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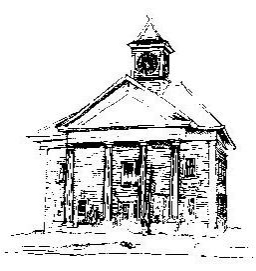
Task Analysis Briefing

Danville Town Meeting Committee (TMC)

All Those in Favor, Frank Bryan and Susan Clark - There are a lot of factors in our world that are pushing us away from each other. Town Meeting builds something Vermont has always had a lot of: social capital.

Identifying options for enhancing local participatory democracy in traditional
Town Meeting

Presentation as of November 18, 2023



Purpose and Agenda

Purpose

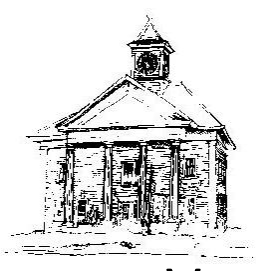
This briefing to the Danville Selectboard and School Board:

- **Updates facts and assumptions** about Town Meetings
- **Validates the task** and guidance for the TMC
- **Solicits guidance** from the boards on acceptable options
- **Sets projected schedule** of activities for the TMC

Alison Despathy, 2023 TM: "I think it really is important for all of us to come together, to see each other's faces, to have the conversations, as we try to sort through and solve problems."

Agenda

- Situation
 - Background
 - Research Notes
 - Towns Across Vermont
 - Election of Officers
 - Recent Voting in Similar Towns/Cities
 - Danville TM History
 - Danville Participation History
 - Changing Town Meeting
- Key Planning Assumptions
- Initially Identified Approaches
- Task Methodology
- Projected Timeline
- Discussion and Guidance



Situation – Background

Glenn Herrin, 2023 TM: "It's the one day a year that somebody can get up and come, talk to their neighbors and argue with them, respectfully, and hash out their differences and vote on what makes a difference to them and their town."

- Vermont mandates Town Meetings
 - Floor Meetings
 - Australian Ballots
 - Danville charter: "All voting on the Town budget and the highway budget at all annual and special meetings shall be by Australian ballot." [24 App. V.S.A. ch. 114, § 101](#)
 - Danville School District charter: "All voting on the school budget at all annual and special meetings shall be by Australian ballot." [16 App. V.S.A. ch. 131, § 101](#)
- Hard data is unreliable
 - Attendance is generally measured by votes; floor meetings sometimes reflect only 1 vote
 - Reporting to the Secretary of State is inconsistent and contains many errors
 - Floor Meetings have about 8-13% turnout
 - Australian Ballots have about 27% turnout
 - Danville's 2021-2022 turnout (absentee ballot only) peaked at about 40%
- Every town is different
 - Most towns use a combination of Floor Meeting and Australian Ballot (but the mix varies)
 - Some towns seem very happy... and other towns do not



Situation – Research Notes

- First Town Meeting – Bennington, 1762
- Small towns have better attendance than large towns
- Australian Ballot reduces attendance for floor meetings
- Sociological and political ideologies do not appear to affect attendance or participation
- The size of the hall does not make a difference in attendance or participation
- Diversity is a plus for participation
- Night meetings tend to decrease in attendance over time
- Changing from Tuesday to Saturday does not seem to affect turnout
- Issues are the most important determinant of turnout and the amount of discussion

Eric Bach, 2023 TM: "...they don't really get to have a voice in how things are done, because they can't get here."



Situation – Towns Across Vermont

- Trend towards Australian Ballot
 - In 2013, 45 towns/cities used only AB; in 2023 that number was 64
 - In 2013, 77 towns used floor vote exclusively, in 2023 that number was 69
 - The majority of towns use AB/floor hybrid
- Observations from Town Officials
 - Many towns have *perception* of dwindling attendance and engagement
 - Some towns like methods that other towns hate and vice versa!
 - All towns noted increased voting with mail-in ballots during COVID
 - Most towns prefer a hybrid of Floor Meeting and Australian Ballot
 - Small percentage thought info meetings before balloting is adequate, majority thought those are not well attended and are compromised since there is no chance for change at that point
- 2023 Australian Ballot questions
 - 18 towns voted on moving entirely to Australian Ballot
 - At least 3 voted to eliminate floor meeting
 - Most kept floor meeting, but some shifted to electing officials by Australian Ballot
- All towns are seeking more attendance and access
 - Many town clerks discussed recent trainings regarding solutions for those who are sick, disabled or cannot make town meeting but would like to participate without an Australian Ballot
 - Creative solutions and interpretations/amendments of statute all being considered to create equitable access to Town Meeting

Engaging issues:

- Mobile towers
- Dollar General
- Wind towers
- Budget increases
- School buildings
- Firearm use ordinances
- ATVs
- Zoning changes
- Bond votes
- Emergency services
- ...



Situation – Election of Officers

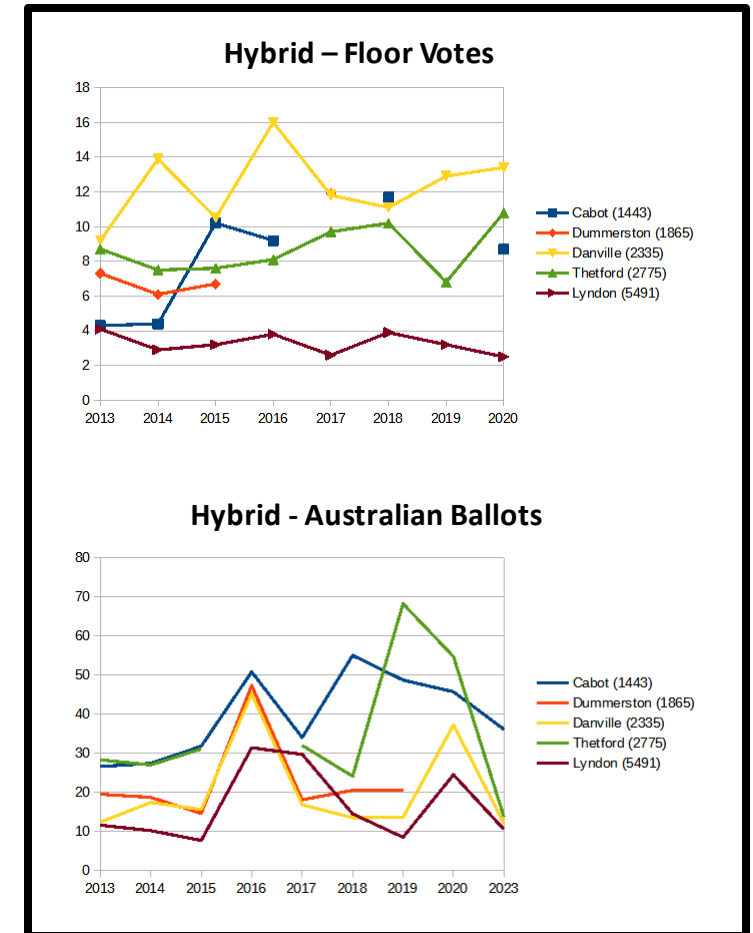
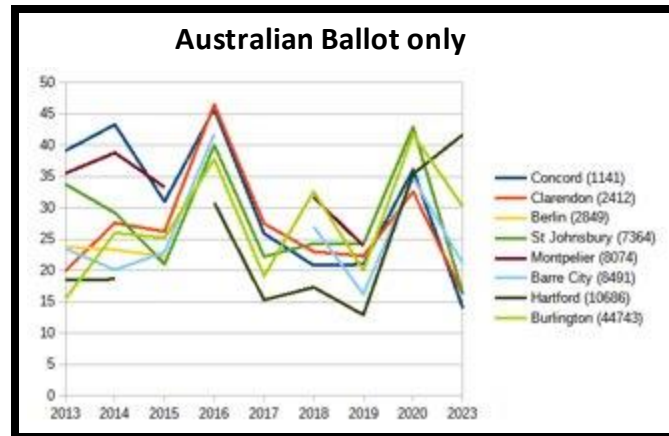
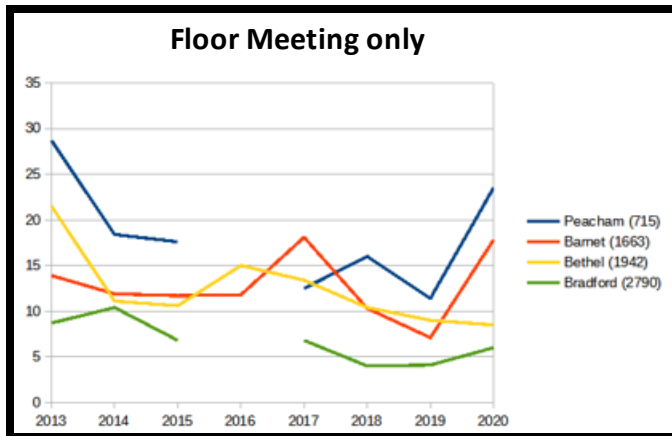
About 4 towns use Australian Ballot only for budgets, while about 84 use Australian Ballot to elect officers.

- Elections at Floor Meetings *do* allow introductions
 - [17 V.S.A. § 2640\(c\)\(2\)](#): "... a candidate for local office nominated from the floor at the annual meeting may introduce his or her candidacy to the extent permitted by the voters at the meeting."
- Election by Australian Ballot requires candidate registration
 - People seeking an office must circulate a petition
 - Petition requires either 30 signatures or 5% of the registered voters - whichever is less
 - A short, single page form filled out to town clerk is the only other requirement
- 2023 Town/City Reported Methodology (for town issues, of 235 reporting)
 - 158 use Australian ballot for officers
 - 101 use Australian ballot for public questions
 - 78 use Australian ballot for budgets
 - 74 use Australian ballot for both officers and budgets
 - *School numbers are similar, but merged districts and supervisory unions occlude the data*

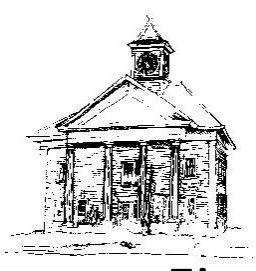


Situation – Recent Voting in Similar Towns/Cities

- Floor Meeting attendance
 - Current average 13% for floor meetings only, 8% for combination
 - Generally smaller towns have better turnouts
- Australian Ballot attracts 2-3 times floor turnout
 - Average ~27%
 - Options vary – all items, budget, officers, appropriations, ...
- Turnout for all voting is clearly most affected by local issues



<https://sos.vermont.gov/elections/election-info-resources/town-meeting-local-elections/>



Situation – Danville TM History

- First Danville Town Meeting: March 17, 1788
- Early meetings reflect an abundance of officers
 - About 50 appointees; 31 town surveyors and highwaymen
 - Controversial issues were generally about livestock
 - 1813 TM ordinance bans rams from wandering around
- 1840 town population peaks at 2,633
 - Population for last 20 years is around 2,200
 - Average voter checklist in recent years is 1,700
- 2010 petition changes charter to require Australian ballot for budgets
 - November ballot item - 2:1 in favor of Australian Ballots (1,146 total ballots)
 - Since 2011, all budgets have passed as presented (with one school exception)
- 2020 most recent "normal" meeting: 239 at floor meeting, 662 ballots cast
 - 2021-22 no in-person Town Meeting due to COVID restrictions
 - 2023 last-minute change to in-person Town Meeting; item to vote on all public questions and elect officers by Australian ballot



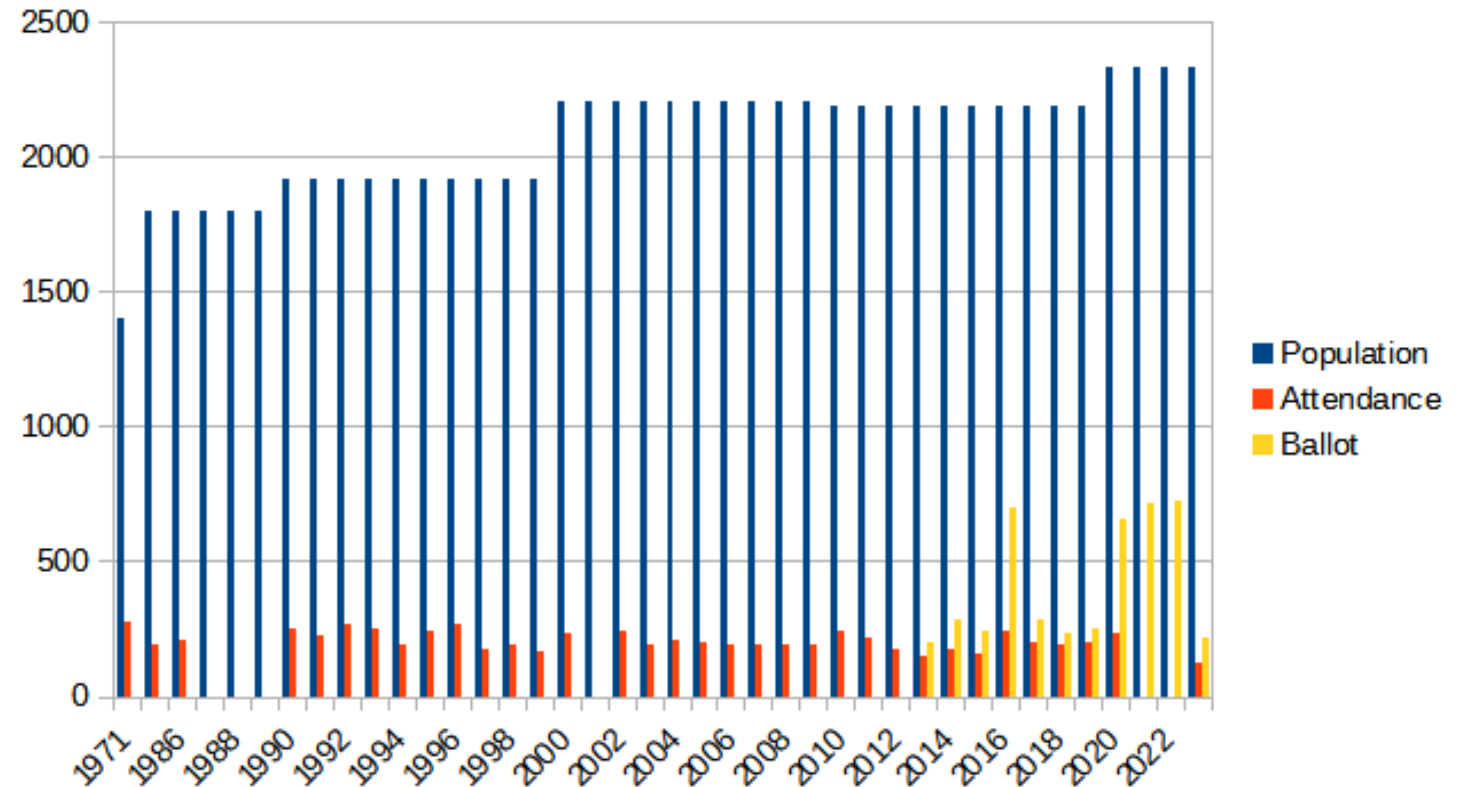
Situation – Danville Participation History

Recent record high participation in 2016 with questions about ATVs and Article 46 school funding

- Over the past 35-40 years, floor meeting attendance has ranged from 153 to 275 with an average of 209
- Participation seems highly dependent on issues:
 - 2016 ATVs: 250 (+706 ballots)
 - 2015 eliminate auditor: 164
 - 2012 first budget ballot: 176
 - 2005 nothing exciting: 207
 - 1997 appropriations: 178
 - 1996 school budget: 269
 - 1994 insurance: 193
 - 1991 library foundation: 226
 - 1971 kindergarten: 283

- Attendance is NOT really dropping, but...
- Attendance has never been high
- Maximum voter turnout seems to be ~40%

Alison Low, 2023 TM: "[Working families] are the people that we need to hear from the most, and we're not hearing from them now."





Situation – Changing Town Meeting

- Annual Meetings are required by law - [17 V.S.A. § 2640](#)
 - A meeting of the legal voters of each town shall be held annually on the first Tuesday of March
 - The annual town meeting shall be the annual town school district meeting - [16 V.S.A. § 422](#)
- Allowable Changes
 - ***Charters can override normal Annual Meeting laws; otherwise...***
 - Meeting time and place are set locally
 - Floor meeting may start on any of the three days before the first Tuesday of March (Saturday on)
 - Australian Balloting must be the first Tuesday of March
 - Officers, budgets, and public questions may be elected by Australian Ballot
- Change Process
 - Floor Meeting date shift requires a town vote - [17 V.S.A. § 2640\(b\)](#)
 - Switching to Australian Ballot (for elections, budgets, or public questions) requires a town vote; once adopted, Australian Ballots continue unless discontinued by a town vote - [17 V.S.A. § 2680\(b\)-\(d\)](#)
 - Annual School District meetings can be between February 1 and June 14, with a town vote - [16 V.S.A. § 422](#)
 - Charter changes require a proposal (Selectboard or petition), 2 public hearings, an Australian Ballot vote, and then enactment by the state legislature - [17 V.S.A. § 2645](#)



Key Planning Assumptions

Even for Australian Balloting, 40% turnout is for hot-button issues; 25% is more normal.

- Maximum turnout is about 40% of voters
- Floor meetings serve a public good beyond voting:
 - Participation in TM encourages participation in other town bodies and activities
 - Face to face discussion of issues fosters civility and compromise
- Australian ballots improve turnout for disenfranchised populations (disabled, working, newcomers, ...)
- We can improve floor meeting turnout and participation without changing the basic format
- **It all comes down to striking a balance between enfranchising those who can't attend TMD and giving a meaningful function for the people who do attend**



Initially Identified Approaches

The TM Committee expects to make at least 2 format recommendations as well as suggestions for improving participation for ANY format.

TM Format

- Floor Meeting Only
- Hybrid
 - AB for budgets (current)
 - AB for elections
 - AB for public questions
- Australian Ballot Only
- ~~Representative Town Meeting~~
- New Hampshire [SB2](#)
 - In-person meeting to set ballot items
 - Voting weeks later

Participation Boosters

- Encourage Participation
 - Ensure accessibility on par with balloting
 - Offer online attendance
 - Offer daycare
 - Involve young people
 - Advertise services and issues
- Improve Ballot Item Input
 - Host info meeting before TM warning to allow voters to comment on, if not amend, items
- Change Floor Meeting Date/Time
 - Saturday before first Tuesday
 - Saturday evening
 - Sunday or Monday
 - Tuesday evening

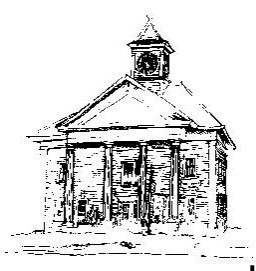


Task Methodology

*Both Selectboard and School board
agreed with these general goals
and this approach.*

- TMC Goal: identify options for Town Meeting that will...
 - Result in **good decisions** that are understood by and reflect the will of Danville residents
 - Maximize **participation** by people who want to participate
 - Increase **civic engagement** beyond Town Meeting
- TMC Approach:
 - Step 1: Identify **facts and assumptions**
 - Brief and get guidance from Selectboard and School Board
 - Step 2: Research and identify **all potential options**
 - Present to Selectboard, School Board, and 2024 Town Meeting
 - Gather input on implementation and acceptability of options
 - Step 3: Develop and refine plans for **realistic options**
 - Solicit public input and hold public forum(s)
 - Create outlines for options that are feasible, acceptable, and suitable
 - Present recommended options to Selectboard and School Board

Charter Mission: The Town Meeting Committee identifies options for enhancing local participatory democracy in traditional Town Meeting by conducting research, soliciting and considering public input, and making recommendations to the Selectboard and School Board by January 2025.



Projected Timeline

Both Selectboard and School board agreed with this timeline.

Step 1

- July – August 2023
 - Selectboard charters Town Meeting Committee (TMC)
 - TMC holds initial organizational meeting
- September - October 2023
 - TMC conducts initial research into background and legal options

Step 2

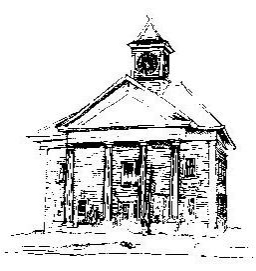
- November 2023
 - *TMC briefs Selectboard and School Board on Task Analysis*
- December 2023 – February 2023
 - TMC continue research, refines ideas into potential options
 - *TMC briefs Selectboard and School Board on Potential Options*
- March 2024
 - *TMC makes public presentation as part of 2024 Town Meeting (and/or Info Meetings)*

Step 3

- April – May 2024
 - TMC updates options based on board and TM feedback
- June 2024
 - TMC hosts public meeting to discuss updated recommendations
- July – August 2024
 - TMC finalizes recommendations
- September 2024
 - *TMC presents Final Recommendations to Selectboard and School Board*
- October 2024 – December 2025
 - Selectboard and School Board decide on, implement, and warn recommendations
- March 2025
 - *TMC supports 2025 Town Meeting (and/or Info Meetings as needed)*
 - Danville conducts Town Meeting to experiment with / adopt / vote on recommendations



Discussion and Guidance



All Those in Favor, Frank Bryan and Susan Clark: "...Australian Ballot takes away your right to legislate – to be part of the lawmaking process – and it doesn't even replace it with a deliberative body that represents you. It simply allows you to vote up or vote down, yes or no, on an issue prepared by the selectboard or in many cases by a small group of private citizens with a special interest."

Alison Low, 2023 TM: "[Working families] are the people that we need to hear from the most, and we're not hearing from them now."

Real Democracy, Frank Bryan: "Yes – Town Meeting has its flaws, but show me a better system."

Glenn Herrin, 2023 TM: "It's the one day a year that somebody can get up and come, talk to their neighbors and argue with them, respectfully, and hash out their differences and vote on what makes a difference to them and their town."

Susan Clark: "Australian Ballot voting allows more people to participate but shrinks the legislative vocabulary."

All Those in Favor, Frank Bryan and Susan Clark: "[Debates]... boil down to quantity vs. Quality – more people will participate in a less meaningful way if the Australian Ballot is adopted."

Eric Bach, 2023 TM: "...they don't really get to have a voice in how things are done, because they can't get here."

Town Treasurer: "We had record breaking turnout for voters" [during the pandemic]

Alison Despathy, 2023 TM: "I think it really is important for all of us to come together, to see each other's faces, to have the conversations, as we try to sort through and solve problems."