

TMD Committee Minutes

August 29, 2023, Danville Town Offices

Present: Tom Ziobrowski, Alice Kitchel, Alison Low, Glenn Herrin, Eric Hutchins, Alison Despathy, Clayton Cargill

Glenn Herrin opened the meeting at 6:30 p.m.

The group proposed a change to the agenda to allow for introductions

1. Introductions

Glenn Herrin from Randolph, moved here in 2015. Currently serves on the Planning Commission, Selectboard and the Emergency Management Committee. Self-described fan of Town Meeting Day and the participation that it entails, because “it’s important to get people together to talk about things.” Wants to avoid situation in Brattleboro where they have a representative town meeting, where 138 elected town meeting day representatives conduct business. You can read more about it here: <https://www.brattleboro.org/?SEC=72B7711A-7A9D-46D8-A2B4-AD97878AA2A0> Glenn wants to keep TMD, but open to options to increase participation.

Clayton Cargill is here to represent Schoolboard representation. Loves TMD and has participated in multiple capacities over the years. He has seen dwindling participation and “exclusionary participation.” “When we sent out ballots out the participation was overwhelming,” he said. Clayton noted the irony that after the article to go to Australian ballot was roundly defeated, participants bundled remaining articles so that they could go home. Clayton is originally from Texas

Tom Ziobrowski has been Town Meeting moderator for years. In 2021 721 people voted by Australian ballot, but he still wants to have TMD. Wants to find a way to make it work better. Didn’t get to participate this year. Missed the vote for the school budget, which eventually had to be cured. Originally from PA.

Alison Low, originally from NH. Would like to increase participation because it’s an equity issue, and she too finds dwindling participation to be exclusionary participation. She found it ironic that expanding the right to vote in Town Meeting is decided by a small group of people. She is concerned that not everyone gets to participate. As an employee of the regional planning commission, she gets the day off and is encouraged to attend. People by right can get the day off, but some people have to give up a day’s pay. Would like to consider some hybrid model that allows for face-to-face and for Australian ballot, such as SB2 in NH.

Alice Kitchel: Grew up in Barnet. Alice felt that although going to ballot might “level the playing field,” TMD is an important civil tradition where people have to come face to face and be accountable to each other.

Alison Despathy: TMD is the democratic process. Face to face interaction is invaluable and civic engagement is really important. People are so busy, working, raising kids, they are trusting but not participating in the decision-making process. She felt that the article to go to Australian ballot was impulsive. Rather, she feels that we should work to make it inclusive and allow people to have a part.

Eric Hutchins: Moved to Danville 2 years ago. Originally from Montpelier. Professor was Frank Bryan. Democratic process is important, and so is TMD. He said that the assumption is that young people are apathetic, but he has found that they are not. They are very interested in politics, but he found that they don't know how to participate and "pull the levers." What they see is corporate media and just a bunch of arguing. By contrast, politics at the hyperlocal level is talking face to face and maintaining neighbor relationships. We have to be accountable – and we can't be jerks. People can be nice to each other even though they disagree. How do we increase that level of participation? How do we become more welcoming to people?

Clayton talked about moving the election of public officials to a ballot, noting that one of the challenges at TMD is that it is illegal to campaign at a polling place. At TMD, the candidates couldn't say anything. Can you make it harder for people to get on the ballot so that people have to make themselves known? There are towns that have elections for town officials and schoolboard.

2. Selectboard discussion and charter review: Glenn reviewed the slides that were presented at the Selectboard. He outlined one approach for decision-making but noted that we are not bound by it. An initial target date is to do the research and come back to the selectboard in January to let them know about some of the options we are considering. There is some flexibility with that deadline, because we are not going to do anything that required a warrant article. Rather, we will be expected to brief the public on our activities at the next Town Meeting. He also referenced the charter for the group, which follows Open Meeting Law.

Recommendations for changes/improvements need to be in place by fall of 2024, and the selectboard and schoolboard should be given a range of reasonable and viable options. Changes could be incremental. The recommendations would be focused on what changes could be made, if any, to Town Meeting, rather than broader changes to public engagement. That said, if the group finds barriers to participation at Town Meeting Day, we should address them.

3. Public Comment: There were no comments from the public.

4. Elect chair: The chair will set the agenda, post notices and run the meeting. Glenn was nominated as chair by Eric. Tom also said that he could do it. Glenn nominated Tom. Clayton 2nd nomination of Tom. Tom was eventually elected the chair.

5. Determine next/regular meeting schedule: Everyone has pretty busy schedules, but the group ultimately landed on the first Wednesday in October (October 4th at 7:00.) The group also decided to keep October 25th (the fourth Wednesday) open. It is unclear whether the group needs one or two meetings a month. We can amend the schedule as necessary.

6. Additional comments/discussion: We started to identify the research needed and next steps to become better informed. We reviewed partial data on TMD participation over the years and whether there were major issues. It was noted that the Town has historical records of TMD, and these can be reviewed by scheduling an appointment. After a charter change in 2011 the highway budget and school budget have been voted on by Australian ballot. All other issues are still voted on from the floor (with the exception of the 2021 and 2022 during COVID).

There is the issue of who isn't coming and why. Traditional means of contact with non-participants may be irrelevant (i.e. FPF, etc) and you might be dealing with apathy. Surveys will need to be complemented

with in-person canvassing, like at Marty's. Probably not at recycling, since everyone who goes to recycling goes to TM. As for in-person engagement on this issue, we should try to find out as much as possible when someone is willing to talk. Maybe we can uncover barriers to participation and potential solutions.

Clayton noted that TMD in 2023 was highly unusual because of the uncertainty leading up to it. No was sure that an in-person meeting would be possible until the last minute. By then, no one had asked the library to host the traditional ham dinner. People came to TMD and were asking when dinner was going to be served.

Assignments:

Eric: Dig through TMD records and talk to the new principal about connection with school activities and/or Capstone potential. Also talk to government and civics teacher.

Glenn: What other towns are doing in Vermont and how that has changed?

Alison D: Research current events in other towns that have brought on civic engagement. What are the towns are the most successful with engagement? (Maybe check in with Slow Democracy?)

Clayton Cargill: Research options for election of officials.

Everyone: think about what we want to learn from people who don't attend. What do we ask?

Resources identified throughout the course of the meeting:

Vermont Statutes online <https://legislature.vermont.gov/statutes/>

Robert's Rules of Order (first published in 1876). A one-pager would be helpful if it exists. Here is one, although it's intended for nonprofit boards: <https://www.boardeffect.com/blog/roberts-rules-of-order-cheat-sheet/>

Vermont League of Cities and Towns: The municipal assistance portal changed recently, and member communities must have an account to access resources. If there is something that people want, however, we can put in a request: <https://www.vlct.org/>

A couple of books were mentioned/recommended:

[Real Democracy](#) and [All Those in Favor](#), both by Frank M Bryan. The latter is co-authored with Susan Clark who is associated with [Slow Democracy](#) and co-authored a book by the same name.

[Stolen Focus: Why You Can't Pay Attention and How to Think Deeply Again](#); and [Lost Connection: Why You're Depressed and How to Find Hope](#), both by Johann Hari.

The meeting adjourned at 8:02 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Alison Low