

## Town Meeting Date Committee

Wednesday, October 4, 2023, Danville Town Offices

Present: Tom Ziobrowski, Chair; Eric Hutchins, Alison Despathy, Alison Low, Alice Kitchel, Glenn Herrin, Clayton Cargill; No members from the public present

The meeting was called to order at 7:01.

The first order of business was to set a regular time for meetings. A second meeting for October was not going to work for most people, so the committee opted for the first Wednesday of the month. **Next meeting is November 1<sup>st</sup> at 7:00.**

There was considerable discussion about circulating information in advance of a meeting. If information is an ACTIONABLE product, such as the presentation that we will eventually make to the selectboard, it should become part of the agenda packet. Eventually information circulated in a meeting becomes part of the meeting record.

Tom presented historic numbers for Town Meeting attendance, along with notations of items of interest that may have impacted attendance. It was noted that the Secy of State's web site, which has data for each town going back 10 years, has many holes. Alison D. called towns to confirm information, again noting discrepancies with Sec'y of State records. In 2010 when Danville voted to make the budgets Australian ballot, the vote was not close – 2:1. Unfortunately, however, there are no numbers for participation immediately after the charter change, for Australian ballot votes for Town, Highway, or School budgets for 2011 or 2012, and we cannot locate the records. Tom was also surprised to learn that we don't record meetings. Also noted that that 2020 and 2021 attendance was zero due to COVID. So, there are anomalies, and no hard and fast findings, but it's a good basis to start from. There is a perception that attendance is dwindling, but the numbers in Danville don't seem to indicate that.

Eric went to the Town records, going back to 1808. Some records missing from the 1920s. Town hit a peak population in 1840 (2633), not so far from current decennial Census (2355). At early meetings, they had an abundance of officers, about 50 appointees. There were 31 town surveyors and highwaymen. The only controversial issue was ordinances around wandering livestock. 1813 ordinance banning rams from wandering around. Quantitative data was hard to come by.

Alison D. Shared more on the numbers. Both she and Alice identified quotes that they felt embodies the discussion and importance of town meeting day. Alison D reached out to communities to get perspective. Some town clerks questioned the Australian ballot – and if voters were simply voting for the sake of voting. Others had concerns about costs and election integrity. Nevertheless, a school board member voiced concern about denying access (to those who can't attend, etc.). Disability and illness were also concerns.

Note: Vermont Statute provides some latitude to towns to take “reasonable measures” to accommodate elders or people with disabilities on Town Meeting day. However these measures don't have to be taken if they pose an undue hardship to the Town.

<https://legislature.vermont.gov/statutes/section/17/055/02667>

That said, the standards of access are more stringent if Australian ballot is involved. In that case, the board of Civil Authority SHALL take measures that are necessary to accommodate elders or individuals with a disability. <https://legislature.vermont.gov/statutes/section/17/051/02502> [subsection (e)]

There were 18 towns that voted on Australian ballot. Craftsbury tabled. Full AB voted down in other towns. Essex Town and Strafford voted full AB, and Coventry appears to have gone that route, as has Marlboro. Many towns have adopted a hybrid approach. Susan Clark (Slow Democracy) is working with Craftsbury to advise on the TMD process. (Freedom and Unity <https://www.townofcraftsbury.com/freedom-unity-comm> ); Peacham has done a similar project with Susan Clark <https://peacham.org/strengthening-21st-century-democracy/>

Clayton looked at how election of officers by petition. Those who want to be elected can circulate a petition to get either 30 signatures or 5% of the registered voters, whichever is less. Of 247 communities that use AB for election of town officers, 173 still have the budgets come from the floor. One possibility is that we can flip the roles of AB – Australian ballot for officers, floor for the budget.

Other shared findings:

- All towns experienced increased participation through AB during pandemic.
- Higher participation noted in towns that mailed ballots prior to TMD.
- Attendance for towns with floor-only meetings does appear to be dropping slightly. Only-floor meeting with towns our size have 13%. Hybrid is 8%, but others are participating by ballot.
- It really is about the issues. Controversial issues will drive up attendance.
- Smaller towns ( $\leq 5,000$ ) have better attendance than larger towns.
- Frank Bryan cites an average of 20.5% of registered voter attendance over 30 years.
- Australian ballot reduces attendance.
- The size of the hall does not make a difference in attendance.
- Education level is a key component.
- Night meetings tend to decrease attendance over time.

Eric still noted that even though things don't change, it doesn't mean that we can't suggest improvements/accommodations to expand participation. There was a discussion about possible measures: Combine town and school meeting. Use AB only for election of officers. Offer daycare. Involve young people, give them a role. Make TMD a town holiday. Make it easy to attend and meaningful to attend. Explore the possibility of something like SB2 (in NH)

There was a discussion about the statutory basis for TMD, which is outlined in Title 17, Subchapter 2: <https://legislature.vermont.gov/statutes/chapter/17/055> , as well as the use of charters and charter changes. <https://legislature.vermont.gov/statutes/section/17/055/02645> What isn't clear is the threshold for a charter change. Would we, for example, need a charter change to flip the roles of AB at TMD?

Glenn reminded us of the process. We are in fact-finding mode. (Step 1) We will present findings to the SB. In November. Step 2 is to consider measures to approach town meeting day in the future. That is

what we present to TMD at 2024 to get feedback. After public feedback, will refine these approaches to four or five recommendations.

The group had discussed doing a survey, but it was determined that it is too soon. We need to let it ferment. We want to distribute the data and findings first. In the meantime, we can consider questions that we might want to include on the survey.

Next time we want to focus on building what we are going to the selectboard/schoolboard: Here is what we have learned, here is how we are going to proceed. Then, we'll get their feedback. Our next meeting is the 1<sup>st</sup>, then we will have about a week to prepare for the presentation.

Finally we talked about the over purpose of this committee. It all comes down to striking a balance between enfranchising those who can't attend TMD, and giving a role for people who do attend. It is agreed that TMD has an intrinsic value and is a central element of Vermont's culture. It "enforces civility" because disagreements must be dealt with in person. In short, it's civic and civil.

The committee voted to adjourn at 9:00.

Respectfully submitted,

Alison Low