



# Needham Town Meeting

## People, Process and Purpose

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With Special Guest

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# James Hugh Powers Hall





# The Basics

- Needham Town Meeting started in 1711.
- Change to Representative Town Meeting in 1933.
- 254 elected and at-large members.
- Proportional representation of Needham's 10 Precincts.
- The legislative branch of government.
- Town Meeting exercises "all powers vested in the municipal corporation."

# The Members

- Non-partisan – nomination papers “shall bear no political designation.”
- Members represent only their neighbors, not any faction, caucus or interest group.
- Members must
  - be informed
  - act in the best interests of their constituents and the Town as a whole.
  - attend Town Meeting and vote.



# A Citizen Legislature

- Self-Governance, pure and simple.
- Engage with constituents, solicit views
- Evaluate the Articles in the Warrant.
- At the meeting, respectfully ask questions and share viewpoint.
- Make motions under an Article (e.g., amend, divide, refer).
- Vote on subsidiary motions and Main Motion.
- Be a representative between town meetings.

# Other Key Participants at Town Meeting

## ➤ Select Board

- Elected – Executive Branch of Town Government.
- Serves as the Warrant Committee, sets the agenda in the form of the Warrant.
- Often is the proponent of Main Motions.

## ➤ Finance Committee

- Nine citizens appointed by the Moderator.
- Represent the legislative branch year-round.
- Provides Members with recommendations on each article found to have financial implications.
- Sponsors and presents the Operating budget.



# Other Key Participants at Town Meeting

## ➤ Planning Board

- Elected to oversee land use per state law.
- Proposes new and amended zoning by-laws.

## ➤ Community Preservation Committee

- Appointed to administer funds collected under the Community Preservation Act.

## ➤ Personnel Board

- Five citizens appointed by the Moderator
- Represents the interests of the legislative branch.
- Advises on human resource issues and makes recommendations to Town Meeting on HR articles.



# Process

- Boards and committees work all year to prepare for Town Meeting.
- Public hearings, discussions, negotiations precede Town Meeting.
- Town Meeting is not about someone, or some group “winning” or “losing.”
- There are no “sides” at Town Meeting
- Everyone is focused on what is best for our town.
  - Discussion ≠ Destruction
  - Debate ≠ Battle
  - Disagreement ≠ Division





# Process - Moderator

- Town Meeting is conducted under state law, municipal law (Town Charter and By-Laws), rules and tradition.
- State law empowers the Moderator to:
  - preside and regulate the proceedings
  - decide all questions of order
  - declare all votes
- Enforce the rules of procedure and the rules adopted by the meeting.



# Process -- Decorum

- **Town Meeting adopts its own rules, including rules on decorum.**
- **Is there a “right to be rude?”**
  - **Not at Representative Town Meeting**
  - **Barron v. Kolenda (SJC decision March 7)**
- **Public Comment v. Rep. Town Meeting**
  - **Elected Members**
  - **Adopt and impose their own rules**
  - **Moderator maintains order under state law**

# Process – The Business of Governing Needham

- **Article describes a Main Motion**
  - A “motion” means to take action
- **Role of the Consent Calendar**
  - Contents Determined by the Members
- **Presentation and discussion of a Main Motion (Select Board, Finance Comm.)**
- **Respectful floor discussion and motions**
  - Questions, additional information, sharing views
- **Vote on motions and Main Motion.**
- **Move on to the next Article in sequence.**

# Purpose

- To empower citizens to govern themselves.
- Rooted in the most fundamental concepts of our nation. (The model for our system)
- Permit ordinary citizens to not only opine on but *decide* the most important decisions.
  - We do not outsource governance in Needham
  - You have a voice and an essential role
- Town Meeting, boards and committees are a real system of checks and balances.
- Not a “rubber stamp” and never should be.
- No “winners” or “losers.”



# Purpose

- Let's set an example for the town, for Massachusetts and the nation.
- Let's show the benefits of volunteerism and community involvement.
- Let's reject partisanship and polarization.
- Let's reject demonization and disrespect of contrary views.
- Let's demonstrate what cordial, merits-based discussion, deliberation and engagement look like.
- And let's avoid this....



# Town Meeting No More



## Changed to a Town Council – Manager System

No. Attleborough – 2019  
Amherst – 2018  
East Longmeadow – 2016  
Bridgewater – 2011  
Randolph – 2009  
Winthrop - 2005  
Palmer – 2004

## Changed to a Town Council – Mayor System

Framingham – 2017  
Braintree – 2008  
Greenfield – 2003  
W. Springfield – 2000  
Weymouth – 1999  
Amesbury – 1996  
Easthampton – 1996  
Methuen – 1994  
Agawam - 1989



# Questions

