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Keep Town Meeting, but improve it.

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to provide our input here. My husband and I have lived in Andover for 29 years. Our daughter went through the Andover school system. There is so much to like about this town. One of the many attributes that attracted us to Andover was its form of government with its Open Town Meeting, a form of democratic government dating back to Colonial times. We've listened to both arguments: Open Town Meeting vs Town Council with Town Manager. We understand the criticisms of Town Meeting. However, we believe that the effort should be made to improve Town Meeting before we completely abandon it.

We especially appreciate the Town Warrants that come to our home by mail, that give us a chance to become familiar with the issues before the Town.

We also appreciate the opportunity to attend Town meeting and hear the thinking and planning behind the warrant articles and the opposing arguments. Having the ability to stand and present our questions and points of view is an important benefit of participatory democracy. And we value our right to vote on the warrants, regardless of whether our position is approved.

We are in favor of Open Town Meeting, but would like to see some improvements to that form of government rather than abandoning it.

Once we abandon Open Town meeting, we cannot get it back.

Furthermore, there is no clear benefit, or convincing argument presented, for a town council and manager form of governance over town meeting.

We have heard the argument that 500 attendees is not a good representation of the town. Seems to us that is far better participation than a town council of 10-15 elected representatives. With some improvements to Town Meeting, we may see attendance improve.

With Town Meeting citizens have direct access to voting on issues that are important to them. They do not have that right with a Town Council. With that, we'd be one step closer to moving Andover in the direction of a city—is that what we want? We don't think so.

Town meeting allows a resident to be a representative and to speak and vote for causes that matter to them. They have a voice, directly. A Town Council end that.

A Town Council limits representation, cuts off the ability of our town members to represent their own views, or to have an opportunity to speak to and vote on important town governance issues.

Why not improve the Town Meeting so that it is more efficient and more accessible?

One complaint about Town Meeting is that it occurs only once per year and thus decisions have to be postponed too long resulting in missed opportunities. Can't we have Town Meeting twice/year? If that must go before the legislature let's do that and provide the sound reasons why we want to do that. The advantage is that two meetings would reduce the number of warrants at each meeting and address the 'missed opportunities' argument.

The town warrant, mailed to every voter, is very informative and helpful. Home mailings are the best way to inform our residents.

Town Council will not improve the communication issue—that is a separate issue altogether. We did not find out about this town governance committee until about 3 weeks ago, when a neighbor left an informative flyer on our doorstep. Why didn't the town mail a notice to registered voters? We also have not seen coverage or Notice published in the Andover Townsman.

Town Council does not guarantee better decisions, it only concentrates power. Who will run? Will they be good candidates? Will they do the review that we would want of town issues? How do we know they would be any better than residents of our town who educate themselves or who may already be well educated and care about the issues? These citizens bring their talents to Town Meeting and to our town.

Some complain that Town Meeting slows some decisions down. Yes, that may in fact be true, which can be good, leading to better outcomes for the town. Town Yard and Ballardvale Station are two good examples—the town's preparation was lacking, and at Town Meeting, it was evident to all. Town Meeting did the right thing to vote down the plans as originally presented, which then required further study by the town. When revised plans were brought to Town Meeting, the voters approved the improved plans.

Turning to a Town Council with a Manager may make our government more agile but at what cost? It may change the way the town looks, and we don't see any indicators that Andover residents want that. Some towns around us changed their form of governments and now they don't look so good. Until now, our more democratic form of government has helped Andover do a good job of keeping industrial development near the highway exchanges (for example) while maintaining a classic New England residential environment.

We don't want to become a city. There are plenty of urban landscapes nearby with easy access. Andover's balance of residential and conservation land makes the town uniquely desirable in the Merrimack Valley, reflected in the property values and robust real estate market. Town Meeting is an integral element, we believe, in maintaining the charm and desirability of our town. Let's improve it, not eliminate it.