

David Brown

2/4/2021

Comments on Town Governance Study Committee presentation

Having now watched the entire video of the presentation. I must say I am very impressed with the work of the committee! The data on participation in TM was especially illuminating, and dispels a lot of myths about who goes to TM and how representative it is. Here are a few of my comments and suggestions:

Overall, I am in agreement with the (preliminary) recommendations of the Committee. If I had any doubts about Town Meeting being the right form of government for Andover at this time (not really), they have been dispelled. I firmly believe that the open Town Meeting continues to be our best option.

- Although the Saturday Town Meeting worked well last year, I'm concerned about trying to compress everything into one day. It makes for a long day and I think people's patience and attention span starts to wane after 3-4 hours. Perhaps TM could start with a Saturday session and finish on Monday/Tuesday evening as necessary.

- Bifurcation – having discussion on one day and a vote on another – is a really bad idea. The odds are that the people present for the discussion will not be the same ones present for the vote.

- Formalizing having a Special Town Meeting in the fall is a great idea, one that should be implemented immediately. Splitting the focus to budget & administration in the spring and zoning/planning in the fall makes sense, but I would not be too rigid in enforcing that.

- Having a completely remote TM effectively shuts out a lot of people who do not have access or are uncomfortable using the technology. Down the road, allowing for some form of remote participation & voting would probably be a good thing.

- Electronic voting at TM would probably be a good thing, if the cost can be contained to a reasonable level (i.e., comparable to what it costs to pay all of the counters who would then not be needed). But that will require approval by Town Meeting, and I'm not sure that is going to happen anytime soon. I appreciate the Moderator's concern about having a fast and accurate count, but her mandate of having 2 counters for each section does not address the root of the problem, and has the potential for creating even greater confusion if the 2 counters do not agree (this has happened!). Note: I am a precinct Warden and have been a counter at Town Meeting for many years.

- The real issue with hand counting is that, especially in the Collins Center, the sections are too big and too spread out, making it difficult for the counters to readily see who is standing and who is not. The red/green voting paddles that we used last year were a big help in this regard. My recommendations:

- Do not hold TM in the Collins Center. I know that it comes with built-in audio & video, but it is just about impossible to divide the auditorium into sections that are not too wide to facilitate counting from one aisle – exacerbated by the fact that people tend to sit at the ends of the rows nearest the aisles, at opposite ends of the same section. Plus there is the issue of having to have an overflow section if the meeting is expected to be well attended.

- Instead, hold TM in the field house, even though that means renting chairs and the A/V setup (which, BTW, were superb at the outdoor TM last year). Organize the room into sections of not more than 50-75 seats each, with each section not more than 8 seats wide. Have a gap in between the back row of each section and the front row of the next so that the counter can stand in the middle at the front of his/her. That makes it easier for one person to accurately count the votes in a section, especially if the colored paddles are used.

- Designate a “warden” for each cluster of 4-6 sections who would collect the results from the individual counters and report them, by section, when called on by the moderator. This would reduce any delays in reporting resulting from having a lot more sections. Perhaps have a count of the Yeas and Nays and then report both results to the podium at once, so that there would only be one roll call of the sections.

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Contact Me    The Committee May Contact Me to Discuss my Input