

Woodbury Town Meeting Study Committee
MINUTES (UNAPPROVED)
Thursday, May 19, 2022, via Zoom

Members present: Ellie Hayes, Gwen Maynard, Alex Peltz, Jonah Meacham, and Jayne Nold-Laurendeau, John Reid

Members of the community present: Diana Peduzzi, Stephen Murphy

Guests: Susan Clark

Meeting began at 8:05.

Susan Clark asks folks to share their interest in this topic.

Ellie spoke about special meeting and split between the townspeople. Expressed concern about composition of the group not representing the perspectives shared in the town.

Jonah spoke about his return to VT and those who feel disenfranchised by the current process.

Gwen agreed with everything so far. Expressed wanting a better sense of community and has a feeling like we're all falling apart and town meeting needs to remain.

Jane spoke about similar feelings of division amongst town residents. She hopes Old Home Day will also bring people together, amongst other things. Jane witnessed the removal of town meeting from Berlin and how the town was forever changed.

John spoke about his offer to form a study committee at the Special Town Meeting. If the town goes to Australian Ballot then it likely won't go back to Town Meeting. Hoping we can take some steps to fix town meeting before going fully to Australia Ballot.

Diana spoke about her role on select board to form the committee. She agrees with the need of the committees goals to form new.

Stephen M spoke about need for people to see, hear, and get to know about each other.

Susan Clark spoke about her experience as town moderator and her research into town meeting.

Democracy doesn't have a committee. But needs it like all issues facing residents.

Her town (Middlesex) has a Solutions Committee.

Suggestion to us to personally invite other residents with divergent viewpoints.

We want both democratic quality and democratic quantity.

Susan Clark's Presentation:

Direct and deliberative democracy.

Uniqueness of TM: every citizen is a legislator. TM is a deliberative body.

Other direct democracy: initiatives and public referenda but different because they're not deliberative like they are at TM. A unique process at TM. Frank Bryan at UVM conducted thousands of TM visits with students to gather data about how it works. "Real Democracy"

Findings include: attendance is struggling. Dipped down to about 11% attendance of registered voters. Higher at smaller towns and lower in larger towns. 100% attendance is almost impossible. Ballot box attendance is around 25%. Barre in ballot vote was only 13%

John: Woodbury's attendance is between 9-16%

Highs and lows of attendance often equates to federal elections or hot topic issues.

Attendance going down due to: (1) town size plays a role, small brings out more (2) Issues Matter, which is unique among TM because the deliberative nature means voices are heard and can be influential (3) Australian Ballot is replacing TM. Informational Meeting is an easy way to replace the "meeting" but is only a public hearing and no decisions are made. "Conventional" Participation is non-power or decision-making public engagement. CP can be harmful for many reasons. Act 46 has harmed TM because town budgets are not voted on by the floor. Traditionally the school budgets are voted on in parallel meetings with TM and brought people to meetings.

COVID laws that allowed AB may have reduced interest, although may have spurred renewed interest in TM.

Ballot box voting is skewed by demographic and unrepresentative. TM voting are predominantly white. Data shows that TM is more welcoming and diverse. In VT TM women often make up at least 50% attendees and VT's legislature is over 50%.

Beneficial outcomes of TM: (1) improved civic health; economic strength, resilience in crisis

Tips to improve TM: (1) Offer Child Care: improves participation among women (2) Highlight the issues to raise people's awareness and interest (3) Consider timing (can happen on Sat, Sun, Mon or Tues). Factor in school break. On average changing the date did not change attendance. Set the time of specific votes, such as vote on budget.

Bethel Operators Manual.

Vermont Institute for Government has resources. Put some of these resources on FPF before TM.

Welcome newcomers: East Montpelier instituted a newcomer letter and might also include new voters. Civil invocation, like the one at the start of the book. Sets the tone on civility. Add some ceremony or personal/human. Are there translation issues? Really important to involve young people, which for kids sets a foundation in the experience of direct democracy.

Example: Poster project for town meeting? Enjoy and eat! Give awards and honor volunteers.

Consider Technology. Offer remote TM participation. People can watch but can't vote. Some software might be able to verify voter authentication so they can remote vote.

Celebration: Other ways to engage people throughout the year: walks, honoring people, young people interviewing older people and and share those stories at TM.

Alex asked if Middlesex conducted a survey of townspeople before making changes to TM:

Select board in Middlesex decided the 4:30 timeframe, but the Solutions Committee did a survey and asked what works and what doesn't work. Susan suggested a paper survey and digital version. Maybe consult with UVM or Vermont Institute for Government for advice on compiling the survey.

John added: To change the DAY of TM has to be approved by voters. To change the TIME can be made by select board.

Employers are required to give unpaid time off work to attend TM.

Heart of the matter is the quality versus quantity. It's not a polarity, one versus the other. It is a polarity to manage.

NH has SB2 which has a town meeting but then ballot later. Susan thinks this is a mess because it creates room for error and division. There isn't a silver bullet.

John: takeaway from those in favor of AB is that some feel very excluded from the conversation.

John wrap up

Meeting minutes approved 7:22pm

Discussion to have hybrid in-person and Zoom meeting 7:23pm

John opened discussion to update the Town website.

Meeting adjourn 7:27pm