

Town Meeting Guidelines

Town Meeting guidelines exist to facilitate an orderly, dignified, respectful and fair discussion of issues leading to informed votes and good decisions. We all deserve the respect and courtesy of our neighbors, and we owe them the same. The Moderator will politely, but firmly enforce these guidelines, in appropriate circumstances for the benefit of all.

Addressing the Meeting

- Wait to be recognized (given the floor) by the Moderator
- Begin by stating your name and address (or board/committee you represent)
- Speak only to the motion before the Meeting at the moment
- No personal speech- you may not speak about or to other persons. You may not reference the person or comment on his or her character, motivation, etc.
- Rude or disrespectful speech will not be tolerated
- While all may speak on a motion more than once, no one may speak a second time until everyone who wishes to has spoken once. Repetitive or redundant comments should be avoided.

Questions

Speakers may ask a question of another person in the hall, but that question must be addressed through the Moderator. For example "I have a question through the Moderator (or the Chair) for Town Counsel." Dialogue between two persons is not allowed.

Moving/Calling the Question

A speaker may not participate in debate and then finish their comments with a motion to move/call the question. Such a motion must be the only thing the speaker says on that trip to the microphone.

Amendments

Simple amendments to a motion that change only a few words or numbers can be moved verbally. All other amendments must be presented to the Moderator in writing.

Handouts

Printed information can be left with the checkers on the registration tables for voters to read if the following guidelines are followed:

- Must be approved in advance by the Moderator
- Must be left on the table for optional pick up. May not be distributed by hand.
- Must identify the author(s)
- Must be informational and pertinent to Town Meeting

No other literature may be distributed within the building.

Further guidelines on the conduct of Town Meeting may be found in the book Town Meeting Time, published by the Massachusetts Moderator's Association.

Understanding and Participating in Town Meeting

Town Meeting operates under rules laid out in State Law and the guidelines provided in Town Meeting Time. Many communities have local bylaws that define Town Meeting procedures, but at this time, Littleton does not have such a bylaw. What follows is a summary of applicable rules and guidelines intended to give most people enough information to do most of what they may want to do in Town Meeting.

The Basics

Why Town Meeting?

Littleton doesn't have an elected Congress or a Legislature like the Federal and State governments. Town Meeting is our Legislature. Town Meeting decides where and how the Town spends its money. It also creates and amends town laws (called by-laws), such as our general and zoning by-laws, and accepts State enabling legislation.

Participants at Town Meeting

- **The Moderator**- Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 39, §§15 and 17 state in part that: "The Moderator shall preside and regulate the proceedings, decide all questions of order, and make public declaration of all votes,.... No person shall address a town meeting without leave of the Moderator, and all persons shall, at the request of the Moderator, be silent. If a person, after warning from the Moderator, persists in disorderly behavior, the Moderator may order him to withdraw from the meeting, and, if he does not withdraw, may order a constable or any other person to remove him and confine him in some convenient place until the meeting is adjourned."
- **The Selectmen** – The chief elected officials of the Town. The Selectmen are charged with the responsibility of setting the date, time and place of all Town Meetings by means of the Town Meeting Warrant, which is a notice to the Town of the matters that will be considered at Town Meeting. The Selectmen may sponsor their own articles at Town Meeting as well as allow those submitted by other boards/committees to be placed on the Warrant. No article may be placed on a Town Meeting Warrant without the consent of the Selectmen, unless by citizens' petition. The Selectmen are seated to the left of the Moderator at Town Meeting.
- **The Finance Committee**- A seven-member appointed committee charged with studying in depth all fiscal matters before Town Meeting and giving their advice about where and how much money to spend. They may not recommend that the Town spend more than its anticipated income. In other words, they must recommend a balanced budget. Their recommendations are advisory only. Town Meeting ultimately decides how the Town's money is spent. The Finance Committee examines the intricate details of Town finances, so that the voters can make well-informed decisions on fiscal matters. They are seated to the right of the Moderator and Town Clerk at Town Meeting.

- **The Town Clerk**- keeps the official record of all Town Meeting votes as declared by the Moderator. She is seated to the right of the Moderator at Town Meeting
- **Town Counsel**- the Town's attorney, who attends Town Meeting to provide legal advice. He is seated to the left of the Moderator and the Selectmen at Town Meeting
- **The Town Administrator** - The chief administrative official in the Town. He works directly for the Selectmen and is responsible for the day-to-day management of Town government. He is seated to the right of the Moderator at Town Meeting.
- **The Voters (You)** - The most important participants at Town Meeting and the final decision-makers are the voters.

How Much Can We Spend?

State law requires that Town Meeting pass a balanced budget. That means that when all revenue and expenses are counted, we cannot spend more on the operating budget and all Warrant articles than we anticipate receiving in terms of revenue. Because of uncertainties in both income and expenses, the Finance Committee proceeds on carefully considered assumptions in preparing the budget and in formulating their recommendations on Warrant articles. Can Town Meeting vote to spend more than the Finance Committee recommends? Yes, but not without consequences. For example:

- If, when all expenses and income are added up, we have enough **MORE** money than the Finance Committee estimated to cover the extra expenses we voted, all is well and everything is paid for.
- If, when all expenses and income are added up, the Finance Committee estimates prove too high and there is **LESS** money available than we have voted to spend, we may have to return to a Special Town Meeting (probably in the Fall) at which time we will have to make enough spending cuts to return the budget to balance. In the alternative, the Selectmen may seek to cure the imbalance with a Proposition 21/2 override or debt exclusion vote.

The Warrant and its Articles

The Warrant is a list of numbered articles that describes the business Town Meeting will address. It is meant to serve as a warning to all citizens of the actions the Town may take at the Meeting. The Meeting cannot legally take any action that is not described in the Warrant.

An article is essentially a question put to Town Meeting. The wording usually begins with "To see if the Town will....." followed by the substance of the article. (e.g.: Spend X amount of money for Y purpose.) Town Meeting then votes whether or not the Town will do what the article describes. Town Meeting addresses the articles in the Warrant in their numbered order (unless the order is changed by the Moderator).

Dealing With a Warrant Article

Step 1: The Motion

After some introductory remarks, Town Meeting begins its business when the Moderator announcing Article 1. If practical, the Moderator reads the article aloud. If it is too lengthy, he will read a brief summary followed by “as described in the article”. Refer to the printed Warrant for the exact language. A few different things can happen then:

- The Moderator, as part of the introduction to the article, will read “It has been moved and seconded by the (article sponsor) that the Town will vote to (remainder of motion).” Those steps place the article, as written in the Warrant, before Town Meeting as a Main Motion.
- A motion can be made to “pass over,” “postpone indefinitely” or “dismiss” an article. These all mean the same thing, which is to NOT do what is proposed in the article. If seconded, this becomes the Main Motion and must be acted upon before the Meeting can again consider the article.

Step 2: Finance Committee Recommendation

Once a Main Motion involving a fiscal matter has been made and seconded, the Moderator asks the Finance Committee for its recommendation. The Finance Committee may simply state that it does or does not recommend the article. It may also explain its recommendation.

Step 3: Debate

Discussion of the article usually begins with the sponsor (the Town board, official or group of citizens that asked to have the article on the Warrant). The sponsor will explain why he or she thinks the article is good for the Town and why Town Meeting should support it. Debate then continues with anyone who wishes to speak on the issue. During debate, there may be other motions to amend, postpone, etc. the Main Motion. These are handled with their own separate discussion and vote after which the Meeting returns to the Main Motion. Debate continues until no one else wishes to speak or until the question is “called” (see “How to end debate” below). If you wish to speak in debate, but don’t know the procedure, see “How to speak during discussion of a motion/article” below.

Step 4: The Vote

When debate is finished, the Moderator will call for a vote and declare the result. A simple majority vote is required for passage of a motion unless otherwise specified by law. Some motions require a two-thirds majority vote for passage, including votes to authorize borrowing, property transfers and zoning changes. Most Town Meeting votes are by voice vote.

This four-step process is repeated until every article on the Warrant has been addressed.

Two Exceptions:

1- The Budget

The Town's operating budget is the money set aside to operate Town government for the coming fiscal year. This includes the schools, police and fire departments, Town offices and services, Town employee salaries, insurance, etc. It is typically included in one Warrant article. Discussion of the budget is handled differently from the other articles on the Warrant. After the main motion on the budget article is put before Town Meeting, the process is as follows:

- The Moderator reads the expense total for each department in the order listed on the Warrant. This total may include some subcategories, usually "Expenses" and "Personal Services."
- All who agree to or would vote for the amount stated are silent.
- If someone disagrees with or requires some explanation regarding that expense total or any of the line items under it, he or she cries "Hold" loud enough for the Moderator to hear. The "Hold" on that item will be noted.
- When all department totals have been read, most will have met with silence, but a few will have a "Hold" on them
- The Moderator then asks for a motion to accept all line items that do not have a "Hold". Since these items met with no disagreement, they are generally passed unanimously. That portion of the budget is now accepted.
- The Meeting then returns to the first line item with a "Hold" on it. It is discussed and voted either in its original form, or as amended.

The same procedure is followed with each subsequent line item with a "Hold" until all have been voted.

2- The Consent Calendar

There are several articles on the Warrant that are legally necessary, but are generally routine and non-controversial, and they are usually passed unanimously. Some examples would be: road acceptances, annual reauthorizations of revolving funds and short term borrowing authority. To streamline the Town Meeting process, beginning in 2007, we will use what is called a "Consent Calendar" to dispose of several of these perfunctory articles at once rather than having to deal with each one individually. Many communities have adopted the practice of the Consent Calendar and have found that it greatly improves the flow of Town Meeting, and allows the voters to have more time to debate the remaining articles on the Warrant. The Consent Calendar procedure is as follows:

The Moderator will call for a motion "that Town Meeting advance Articles numbered (*the numbers of the Consent Calendar articles*) and that these articles be adopted as recommended and presented in the written materials". This motion will place all the listed articles before the Meeting in a single motion.

While it is anticipated that the Consent Calendar will be passed unanimously, every voter has the right to question and debate ANY of the articles in the motion. If you do not "consent" to the Consent Calendar, rise and say so during debate.

Participating in Town Meeting

Below is a general description of how to participate at Town Meeting. The explanations begin with some of the more common activities and end with some of the more obscure activities.

How to speak during discussion of a motion/article:

Raise your hand. Wait to be recognized by the Moderator. If he fails to recognize you call his attention by saying "Mr. Moderator". When you are recognized, the floor is yours.

Please adhere to the following guidelines when addressing Town Meeting:

- Wait to be recognized (given the floor) by the Moderator.
- Begin by stating your name and address.
- Speak only to the motion before the Meeting at the moment.
- No personal speech. This means you must address all remarks to the Meeting as a whole or to the Moderator. You may question a Town board or official or another Town Meeting attendee, but you must preface your question with "Through the Moderator (or the chair), I have a question for ____". You may not speak about another person.
- Rude or disrespectful speech will not be tolerated.
- While Town Meeting members will generally be allowed to speak on a motion more than once, no one may speak twice until everyone who wishes to has spoken once.
- Please be succinct in your comments.

How to vote on the motion/article before the Meeting:

When all debate on the question is finished, or if the question is "called" (see below), the Moderator will call for a vote by saying "All those in favor will say 'aye'". If you want to vote for the question say "aye" at normal conversational volume. The Moderator will then say "Those opposed will say 'nay'", or sometimes, for brevity, just "Those opposed?" The Moderator judges which side had the greater number of votes and declares whether the motion is "carried" (the ayes won) or is "defeated" (the nays won).

If the Moderator is uncertain which side won, he will call for a hand vote "All those in favor will raise their hand". If the winning side is clear from visual inspection, the Moderator will so declare it. If not, the votes are then counted by sworn "tellers" who will move through the room counting raised hands. Be sure to keep your hand up until you are CERTAIN the teller has counted you. The same procedure follows for those opposed. The Moderator then announces the vote totals and whether the motion is carried or defeated.

How to ask for information you need to help you understand the motion/article before the Meeting:

Approach a microphone. Wait to be recognized. State your name. "Mr. Moderator, through the chair, I have a question" if you know who you want to answer it you can continue "...for the Finance Committee, Town Counsel, etc.". You can also simply ask the question and the Moderator will assist in getting the best person to answer it. Remember

ALL QUESTIONS MUST BE ASKED THROUGH THE MODERATOR. You may not ask anyone a question directly.

How to end debate on a motion/article and proceed to vote:

If you think debate has gone on long enough and is becoming repetitious, you may move to end debate as follows: Raise your hand. Wait to be recognized and say "I move the previous question". Tradition often shortens this to "Move the question". If this motion is seconded, the Meeting then votes without discussion whether to stop all debate on the previous motion/article. If 2/3 or more of the Meeting vote "aye", the question is considered "called" and the Meeting proceeds immediately to vote on the "called" motion/article. If less than 2/3 vote "aye" to calling the question, debate resumes. Please note, you may not speak on the question and then finish your remarks with a motion to call the question. Motion to call the question must be the ONLY thing you say on that trip to the microphone.

How to amend (change or modify) the motion/article before the Meeting:

Amendment of a motion is common and often very helpful. But, it raises two concerns: First, is the amended language offered in proper legal form? Second, can the Meeting understand the amendment well enough to consider it properly? If the amendment is very simple, changing only a few words or numbers, it can be presented verbally. If the amendment is more complex, it must be reviewed by Town Counsel and presented to the Moderator in writing. To do this, approach the head table and signal Town Counsel. He or she will meet with you at the side of the head table and review your written amendment to determine if it does what you want it to do. You may then approach a microphone and, when recognized, say "I move we amend the motion on the floor by adding/deleting/changing X to Y, etc. If your motion to amend is seconded, Town Meeting will then discuss and vote on your amendment. When that vote is complete, the Meeting will return to the original question in its amended form, if your amendment was voted favorably or in its original form if the amendment was voted down.

How to question the legality or parliamentary correctness of the proceedings:

The Moderator WILL make mistakes. Sometimes they are trivial, sometimes they matter. If you see something being done incorrectly, you will do a service to both the Moderator and the Town Meeting as a whole to point it out. Rise from your seat and say with gusto "I rise to a point of order" or "Point of order". This is one of two situations in which you may interrupt a speaker. If the Moderator has made a mistake and the Meeting is proceeding improperly, your point of order supersedes all debate. The Moderator will recognize you with "Please state your point of order". You then state what you suspect is wrong with the proceedings. The Moderator then reflects and rules upon your point of order, either agreeing with you and modifying the proceedings accordingly or disagreeing and continuing as before. The Moderator's ruling is final and not open to debate.

How to question the Moderator's declaration of the vote: If you think the Moderator declared the wrong side to have won in a voice vote:

Stand and speak loudly enough to be heard "I question (or doubt) the vote". If you are joined by six other voters who also doubt the vote, a counted hand vote will be taken.

How to adjourn to the following night:

Raise your hand. Be recognized. State your name and address. Say "I move that we adjourn to (the next available night for Town Meeting) at 7:00 PM". This process should continue until all business is completed. Please note "adjourn" does not mean, "end" the Meeting for the year. When all business is complete, the Meeting is "dissolved". Adjournment is a recess until the next night.

How to do something you don't know how to do:

Raise your hand. Be recognized and say what it is you would like to do. If it is legal and proper, the Moderator will advise you of the correct procedure. Be prepared for the possibility that what you want to do may not be legal or may be outside the authority of Town Meeting. If so, the Moderator will so advise you. Either way you will be treated politely and will not be intentionally embarrassed and we will all learn something in the process.

There are several other more obscure actions, too numerous to list here, available to Town Meeting members. The generally recognized authority on Town Meeting procedure is Town Meeting Time, a small book published by the Massachusetts Moderator's Association. Copies can be ordered from:

Massachusetts Moderator's Association

P.O. Box 1795

Boston, MA 02105-1795

The Moderator is available before Town Meeting to help you with any questions.