

2014 MESSAGE FROM THE TOWN MODERATOR

Dear Residents:

The traditions and procedures of Town Meeting have been created over centuries. Somerset relies on “Town Meeting Time” for parliamentary procedure. I have allowed informal conversation among participants for the purpose of easing voter understanding of the issues to be decided as well as assisting residents who may wish to make amendments, but may not know how. This takes time and patience on the part of the attendees.

Participating in a special or annual community assembly is the hallmark of Open Town Meeting. The general tenure of respectful deliberation and debate are governed by and evidenced in attendee’s adherence to the four simple behaviors below:

- It is asked that petitioners and follow-up speakers who address the meeting provide only new information in an effort to persuade undecided voters. Continued reiteration of previously heard information as a show of support takes time and does little to positively influence the outcome of a vote.
- Please refrain from applause or negative responses during discussions.
- Please keep personalities out of discussions.
- Keeping remarks brief and relevant shows respect for the value of your neighbors’ time. The most persuasive statements at Town Meeting are often those succinctly stated, disclosing new facts or arguments in an effort to advance a position while retaining the audience’s full attention.

Lastly, please review the Simplified Rules of Parliamentary Procedure and a Glossary of Town Meeting Terms and Participants that relate to Town Meeting. These rules and other information, presented, will be helpful to all who attend, speak and/or present at Town Meeting.

Participation at Town Meeting is a unique tradition, one that differentiates New England towns from other regions of the country, cities, and some towns, in our own Commonwealth. Open Town Meeting remains the most direct and inclusive form of participatory democracy ever utilized in any form of government on this earth. I invite you to continue to participate and contribute to this vital community conversation.

Lucia M. Casey
Town Moderator

2014 SOMERSET TOWN MEETING SIMPLIFIED RULES OF PARLIAMENTARY PROCEDURE

The purpose of Town Meeting is to establish and update the By-laws, operational policies, budgets and land use rules that govern our Town. Somerset's Open Town Meeting has been in force as our form of government since 1790. It represents the purest form of democracy in that every vote truly counts. Each registered voter is guaranteed an equal voice in the decisions made by the Meeting. In order to protect the sanctity of that vote, the Town Moderator uses Town Meeting Time, "A Handbook of Parliamentary Law" under which Town Meeting is to be conducted. This publication was first published by the Massachusetts Moderator's Association in 1962 and has been used at Somerset Town Meetings as far back as 1964. In addition, the participant roles are historically based on the traditions established by generations of Somerset citizens, acting as legislators of their local governments.

Town Meetings across the Commonwealth of Massachusetts are similar, but not identical, in the manner in which they are conducted. Local traditions can significantly affect a town's proceedings and help define the role and latitude of the Moderator. At Somerset Town Meetings every effort is made to present all necessary information in an efficient and timely manner so that the most clarity can be afforded to voters, enabling them to make informed decisions. Voters, in turn, have a unique responsibility. Not only must they express, by vote, the decisions made based upon their own judgment and perspective, but also be aware of the effect their vote and/or decision has on all citizens of the Somerset Community.

The rules of procedure for Somerset Town Meeting follow:

1. The first action required after the reading of an **Article and Recommendation of the Advisory and Finance Committee** on the Meeting's **Warrant** is that a **Main Motion** be proposed. The citizen sponsor of an article, Town Board sponsor, or Town Board with an affirmative recommendation, are likely movers of a main motion.
2. All motions must be seconded by a voter other than by the person offering the main motion, and only then may discussion and debate begin.
3. Any Town Board or voter may amend the motion for consideration and deliberation of the meeting. An **amendment**, changing or limiting the main motion, can be offered during the course of debate. The Moderator may rule an amendment out of order if it is beyond the scope of the warrant article. The Moderator will redirect the discussion to consider the proposed amendment once it is properly before the meeting.
4. Any voter wishing to address the meeting must first gain the attention of the Moderator when no other speaker has the floor. Public microphones are available, where a speaker seeking to be recognized, being courteous to others and those next in line, will call out "Madam. Moderator..."
5. Speakers must introduce themselves using their full name and street address each time speaking at a session of Town Meeting.
6. Once recognized by the Moderator, a speaker is given a turn to speak and must address the meeting on only the article currently under discussion. Voters not doing so or speaking in a disrespectful fashion may be suspended from speaking on the matter at the discretion of the Moderator. Questions are welcome, as well as statements endorsing a position. A voter with a procedural question will take precedence over anyone stating an opinion of support or non-support for an article.

7. All remarks should be addressed to and through the Moderator, for the benefit of all attendees. Direct questioning of others is not permitted. Questions may be directed, through the Moderator, to any petitioner, speaker or official and, if determined germane by the Moderator, the person asked will have the immediate opportunity to answer such query.
8. Respectful deliberation and debate are fundamental to Town Meeting. The Moderator will discourage repetitious statements. In due course it will become apparent that sufficient information has been presented and voters are ready to make their decision. Motions to move the question to a vote are in order and are not generally subject to debate. A motion to move the question requires a 2/3 vote for approval. At the Moderator's discretion, such motion may not be allowed and/or may be subject to debate, particularly if the motion to close debate would restrict informed consideration of the entire meeting and/or comes before an appropriate discussion has taken place on the main motion.
9. Votes are most often taken by two methods – voice (“Ayes” and “Nays”), or a counted vote (“standing”) – and declared to be complete by the Moderator when she announces the result. If the determination of a voice vote is doubted, a request by at least seven (7) voters, rising and standing in place, will mandate the Moderator to request a counted vote.
10. Most issues will be decided by a simple majority of those voting. Issues requiring a two-thirds (2/3), four-fifths (4/5), or other majority will be clearly identified to the meeting at the time the article is presented and again at the time of the vote. Articles that require greater than majority votes may be taken by voice and/or a limited counted vote for the efficient conduct of the meeting. The Moderator will declare a vote unanimous, if so understood.

Glossary of Town Meeting Terms and Participants

Town Meeting

Town Meeting is the duly-called meeting in which all registered voters are eligible to participate. It is the Town's de facto legislature, where fiscal issues, zoning changes, by-law amendments, and other matters affecting the Town are decided. An Annual Town Meeting is held in the spring to decide issues for the following fiscal year, which begins on July 1st. A Special Town Meeting may be called at any time to deal with issues that cannot wait for the next Annual Meeting. A Special Town Meeting is called by vote of the Selectmen or if two hundred (200) voters sign a petition requesting one.

Warrant

The Warrant is the official public notice of business to be considered at Town Meeting. It will be publicly posted throughout the Town, set a time and place for the meeting, and contain one or more articles. Once the warrant is opened by the Selectmen articles may be submitted until the deadline set by the Board of Selectmen.

Article

An Article is the self-described characterization of an issue to be decided at the meeting and must be clearly defined by the petitioner or sponsor. The content of the article must be clearly and completely explained so that voters will fully understand the context and meaning of the article. The **scope** of each article sets the bounds of actions that may be taken. Amendments or motions outside the scope of issues and/or actions presented in the article at the time of posting of the Warrant may not be considered at the meeting. Articles are submitted by Town Boards or agencies, citizen petitions of ten (10) registered voters at Annual Town Meeting, or one hundred (100) registered voters at Special Town Meeting.

Main Motion

A main motion is required for the meeting to act on a given article and must be within its scope. It may be as simple as "I move the Town so vote" or a more complex motion, as long as the article's scope is not exceeded. A main motion must be made and seconded for discussion to proceed. Affirmative rather than negative main motions are preferred to avoid voter confusion.

Amendments

Amendments may be offered to a main motion, debated and then accepted or rejected. Individual amendments will be considered in the normal course of business, in turn. Amendments to amendments will be actively discouraged and generally not allowed unless, in the Moderator's discretion, it provides specific clarity to the issue under consideration. Upon all secondary motions having been voted, voters will return to discussion and vote on the main motion, whether amended or not.

Reconsideration

Reconsideration of an action under any single article may be proposed only once upon the conclusion of any article and prior to the commencement of the next. Whether offered for reasons of clarity or tactic to preclude reconsideration of votes already taken, the introduction of a motion to reconsider should not be done lightly as once reconsideration is denied, the decision on an article cannot be reversed or altered.

Adjournment

A motion of adjournment requires the meeting to convene at a certain future time, date and place.

Dissolution

Dissolution is the final act of a meeting. All issues will have concluded, and future discussion will require another separate meeting and duly posted warrant.

Responsible Parties:

Voters

Voters are the ultimate decision makers. Voted decisions are binding on the entire Town, including its elected officials, with the exception of resolutions or advisory articles.

Moderator

The Moderator is the person elected and responsible for the conduct of the meeting. Establishment of rules, procedural rulings, conduct of debate, and voting are vested solely in the Moderator.

Town Clerk

The Town Clerk is elected and is responsible for distributing notices of any Town Meeting, keeping all public records associated with the meetings, and producing the final recorded minutes of actions voted. The Town Clerk's minutes are the only tangible record of debate and voting, and are used in formal enactment of local By-law.

Selectmen

The Board of Selectmen is an elected body responsible for calling the meeting date, time and place and setting the warrant. This executive board is often authorized by the meeting to act on the Town's behalf between Town Meetings and oversee its management through the appointed Town Administrator.

School Committee

The School Committee is an elected body responsible for setting policy and directing management of the schools, through its appointed Superintendent of Schools.

Finance Committee

The Finance Committee is appointed by the Moderator and is responsible for specific recommendations to the Town Meeting on financial and certain other articles. This body of citizens has the obligation to investigate finance related articles proposed to the meeting and make independent recommendations in the best financial interest of the Town.

Planning Board

The Planning Board is elected and is responsible for administering the Town's Zoning By-law. This Board is required to hold hearings and make recommendations on articles that affect zoning or environmental issues.

Town Counsel

Town Counsel is the Town's Attorney, appointed by the Selectmen. Town Counsel will make legal rulings and advise the meeting when that advice is needed.

Executives, Staff and Committees

Many other participants have strong interest in assuring the success of Town Meeting. They propose issues, explain interests and supply information to the voters. Included in this group are the Town Administrator, Superintendent of Schools, Finance Director/Town Accountant, Department Heads, and various other Town Committees.

Operating Staff

Significant effort is made to properly organize and operate Town Meeting. Town staff and volunteers provide the necessary support to conduct each Town Meeting and include Registrars of Voters, Voter Check-in Clerks, Counters, Public Safety Officers and Facilities Personnel of the building in which the meeting is held.