

MEMORANDUM FROM THE MODERATOR



TO: Town Meeting Members

FROM: Michael K. Fee, Town Moderator

SUBJECT: [2025 Annual Town Meeting](#)

Greetings Town Meeting Members! Congratulations to all Members who were reelected and I extend a warm welcome to Members who were recently elected and are new to Town Meeting. I am grateful for your interest in your town and your willingness to serve in this important role. For our new members, I know you will enjoy being a citizen legislator, representing the interests of your neighbors and our entire town. You are now part of an over three-century-old institution that embodies democracy, citizen empowerment and self-governance, all in a non-partisan forum where civility and mutual respect reign.

[A Word of Thanks](#)

In advance of Annual Town Meeting, I would like to note the end of an era. Our Town Manager, Kate Fitzpatrick, will be retiring in June and this will be her last Annual Town Meeting. Kate has served the Town of Needham for almost 35 years and she has been our Town Manager for 23 of those years. Kate has discharged her duties with professionalism and good nature. I am grateful for her service to our town, and I will miss collaborating with her. You may or may not know that in other towns, Town Managers come and go with some frequency. But in Needham, we have been fortunate to have Kate's steady presence for decades and our town is better for it. Thank you, Kate and congratulations on a job well done.

[Important Dates](#)

We will convene our Annual Town Meeting on **Monday May 5, 2025, at 7:30 p.m.** in James Hugh Powers Hall at Needham Town Hall. Please take steps to prepare for your role. One way is to attend the League of Women Voters of Needham Warrant Meetings at the Center at the Heights on **Monday April 28 at 7:30 p.m.** Rooms will be assigned by precinct, and each room will have a LOWV facilitator, article proponents and

MEMORANDUM FROM THE MODERATOR

members of various boards and committees. I thank the League for organizing these meetings and for their commitment to voter education.

New Town Meeting Members should plan on coming to the Center at the Heights at **6:30 p.m.** that night. In the hour immediately preceding the Warrant Meetings, I will hold a one-hour long, in-person orientation at which I will provide basic information about Town Meeting, as well as various roles and procedures. New Town Meeting members should feel free to converse with experienced Members who are a great source of information and guidance. I am also available to answer questions.

In addition to attending the Warrant Meetings, preparation for Town Meeting consists of more than simply reading the Warrant, though this is essential. Please review all the relevant information available to you through a variety of sources. This includes material posted to the Town Meeting section of the town website. In addition, various materials will be sent to you via U.S. Mail and email. But don't just be passive. Please peruse the town website for information on hearings and other actions that precede Annual Town Meeting. The Needham Channel's website is also a great resource. Please note that all information relevant to the Articles we will address will be posted on the website by **May 1, 2024**.

The Town website contains a vast array of other materials you may find helpful, including minutes and agendas of various boards and committees, as well as the Annual Town Report. All can be found starting with the landing page at www.needhamma.gov. I also encourage you to gather information from your constituents by speaking to the people in your precinct who elected you about matters before Town Meeting. Ask them about their views of the Articles in the Annual and Special Town Meeting Warrants. While social media can be helpful, it is not an official channel of information distribution, and it has its well-known limitations. There is no substitute for a conversation between a representative and his or her constituent. Strive to be an informed and engaged representative. Finally, as a refresher for reelected members and preparation for new members, I also encourage you to review the *Needham Town Meeting Handbook* that I authored and revised in 2021. The Handbook is available at www.needham.gov/townmeeting.

In our representative town meeting, you are the all-important "representatives." The interests of the citizens and taxpayers of Needham are advanced through you. When we convene as Town Meeting, Massachusetts law and our Town Charter states that there is no higher authority in the town. Be mindful of this august role. Respect this role. Stand for citizen government. If you do not protect and exercise your rights, those rights may one day disappear, and you will no longer govern yourself. Instead, you will be on the outside looking in, watching others with the titles of "mayor" or "town council," or "city (or town) manager" govern for you. This has happened in a number of Massachusetts towns that once had town meetings but no longer do. It could happen in Needham. Be vigilant. Be wary of attempts to undermine our legislative branch. Once the right of citizens to participate directly in their governance is gone, it never comes back.

Finally, I ask that you discharge your duties as a Town Meeting Member with diligence, respect and prudence. I have included a discussion of civility at the end of this memorandum. Please read it. Every time we convene as Town Meeting, let us work together to build the best community possible.

MEMORANDUM FROM THE MODERATOR

The Meetings

As mentioned above, Annual Town Meeting will commence at **7:30 p.m. on Monday May 5, 2025**. As is customary, a Special Town Meeting has been noticed for the third night of the Annual Town Meeting, **7:30 p.m. on Monday May 12, 2025**.

The Warrants

The Warrant for the Annual Town Meeting contains 47 Articles. The Warrant for the Special Town Meeting contains 14 Articles. As always, the Warrants contain a wealth of useful information. The Annual Town Meeting Warrant opens with an extremely thorough report from the Finance Committee. When we reach the Operating Budget for Fiscal Year 2026, in keeping with our tradition I will guide a discussion of the budget on a line item-by-line-item basis. During this discussion, Town Meeting Members will have the opportunity to ask questions about every department, service or other item funded as we proceed through each line of the budget. Consistent with our rules of procedure, when we pause at a particular line item, Town Meeting Members may ask for relevant information or offer amendments. Once we pass by a line item, however, discussion on that line item is closed.

The Articles in the Warrants will be addressed in numerical sequence unless there is a successful vote on a motion to alter the order in which the Articles are arranged. It is also possible that a motion may be made to address two or more Articles jointly but vote on them separately. I must evaluate whether such a motion is in the interests of Town Meeting and if so, I will ask you to vote on the motion. At times, this consolidation process can promote efficiency, but your vote on such a request will control whether it occurs.

Consent Calendar

Main Motions under all Articles have been prepared by Town Counsel and will be available for inspection at the Town Clerk's Office at least one week prior to our first session. With rare exceptions these motions typically contain the same language that is found in the Warrant Articles to which they correspond. Main Motions are the operative documents signed by a proponent, tendered to me, and placed on the floor for your consideration. During my opening remarks, I will inform you of any permissible differences between the wording of a Main Motion and the wording of a corresponding Article. The public filing of the Main Motions in advance of Town Meeting allows us to use a Consent Calendar at the start of our Annual and Special Town Meetings.

To construct our Consent Calendar, I will present the Articles in each Warrant to you by number, and I will ask you to express your desire to discuss and debate an Article by exclaiming "Question" after I read the Article's number. If no one calls out "Question," the Main Motion under that Article will be placed on our Consent Calendar. In keeping with our custom, the Main Motions so designated will be compiled and adopted by unanimous consent and never again to be discussed. Those Articles for which one or more Members exclaim "Question" after I call its number or are identified by the Moderator as subject to motions from their sponsors, are grouped as the controversial articles and will be taken up in numerical order by Town Meeting.

MEMORANDUM FROM THE MODERATOR

The Consent Calendar has proven to be a useful tool in the past, streamlining our agenda, so it will consist of only those topics that you -- the Members -- identify as worthy of the time needed for explanation, discussion and debate at Town Meeting. Please remember, however, that the determination of which Main Motions we discuss is controlled by you, not by the Moderator or anyone else. Through the selections you make for our Consent Calendar, you control how we will spend our time together.

Procedure

I ask that each of you observe the conventions and traditional procedures that govern our meeting so that we can complete our work effectively and efficiently. Our proceedings are governed by Massachusetts law, Needham's Charter and General By-Laws, *Town Meeting Time* (3rd Edition) -- the parliamentary manual or "rulebook" from which we draw guidance for our proceedings -- and by tradition. A brief summary of some of our procedures and rules is set forth below.

Shortly after first taking office as Moderator, I authored the *Needham Town Meeting Handbook*. The *Handbook* is available on the Town Meeting section of the town website. The *Handbook* was well received and I revised it extensively in April 2021. Please review the April 2021 revised edition and feel free to consult the *Handbook* to become better informed about the laws, rules and procedures that apply to Town Meeting. The Handbook is available here: <https://www.needhamma.gov/2045/Town-Meeting>.

As a reminder, here is a summary of some of our procedures and rules:

1. Proposed amendments of affirmative main motions should be well thought out and carefully drafted well in advance of the meeting. *This especially applies to proposed amendments of zoning Articles.* Blank forms that may be used for a motion will be available at the Select Board's table prior to each session. I encourage you to put anything other than simple amendments in writing and seek drafting assistance from Town Counsel prior to the meeting. In addition, I will be at the venue early to assist you if you wish. I would like to have as much notice as possible about the motions to amend so I may provide assistance and ensure a smooth presentation and debate.
2. Proponents will deliver presentations under each Article that remains after the Consent Calendar. These will be followed by the recommendation of the Finance Committee. I will seek your unanimous consent for a rule that imposes a **12-minute time limit (in total) for affirmative presentations by the proponents of an Article and 12 minutes in total for the delivery of the Finance Committee's recommendations.** I will also propose our traditional rule governing floor discussion which imposes a **5-minute limit (all inclusive: per person, per article)** for individual Members and Non-Members to speak to a particular Article. In the past, these rules have greatly increased the efficiency of our meetings, while at the same time ensuring the opportunity for access and participation by a wide range of Members, not just a loquacious few.
3. All speakers are reminded that our proceedings are televised and livestreamed by The Needham Channel. This is a great service to our community. The courtesy of a live video coverage, however,

MEMORANDUM FROM THE MODERATOR

must not be abused. Any speaker who refers to the cameras, or whose behavior, in the sole judgment of the Moderator appears to be affected or influenced by the presence of the cameras will be ruled out of order by the Moderator and asked to cease immediately.

4. In keeping with our longstanding practice, I intend to ask the Meeting to adopt by unanimous consent a rule of procedure for debate under Article 13, the Fiscal Year 2026 Operating Budget, as well as debate under the enterprise fund articles in that Warrant, Articles 14 and 15, and the budget for General Fund Cash Capital, Article 27. Under this rule, a motion to amend an appropriation under these budget Articles which adds funds to a particular line item is not in order unless the movant identifies another line item or line items within the budget that will be reduced to fund the increase. This rule has always worked well in Needham.

5. I offer the following abbreviated information on motion practice. Further information may be found in the *Needham Town Meeting Handbook* (April 2021 Revised Edition) and in *Town Meeting Time (3rd Edition)*, available at the Needham Public Library. Some of the motions that may be made at Town Meeting are:

- (A) To Adjourn - Debatable, majority vote required.
- (B) Moving the Previous Question - Not debatable, 2/3 vote required. This motion is a device used to stop any further debate or discussion of an identified motion or motions. It is not debatable and requires a supermajority of 2/3 for passage. At times, the motion can be useful and may promote the efficient disposition of issues. I sometimes receive inquiries from individuals who very much wanted to speak on an issue raised under an Article but were unable to do so because before they could be recognized, someone "moved the question" and the motion was approved by Town Meeting. If the motion is properly made, the rules require that I must accept it and present it to Town Meeting for consideration. The motion can be rejected – and in the past it has been rejected– in situations in which Town Meeting Members collectively decide that they need to hear more information or wish to have additional discussion before voting. If someone wishes to continue discussion, therefore, it is their obligation to vote against this motion. If the motion passes, all discussion ends, and we move to an immediate vote on all motions then pending.
- (C) To Lay on the Table - Not debatable, 2/3 vote required. While the motion was once used to temporarily defer consideration of motions until they were “taken from the table,” in more recent years, it has been used to end discussion of the motion permanently and avoid any vote.
- (D) To Postpone to a Time Certain - Debatable, majority vote required. The moving party must state a reason for this motion. For example, sometimes an essential speaker is not available when we reach an Article, or proponents may want to have action taken on another Article before reaching the Article to be postponed. Whatever the reason, Town Meeting must approve the motion by a majority vote and the motion must specify with certainty the time when discussion will resume.

MEMORANDUM FROM THE MODERATOR

- (E) To Commit, Recommit or Refer Back - Debatable, majority vote required. We call this a "Motion to Refer." It may be used to send the subject matter of an Article back to an existing board or committee for further work, or it may refer the subject matter to a study committee that is described in the motion. The motion can also request the formation of a special committee to which an Article may be referred. If approved by Town Meeting, the subject matter is referred and is not voted on at Town Meeting.
- (F) To Amend - Debatable, majority vote required. Amendments change to the wording of a Main Motion. Motions to amend themselves may be amended, though the process is supervised by the Moderator to prevent confusion. Whenever possible, motions to amend the language of a Main Motion should, as discussed above, be in writing. The Moderator determines whether a motion to amend is proper and within the scope of the Main Motion.
- (G) To Postpone Indefinitely - Debatable, majority vote required. This motion is in essence, a motion to dismiss.

6. Please remember that "points of information," "points of order," and "points of personal privilege" raised by Members during debate will be strictly construed in accordance with their definitions and they will not be used as a means of enlarging the time for debate, especially after a motion to move the previous question has been voted in the affirmative, or after an Article has been disposed of.

7. I also remind everyone about our very important "four corners of the Article" rule. Under this rule, a speaker recognized during discussion under an Article must confine his or her remarks to the subject matter of the Article. In addition, any proposed amendment must fall within the "four corners" of the Article under which it is offered, or it will not be in order.

8. All Town Meeting Members must rise and seek recognition from the Moderator before speaking. A Member or Non-Member Registered Voter must call out "Mr. Moderator" in a clear audible voice. If a Member does not follow this procedure, for example, remaining seated and simply raising a hand in silence, they may not be recognized. Any Member or other speaker who has physical limitations that prevent that person from standing up, raising their hand or calling out for recognition, should inform me prior to the start of the meeting so that reasonable accommodations may be made.

9. It is vitally important that any Member who wishes to address the meeting be able to do so. Stationary microphones will be available for use by any speakers from the floor.

10. Members are reminded to address their remarks to the Moderator as Chair of the Meeting, not to any other person. Members also must refrain from references to personalities or to other speakers, engaging in personal attacks or other uncivil behavior. We are an elected, representative legislative body that enacts its own rules and governs its own Members. Respectful discourse and civility are the hallmarks of our Town Meeting. We will maintain it and I will enforce it.

MEMORANDUM FROM THE MODERATOR

A Word About Civility

I am committed to presiding over a Town Meeting that is a forum for civil and respectful engagement. We are blessed to be a non-partisan body and thus insulated from the harsh partisanship and polarizing speech that permeates the behavior of persons aligned with one political party or another at the federal, and even state levels. But even without political party affiliations, it is imperative that we reject the coarse language and insulting rhetoric that we see employed all too frequently in many facets of society, including social media.

Concerned that discourteous behavior was beginning to infiltrate our Town Meeting, in April 2023 I arranged and presented a program at the Broadmeadow School devoted to this very topic titled “Needham Town Meeting: People, Process and Purpose.” The program was focused on the promotion of civil discourse and respectful interactions at Town Meeting. To help emphasize the point, I enlisted the help of Professor Arthur C. Brooks of the Harvard Business School. Professor Brooks is a world-famous social scientist, best-selling author and sought-after speaker on the topic of interpersonal relations and achieving positive results in organizations through respectful engagement. I followed Professor Brooks’ presentation with a discussion about how Professor Brooks’ advice connects with Town Meeting. The slides from this program are posted on the Town Meeting page of the Town website. One of the points I made at the program is that there is no “winning side” and “losing side” at Town Meeting. We are engaged in a process designed to bring about the best possible outcome for the town as a whole.

Despite my best efforts, I have observed that this message has not reached all our participants in Town Meeting. Our rule prohibiting references to “personalities” traces its origin to a manual for debate for the U.S. House of Representatives drafted by Thomas Jefferson. The idea is quite simple: keep debate focused on the facts and merits and refrain from distracting attacks aimed at individuals, such as fellow Members or other participants in debate. I have enforced this rule and will continue to do so.

Disrespectful comments about individuals corrode the institution of Town Meeting and thus, for good reason they are prohibited. Individuals are entitled to be treated with courtesy. But at our Town Meeting, individuals also collectively populate important and essential boards and committees. Whether these boards are elected or appointed, the individuals on them consist of volunteers drawn from our community, who discharge important duties that are intended to achieve the best for Needham. These boards and committees are entitled to the same level of respect and courtesy collectively that we afford to individuals.

Accordingly, please be advised that consistent with our rule on referring to personalities, I will not tolerate disrespectful remarks from anyone -- a proponent, a Member, or any other speaker -- that denigrate the Select Board, the Finance Committee, the Planning Board or any one of the other numerous boards or committees composed of volunteers who serve this town. Scholars teach us that *ad hominem* arguments are a type of fallacy that diverge from the logic that should permeate effective debate. They are employed by those who cannot advance a fulsome argument on the merits. Please keep discussion, debate and remarks at Town Meeting focused on the facts and the merits of a particular matter before the Meeting, not on the boards or committees who may have brought the matter to Town Meeting or in good faith addressed it or provided recommendations or views.

MEMORANDUM FROM THE MODERATOR

When George Washington was 14-years old, he collected and published his *Rules of Civility*. The first of Washington's Rules of Civility is, "Every action done in company ought to be with some sign of respect to those that are present." On this 250th anniversary of the American Revolution that cemented our right to self-governance, let's follow this sage advice from the hero of the Revolutionary War and our Nation's First President. If a 14-year-old George Washington can figure this out, so can we.

Conclusion

I am looking forward to seeing you all on May 5. Good luck with your preparation. Please let me know if I may be of any assistance. See you all very soon!

With very best wishes,

Michael K. Fee

Needham Town Moderator