

JULY 2022

# TOWN MEETING FORUM FINAL REPORT

Dear Dedham Residents,

In my role as Moderator of the Dedham Town Meeting, I asked several people familiar with the Town Meeting process to join Deputy Moderator Cherylann Sheehan and me in planning a forum, open to all Town Meeting Representatives and others, to identify ways to improve the way we plan for and conduct Town Meeting. I would like to express my thanks to Sarah Sally, Mike Butler and Kevin Preston for bringing their ideas and energy to this project. Together, they bring experience as current or former members of the Town Meeting, the Select Board and the Finance and Warrant Committee. I would also like to thank Public Information Officer Amanda Smith, for her important contributions as well as Susan Fay and Mary Ellen McDonough who assisted us on the night of the Forum.

This Town Meeting Forum was organized in response to questions, suggestions and concerns raised by Town Meeting Representatives and others about the Town Meeting process. I use the word “process” to refer to not just the night of Town Meeting, but to the work that goes on in the months before the Meeting. In those months, the Warrant is assembled, hearings are conducted, informational meetings are held and the recommendations of the Finance and Warrant Committee and the Planning Board are prepared and distributed. All of this work culminates in the publication of the Warrant Book and the deliberations at Town Meeting.

On the following pages, you will find our final report from the Town Meeting Forum held on April 25, 2022 at Town Hall.

Dan Driscoll  
Town Moderator

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# THE FORUM AND THE FINDINGS

The Forum was held on April 25 at Town Hall with approximately 40 residents in attendance. The group was asked to participate in a “lightening round” where ideas were proposed and listed. Those in attendance then broke into three smaller groups where these ideas and others were discussed and rated as to importance.

The groups then came back together where the group reports were shared with all and further discussion was held.

In subsequent weeks, the planning group sorted the most frequently listed ideas into three groups:

## **A. Availability of Information**

This was the most frequently cited area of concern. Members want to have more information, organized in an easily accessible format. There were also comments about the timing of the publication of the Warrant Book and the composition of the Book, for example, can there be statements included by both proponents and opponents of major articles. Can the tax bill cost of major articles be made known?

Another group of ideas focused on a web site dedicated to Town Meeting and a handbook for Town Meeting Representatives with explanations of terms, procedures and responsibilities.

Another set of comments asked that information, including financial information, be better organized and indexed in a central, on-line space.

Conducting pre- Town Meeting information sessions on complicated, expensive or contentious issues was also recommended, perhaps as was done several years ago for the firearms store zoning issue and this year for the Town Green article.

It was also suggested that the Select Board submit a statement of significant activities done since the last Town Meeting as well as challenges in the upcoming year.

There was also a desire to know more about the positions and views of the candidates running for Town Meeting and several requests that the Warrant Review Meeting (the Mini Town Meeting) be on Zoom.

## THE FORUM AND THE FINDINGS (CONTINUED)

### B. Uncertainty over Terminology and Procedure.

This category had a number of specific concerns about frequently used terms, such as “Pass” and “Substitute Motion” and procedures such as Town Meeting Representative priority for speaking, length of time allowed for speaking, and moving the question.

### C. Issues with a One Night Town Meeting

Dedham has a track record of voting on the full Warrant in one night. While this has some advantages, some members felt that it adversely impacted articles that were at the end of the Warrant, led to some long nights and that some of the opening ceremonial activities added to the length of the Meeting.

## RESPONSE TO SUGGESTED CHANGES

The officials and volunteers who planned and conducted the Town Meeting Forum have reviewed all of the suggestions. Some changes can be made immediately; in fact, some changes were in effect for the Spring Annual Town Meeting on May 16th, which was only several weeks after the Forum. In general, these are changes that can be made by the Moderator.

Other ideas require input and advice from other Town officials. Some of these ideas will take longer to review and may present challenges and expense. Not all ideas will be feasible.

Looking first at the Availability of Information category:

- Work is underway on preparing a **Town Meeting Handbook** which will summarize the procedures used at Town Meeting. The Handbook will also discuss the roles of different boards, committees and Town officials, as well as the responsibilities and expectations for Town Meeting Representatives
- There is a wealth of **information about the Town’s financial position** currently available. We will work with Town executive and finance officials to prepare an index of where this information can be accessed. We will talk with the relevant Town officials about the feasibility of centralizing this information. The Town has begun to produce periodic Financial Newsletters, which are available to all residents. These Newsletters should be produced regularly and be available on the Town’s website.

## RESPONSE TO SUGGESTED CHANGES (CONTINUED)

- Forum participants asked that, for major projects, **the impact of the average tax bill** be presented. This information was presented for the new Public Safety Building, the new Town Hall and Senior Center and most recently for the Town Green proposal. This practice will be continued.
- Can the **Town Meeting Warrant Book be available sooner?** The Moderator will work with Town officials to see if this is possible. The publication of the Warrant Book is the last step in a long series of legally -required postings, public hearings and waiting periods that start months before the Town Meeting. Town Meeting Representatives should be reminded that the Warrant itself, without the Finance and Warrant Committee recommendations is available very early in this process. The Moderator sent copies of the Warrant to all District Chairs encouraging them to forward them to their members. Representatives and members of the general public can review what issues will be presented to Town Meeting and begin to ask questions even before the final Warrant Book is available.
- The District Chairs will be asked to arrange for virtual coverage of the **Warrant Review Meeting** (the Mini Town Meeting) in addition to the in person and cable TV coverage.
- The Town conducted a **special information session** on the Town Green proposal a week before the actual Town Meeting. This provided more time for questions and the resolution of problems. Proponents of major issue articles should be encouraged to consider a special session. The Town Green information session was very well attended.
- The Town Manager prepares a comprehensive **Budget Message** for the Select Board each year, early in the Town Meeting preparation schedule. That report is available on the Town web site.
- Several Forum participants indicated that they would like to **know more about the candidates running for Town Meeting.** Some Districts organized informal gatherings to meet candidates and one or more private organizations in Town sought to collect and present candidate statements from those seeking to serve as Town Meeting Representatives. These activities are best done by the District organizations and private groups.

## RESPONSE TO SUGGESTED CHANGES (CONTINUED)

**Second, Uncertainty over Terminology and Procedures** was a frequently cited problem.

As part of the Town Meeting Handbook, there will be a section defining some of these points. The most frequently cited terms and procedures were:

- The use of the word **'Pass'** to set aside Warrant articles for further discussion at Town Meeting. The Moderator will consult with Town Counsel and the By Law Review Committee about substituting a word which better describes the process such as "Hold".
- At the Spring Town Meeting, the Moderator announced that a stricter process would be used to insure that **elected Town Meeting Representatives had priority in speaking**. Residents who are not Representatives can speak at Town Meeting, as is indicated in the Town By Laws, but should wait until Representatives have spoken unless the Meeting votes to allow them to speak sooner.
- A time clock was introduced at the Spring Town Meeting to ensure that the **10 minute speaking rule** was followed. Presentations by sponsors of projects requiring a major expenditure of money or that require a more extensive explanation will be exempted, as has always been the practice.
- Several terms and procedures such as "Move the Question", "Substitute Motion" and "Original Motion" regularly cause some confusion. These terms will be defined in the Town Meeting Handbook and addressed by the Moderator at the beginning of the Meeting.

**Third,** Dedham has generally conducted its **Town Meeting business in one night**, which is, generally speaking, more convenient for many Representatives than multi-night Meetings. There are many towns that dedicate 4, 5 or even more sessions to completing their warrant. On the other hand, as was pointed out by many at the Forum, the Meeting can go late into the evening and the articles at the end of the Warrant are not always fully debated and considered.

## RESPONSE TO SUGGESTED CHANGES (CONTINUED)

- The Warrant could, **when it is originally posted, indicate that two nights, rather than one**, are being set aside for the Meeting. This does not require that the Meeting take place over two nights but, procedurally, makes it easier to adjourn to a second night if a majority of Town Meeting Representatives vote to do so during the first night.
- Town Meeting frequently includes some **ceremonial activities** such as recognizing the accomplishments of a person or group or some brief remarks by a guest. Some of these activities could begin in the time before the full quorum is determined by the Town Clerk. This informal practice has been in place for the last several Town Meetings.
- It can also be emphasized to the Town Meeting Representatives that **any article can be taken up out of order** by a majority vote of the Representatives.
- The Moderator will request that the **Select Board and Planning Board agree to schedule their articles earlier in the Warrant**. It has been the practice for many years to debate Planning Board articles towards the end of the Meeting.

## CONCLUSION

As noted, some of the ideas led to immediate changes in the May Spring Annual Town Meeting. Other suggestions involve policies and procedures under the jurisdiction of other Town officials. Those discussions will be scheduled in the weeks and months to follow.

We strongly encourage those interested in the Town government in general and the Town Meeting specifically, to follow the updates that appear on the Town's web page, [www.dedham-ma.gov](http://www.dedham-ma.gov). and to sign up for notifications in your areas of particular interest.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions at [\*\*djdriscoll29@gmail.com\*\*](mailto:djdriscoll29@gmail.com).

Thank you,

Dan Driscoll  
Moderator