

Richard Howe

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Thank you again for the time and effort you have devoted to serving on the Town Governance Study Committee and for conducting the three recent forums to seek public input. Although I was disappointed more voters did not participate, I hope you found the feedback helpful. After reviewing my notes and watching the video of the January 12 forum, I have a few additional comments to share.

I think we all agree that voter participation is a key factor, if not the key factor in deciding whether to change our form of government. Andrew McBrien's detailed analysis of Town Meeting attendance is extraordinary, but for me, the key question is: how many voters attend the average session of Town meeting? I'm told the number is 500-600, which amounts to less than three percent of Andover's 26,000 voters. Such a low level of participation is not a sign of a healthy democracy.

By comparison, voter participation in town elections averages about 14%, about five times greater. Voting in elections is the way most Americans define the essence of democracy. But clearly your committee places greater weight on in-person participation at Town Meeting than on voting to elect our local legislature. And 14% is nothing to crow about: our local election participation has ranged from a low of about 2% to a high of 23%, and Andover can do better.

To your credit, the committee has suggested a number of potential reforms to increase Town Meeting participation, but none of them would be necessary under a Council-Manager form of government. For example, if Andover had an elected Town Council of 13 members as its legislative body, four members might be elected at large and one elected to represent each precinct. The Town Council would replace Town Meeting and the Select Board, would establish goals and policies, hire and supervise the Town Manager, and approve the budget and local bylaws and regulations. If Town Council members and the School Committee were all elected to two-year terms each November in odd-numbered years (as several towns do), there would be a significantly higher voter turnout. In addition, they would all be taking office at the beginning of annual budget deliberations, rather than at the end.

Moreover, Andover could establish a requirement to permit voters to express their views at Town Council meetings, before each agenda item is voted upon. Remote participation at Town Council meetings is currently permitted by the state, but is unlikely to be approved for Open Town Meetings. In addition, the Town Council could be required to host a meeting in each precinct to seek public input prior to adoption of the annual budget or other major votes. Moreover, the Town Manager would be able to provide more complete, up-to-date briefing materials for Town Council members before each meeting, and these could be publicly posted on-line. More than 90% of municipal governments in this country have elected councils as their legislative bodies.

At last June's meeting of the Town Government Study Committee, members were polled for their preferences for Andover's form of government. Two members stated that if the town were starting from scratch, they would support a Council-Manager form, but they said (and other members agreed) that there was no evident "groundswell" of public opinion demanding change. With hardly any coverage in the local press, no in-person meetings in the past year, and everyone preoccupied with the Covid-19 pandemic, very few public meetings have been well-attended, even remotely. Perhaps before your

deliberations are complete, there could be a full debate to let Andover voters know that there is an alternative to Open Town Meeting, and to seek a non-binding, straw vote.

While there may not be an evident groundswell, the results of the 2019 Residents Survey conducted by UMass Lowell showed significant support for changing Open Town Meeting. The sample of 1004 responses clearly included a disproportionate number (34%) of voters who regularly attend Town Meeting. These voters might be expected to show more support for that form of government. However, one-third (32%) said they thought Open Town Meeting should be abolished. Among those wishing to retain/reform Open Town Meeting, 35% supported remote attendance and voting. If that continues to be prohibited by state law, how many of these respondents would shift to the "abolish town meeting" viewpoint, especially if a viable alternative were presented? And wouldn't this perspective be shared by many of the 97% who rarely attend Town Meeting, but would vote for someone to represent them?

While I would love to see this question debated at this spring's Annual Town Meeting, I know there are more pressing issues on the warrant. There is likely to be a small turnout again this year, and with the pressure to conclude the meeting in a single Saturday, perhaps this debate should be deferred until fall, or whenever it could be more safely conducted for a larger audience.

As always, thank you for your consideration and for your commitment to improving town government.