

Town Meeting Day Committee Meeting

December 6, 7:00 pm

Attending: Tom Ziobrowski, Chair; Alison Despathy, Alice Kitchel, Alison Low, Glenn Herrin, Clayton Cargill, Eric Hutchins. Guest: Susan Clark, co-author of [Slow Democracy](#), and [All Those in Favor](#), as well as Town Moderator and Facilitator of Middlesex Town Meeting Day

Clayton moved to accept minutes. All voted in favor.

Clayton recapped School Board meeting. They were generally receptive to the presentation, although there was not a lot of guidance as to next steps. They will be looking to us for suggestions. There were no strong objections or preferences at this point. Glenn added that this was the same experience with the presentation to the Selectboard.

Alice Kitchel had a suggestion about social capital: Her idea was to establish a standing committee to orchestrate TMD every year. This would be an ongoing effort to enhance it, and the committee -- working irrespective of the Selectboard or the Schoolboard -- would do much of the work of coordination, such as picking up the phones to make sure that things are being done such as setting up tables in the lobby for all the groups who are tabling at TMD; making sure that there is a microphone, or if someone needs a ride. Overall, the committee could work to get the word out. They could even suggest topics to bring to Town Meeting. Ideally, the committee should include someone who has expertise in events coordination. The end result: Make TMD run more efficiently. It's possible that this existing committee could fulfill the role of this committee in its inaugural year and lay the groundwork for a standing committee that would take on the responsibility for posterity.

Then the group turned to discussion with their guest, Susan Clark. They explained the origins of the committee (that Australian Ballot was proposed after the huge increase in voting during the pandemic, only to be roundly defeated at Town Meeting Day in 2023.) The group had researched their options, which essentially boiled down to: 1) putting the budget back to floor vote and putting election of local officials on ballot (which is the opposite of what the Town has now); 2) going back to floor meeting only; 3) adopting some hybrid model or something like SB2 in New Hampshire.

In addition to those options, there are things that we can do to remove barriers to attendance (in other words, things that can be done incrementally). It was generally felt that the group has not fully catalogued these options.

The group talked about metrics for success. Equity of access is a goal in and of itself. We should not fall into the trap of measuring its success with numbers. This was compared, for example, to implementing an access ramp to a building. (Building regulations aside) would you feel compelled to remove it if only a few people used it? Bottom line: Looking at attendance numbers in the interim is not an effective measure of success. Even if something does remove barriers to participation, the numbers do not increase overnight.

Susan Clark commented that exploring how we can make those systems more open makes sense. When we think about TMD, we forget that we have 364 other days. There are meetings/venues/events all year long where people can engage.

Regarding the issue of ballot voting vs. floor participation: Susan stated that ballot voting tends to be skewed to a racial and social economic bias. However, research does not tie TMD participation the same way. TMD is different in that all attendees are able to act in a legislative capacity – as the sovereign. TMD is an opportunity for a legislative action. In the spirit of equity and inclusion, are we just trying to give them a ballot or are we inviting them to participate?

Alice asked her to speak about SB2. Seems like the best of both worlds because it includes the legislative body and then vote on it. Reviews are mixed. Some love it, others don't. Concern is that people can skew the article, and then the ballot process is different. In other words, the ballot reflects a deeper conversation that is not apparent to AB voters. There is a potential for diminishing returns for the floor meeting, which requires more outreach and education before the AB vote. However, she doesn't know the research on this. How many budgets have exploded over this process? Not able to say.

The TMD committee noted that our informational meetings (prior to TMD) are poorly attended; sometimes as few as one or two people. However, Tom Z states that this may also be a more recent development only, and that there were 20 people in the room just prior to COVID.

Susan spoke of research from conventional participation from public hearings. Research shows that public hearings tend to make people feel less empowered. (By contrast Alison L spoke of the public hearing process in planning commissions, where participants have a great deal of sway. Maybe it's an issue of scale?)

Susan also spoke of examples outside of Vermont, such as in Switzerland TMD process in place for centuries. These happen outside. The process there is known as Landsgemeinde:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Landsgemeinde>

Susan also spoke about an Oregon initiative – a jury that deliberates on issues and referenda. It results in a report to all the voters. The upshot is that people read them and felt better about democracy. How do we make the process more accessible? Town clerks may be getting some training to improve access. Middlesex used GoTo meeting for years to accommodate someone who had no other means of access. An ombudsman was needed to manage an online interface. Unfortunately, the Secretary of State made Middlesex stop. Cambridge had a voter who threatened to sue because she wasn't able to attend.

The group talked about the change in Danville's TMD process and attempted to explain the history of it to Susan: Back in 2010/2011, a group of residents pushed for budgeting by Australian Ballot to maximize the number of people who could vote on them. That said, it is not clear whether a charter change was actually required, since we did not have a charter in the first place, although anecdotally the group leaders did seem committed to making the change permanent.

We talked about the history of this committee. It was an issue of striking a balance: giving an opportunity to all anyone who wants to participate, while supporting the tradition of TMD. Originally, the support for AB was out of concern for lack of working families. Susan stated while that was a valid concern, the research doesn't seem to suggest that there are large groups of people who are actually prevented from participating. Eric echoed this sentiment, noting that there are probably people who do not want to attend, but who do not want to dismantle the tradition of TMD either.

The group noted that there are some instances where we don't do voice voting, because in tight votes, there was concern about pressure from neighbors. In that case, we vote from paper slips. Massachusetts uses handheld devices for voting.

Susan was asked about general reticence to participate, cultural barriers from newcomers, etc. One of the communities that she had worked with had voiced concern about newcomers taking over.

What did people do to build participation? Susan spoke about Peacham and their tradition of naming the snowplows. Woodbury has a kids' town meeting.

Susan spoke of two examples that may help to level the playing field for all: Operators manual in Bethel <https://indd.adobe.com/view/50b183d3-6366-4f5f-a4a6-758facdd92fb>

Additionally, Middlesex has had a Town Meeting Day solutions committee since the early aughts: <https://middlesexvermont.org/town-departments/boards-and-committees/>

There was a question about flipping role of AB. Seemed to make sense to have officers voted AB. People often don't know who are they voting for, and they don't have a say on the budget. If we vote to rescind the charter change, we could then go to ad hoc procedural changes.

Susan mentioned the issue of AB and on-floor participation: She refers to it as "breadth" (measured through all those who participate in Australian Ballot) vs. depth (referring to the deeper conversations that take place through on-floor voting. Ultimately, we want both.

Finally, the group turned to the issue of surveys: Peacham and Craftsbury have surveys. Center for research on Vermont might have some expertise on surveys.

For next meeting: We need to finalize a report for the Town Meeting. Alison D will circulate a draft. Discussion on survey questions (an agenda item) was table because we had run out of time. Eric has questions about the 18-month process: Is it possible for him to suggest a change sooner? Nothing is stopping him, however, the group is following its original mission.

The committee voted to adjourn at 8:55 p.m.

Next meeting is January 3rd, 2024