

Boxborough Town Meeting Study Committee
Status Report
December 2016

The Boxborough Town Meeting Study Committee is an ad hoc committee comprised of 5 members of the community and appointed by the Board of Selectmen on August 8, 2016. The committee's mission is to research, evaluate and recommend the best options for increasing attendance, awareness, and participation in town government and annual Town Meeting.

Members of the committee include: Susan Bak, Chair, John Fallon, Clerk, Jennifer Campbell, Jeanne Kangas and Abby Reip.

First Steps

The committee started out by reviewing several documents including the TM survey conducted in 2005, the Report of the Boxborough Town Meeting Study Committee of 2006, population demographics from 2000 through the present and TM attendance history between 1990 and 2016. We were not surprised to learn that Boxborough's population is getting older and that attendance at TM was higher when there were controversial articles in the warrant.

Survey

The committee undertook a new survey. The results essentially verified what we already knew:

- Survey respondents attended TM because of their:
 - Interest and commitment to the Town
 - Desire to voice their opinions
 - Need to understand what was going on in Town
- Reasons for not attending TM: lack of time or lack of interest
- Survey respondents favored a shorter Town Meeting
- 75% of respondents were opposed to moving TM to a Saturday or Sunday

Survey respondents made several suggestions:

- Move the date of TM
- Stop the live broadcast
- Implement off-site/at home electronic voting
- Schedule two Town Meetings per year: ATM in the Spring and STM in the Fall
- Limit TM to one night
- Increase signage on southeast side of Boxborough
- Provide transportation
- Provide childcare
- Control long winded speakers

Initiatives implemented

- Established a **Facebook page** to preview the warrant and provide additional information about TM
Stayed tuned for **short videos** on **Facebook** from local residents explaining why they go to TM
- **Robo call and automated email** to remind voters about TM
- **Welcome letter** to new residents explaining TM
- **Notice to parents** via the “Weekly Chatter” (electronic newsletter serving ABRHS and RJ Grey)
- Town Administrator and Town Moderator taped a “**TM Preview**” **show for cable TV**
- **Relocated signage** to reach a broader group of residents

Move the date of TM

In 1974, Town Meeting was moved from March to May because of the unpredictability of the weather, fluctuations in State Aid and the need to wait on Acton’s Town Meeting to vote the Regional School budget. Towns saw large fluctuations in State Aid making budgeting difficult. If State Aid was considerably less than budgeted, the Town would have to schedule a STM to vote a new budget. Over the years, State Aid has become more predictable with far smaller fluctuations.

Survey respondents felt that we could increase attendance if TM was moved from May, which tends to be a busy month for end of the school year activities, graduations and weddings, to April.

The committee plans to recommend a “sense of the meeting” article at ATM 2017 to get a perspective from a wider group of residents.

Stop the Live Broadcast

Some survey respondents believe that stopping the live broadcast will force residents to attend TM. However, residents who cannot attend, feel they are a part of TM when they can watch the process unfold live, from their homes

The committee does not plan to recommend that the live broadcast be discontinued. We believe that the live broadcast allows those who are unable to attend, to feel like they are a part of the process.

Off-site Electronic Voting

There is currently no legal mechanism for off-site/at home electronic voting. MGL Chapter 39 Section 10 requires that anyone who votes must be present and able to participate in the proceedings. Taking questions electronically from voters off-site/at home is currently being tested in a few towns across the Commonwealth.

On-site Electronic Voting

Over the last 5 years many towns in Massachusetts have adopted on-site electronic voting to speed up the process of counting written ballots/standing votes. Given that Boxborough has had only one written ballot in the last decade and that standing votes go very quickly, this does not appear to have value for the Town.

The committee does not recommend exploring electronic voting.

Two Town Meetings every year

Some survey respondents suggested two Town Meetings every year; one in the Spring and one in the Fall. While a good idea, there are generally not enough issues that need to be addressed for a STM in the Fall. Moreover, a STM in the Fall would not necessarily increase attendance. The committee recommends that the Town holds STMs on an as needed basis.

One-Night Town Meeting

While a one night TM is certainly possible, it would be a dramatic change in the way Boxborough conducts town meetings. However, the committee is looking at ways to make TM shorter through some or all of the following initiatives:

- Shorten announcements and introductions at the beginning of TM
- More articles on the consent agenda
- Continue to limit the number of Town Reports/Presentations
- Continue a time limit on Speakers
- Schedule debate and vote on controversial articles for a specific time
- BoS/FinCom present on motions only if the recommendations of the Boards are different
- Improve quality of presentations

Transportation

The Council on Aging currently provides transportation to and from TM. Information can be found in the Boxborough Buzz or by contacting Laura Arsenault, COA Coordinator at 978 264-1717 or larsenault@boxborough-ma.gov.

Childcare

Childcare services can be found through the A/B family network at the following link: www.abfamily.org.

If you have any other suggestions, please contact any member of the TM Study Committee. We look forward to hearing your ideas. Thank you!