
WOODBURY TOWN MEETING STUDY COMMITTEE FINAL REPORT

To: Woodbury Select Board

From: Woodbury Town Meeting Study Committee

August 25, 2022

This is the report and recommendations from the Woodbury Town Meeting Study Committee to the Select Board, which appointed the committee in April following a special Town Meeting in February to consider conducting some or all annual town business by Australian ballot. Voters decided at that meeting to continue electing town officers at Town Meeting, by a one-vote margin; those attending the meeting were nearly evenly divided.

The committee researched the subject, interviewed and met with Town Meeting experts in the field, and looked in what works and doesn't in other Vermont towns. The committee then conducted a townwide survey about Town Meeting and annual governance.

Two major take-aways from the *research*:

- Voter participation in annual town governance isn't just a numbers game. Town Meetings by their nature bring about more active citizen engagement in town business than deciding issues by paper ballot with no deliberation.
- Town Meeting participation is affected by how active citizen involvement is in town affairs throughout the year. Towns that communicate well with their voters have healthier, better attended Town Meetings.

The main take-aways from the townwide *survey*:

- 65% favor continuing traditional in-person Town Meeting
- 56% favor having it on Saturday
- 78% favor 10 a.m.
- 61% would like to have child care provided
- 79% would like to have a town "user's guide"

The committee recommends:

- That the Select Board warn for a special Town Meeting with this Article:

Shall Woodbury hold its future annual Town Meeting on the Saturday preceding the first Tuesday in March?

Changing the day of Town Meeting requires a townwide vote at a Town Meeting. We considered waiting until the regular Town Meeting next March to consider changing the day, but decided that given the strong preference for Saturday that it would be better to go ahead now, so the outcome could be implemented for next year's Town Meeting.

- That the Select Board appoint a standing Town Meeting Engagement Committee to help plan, promote and help with logistics for Town Meeting, including having child care provided at the meeting. This committee also would be tasked with producing a town "user's guide." The committee would also look for ways for ongoing community building.

Some members of the Town Meeting Study Committee are interested in serving on a standing Town Meeting Engagement Committee, but we thought it important that the Select Board issue a fresh invitation so that anyone who is interested has an opportunity to apply.

Attached is a copy of the results of the townwide survey. Three additional notes about the survey:

- QUESTION 1 and repeated as question 11 (continue with traditional Town Meeting): an explanatory sentence before this question contained an error made in editing. The sentence was:

Secretary of State data shows that either method, over time, results in a similar number of voters participating. Towns changing to Australian ballot have experienced an initial increase in voter turnout, but then it has returned to about the level of turnout the town previously had at Town Meeting.

What the sentence should have said is that the level of voter turnout for Town Meeting vs turnout for Australian ballot varies from town to town. In some towns there has remained a higher number of votes by Australian ballot. In other towns, after an initial increase, the turnout has returned to a level comparable to Town Meetings.

- QUESTION 13, Australian ballot for town budget, in-person Town Meeting for elected officials and other business: this question was added after the survey began, and there already had been 23 survey responses. As a result, response numbers are lower for this question than other Australian ballot-related questions.

This was not a poll of a cross section of Woodbury voters; these were the views of those who chose to take to the survey.

In looking into other towns and how they foster active citizen engagement, we make these observations:

- Woodbury town officials should look for and take advantage of opportunities to communicate with their fellow town citizens. Examples: Announcing that tax bills are in the mail, sending the results of town elections, deadline for dog licenses.

- Front Porch Forum is the predominant communications method. In the townwide survey, 95% said they receive FPF. There are about 740 Woodbury voters. Woodbury FPF has 687 members. We suggest that the Select Board publish its unapproved meeting minutes on FPF within a few days of its meetings.
- A town's web site is important. It needs to be pleasing to the eye, quick and easy to navigate, and easy to update (and kept current).
- The Select Board should look for opportunities to include articles on the Town Meeting agenda that encourage voter participation. Example: when and how to replace town road machinery.
- We need to be open to recognizing that what has worked in the past may need to be changed to engage newer / younger Woodbury residents in town affairs. Key to voter participation is everyone being included and feeling welcome.

Lastly, the Woodbury Community Library may be helpful in engendering citizen engagement in town governance, a good topic for the library trustees and a Woodbury Town Meeting Committee to take up.

Respectfully submitted,

Ellie Hayes

Gwen Marsha

Jonah Meacham

Jayne Nold-Laurendeau

Alex Peltz

John Reid

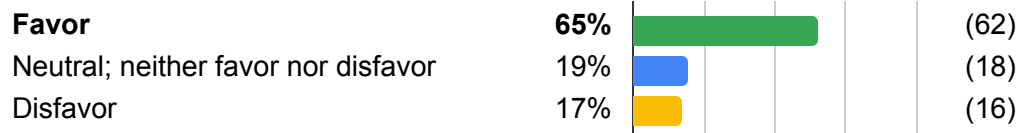
The committee met eight times - May through August. All meetings were fully and properly warned and open to the public (agenda posted on bulletin boards at Town Office and at Post Office, Front Porch Forum, and Woodbury web site. Minutes were prepared in a timely manner and posted in the same manner.

WOODBURY TOWN MEETING SURVEY

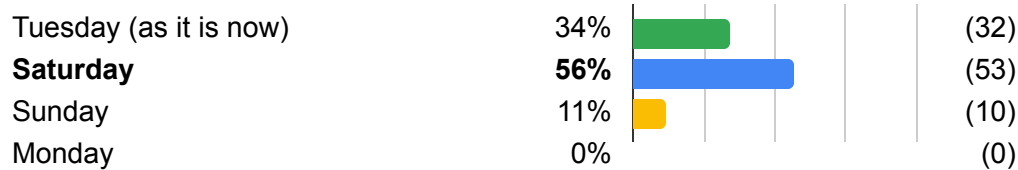
These are the results of a survey about Woodbury Town Meetings / elections / voting / annual governance.

Of Woodbury's 741 registered voters, 100 took the survey (13 percent), conducted in June-July 2022.

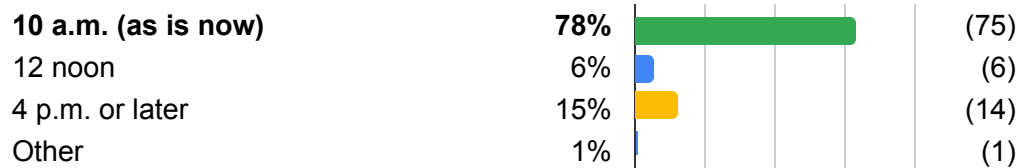
1) Continue with traditional in-person Town Meeting.



2) What day do you think would be best for Town Meeting?



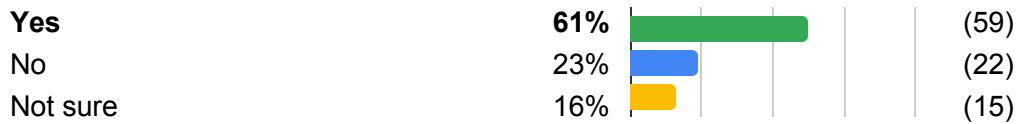
3) What time do you think would be best for Town Meeting?



Comments:

- I like 10 but would do another time to accommodate working folks who don't get a holiday.
- Evening 6 pm or later
- 6 pm
- Early evening if it fits in before a late,late hour.
- After normal work hours; 5:30 or 6 p.m?
- Australian ballot requires no time commitment, only proper communication.
- 7 pm
- 6 pm

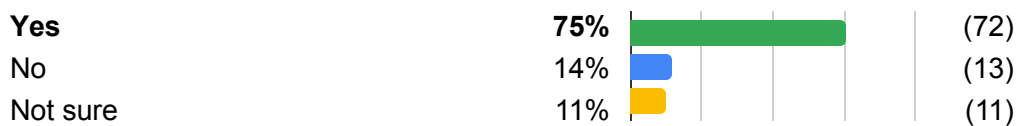
4) Would you like to have childcare provided during Town Meeting?



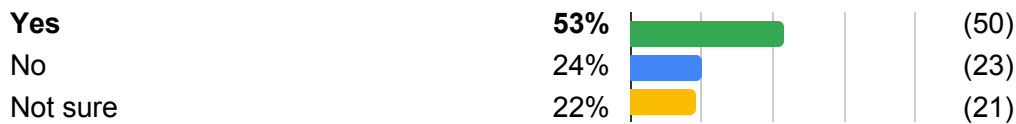
5) Would you like to have a community meal as part of Town Meeting?



6) Do you feel like you have a clear understanding of the voting items and of elected officers' roles?



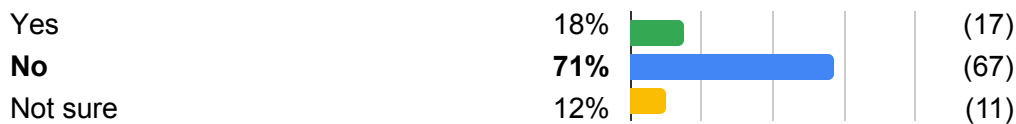
7) Would you be more likely to attend Town Meeting if you knew more about the people running for elected town offices?



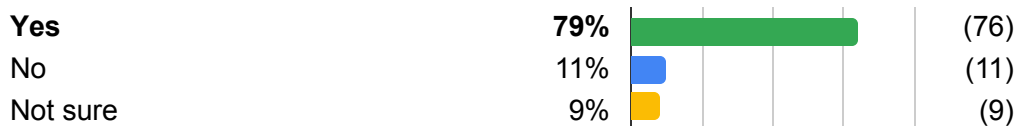
8) Is the time length of Town Meeting a barrier to your attending?



9) Is a lack of information about issues a barrier to your attending Town Meeting?



10) Would it be helpful if Woodbury had a town "user's guide" with information about local government, roles of elected officials, and other general town information?

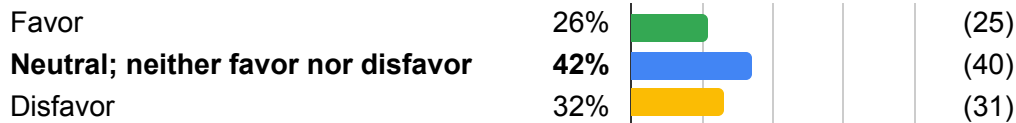


What do you think about each of the following annual town governance options?

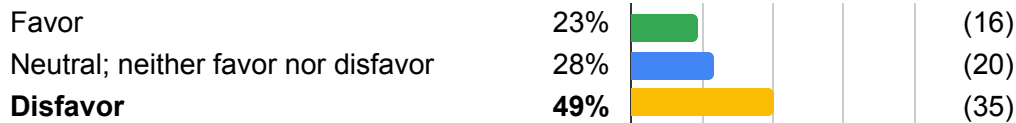
11) Continue with traditional in-person Town Meeting *(repeating #1 to show all related responses together)*.



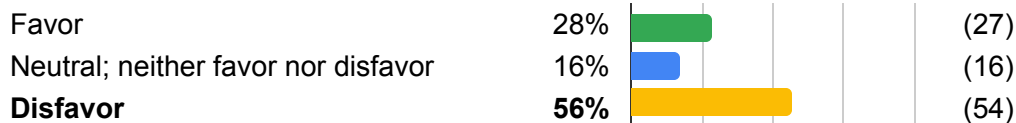
12) Town officers are elected by Australian ballot. Budgets and all other items are acted upon at Town Meeting.



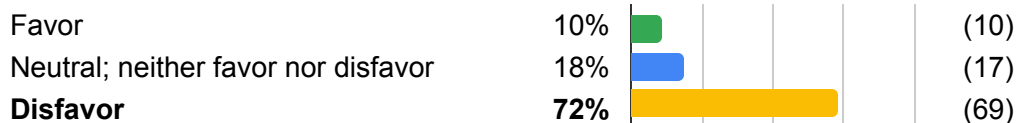
13) Budgets are decided by Australian ballot. Election of town officers and all other items are acted upon at Town Meeting.



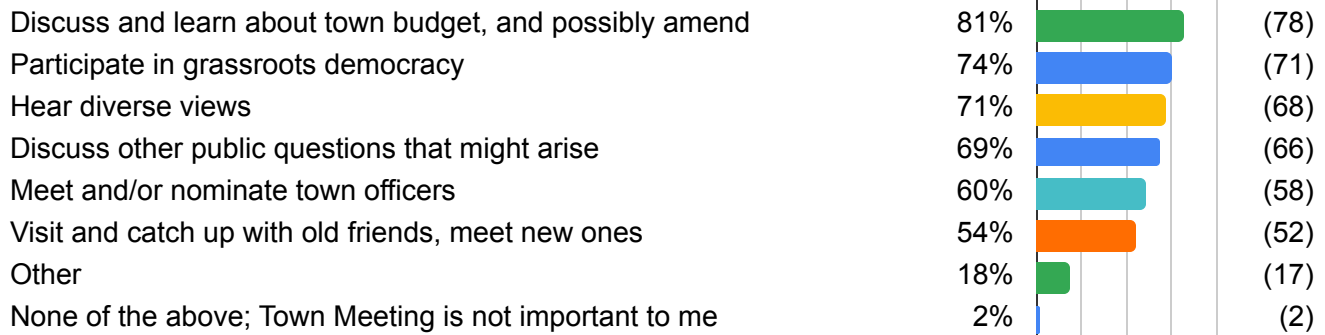
14) Town officers and the town budget are decided by Australian ballot. Only “other issues” are acted upon at Town Meeting.



15) Australian ballot only. No in-person Town Meeting.



16) If Town Meeting is important to you, why? Choose all that apply:



Comments:

- Meet or hear from townspeople I would never encounter without Town Meeting.
- Long held, honorable tradition
- Get to know my neighbors better
- I love the food!
- Sense of community
- I go because it is the only option to vote.
- Be a part of small town Vermont
- This question evades the heart of the issue: the Town Meeting IS important for the content discussed but it's impractical in this day & age to assume or expect that the majority of the working population would sacrifice a vacation day or unpaid day of work to attend a meeting that can easily be done via Australian ballot. Get real. Except for schools, which employees are actually given a free day off for Town Meeting day?
- Elect officials and pass budgets
- Participated in electing Town Officials
- Feel a sense of community amongst neighbors
- Long standing tradition
- The fact that they exist I think is special and I will participate in them as long as I can
- It's important but am usually working.
- Promote mutual respect and neighborliness
- I care a lot about Woodbury, and Town Meeting is the annual heart and soul of the community.
- Vote

17) Would you be more likely to attend Woodbury Town Meeting if any of these ideas were put in place?

Choose all that apply:

If it was a different day or time	57%		(39)
If there is a community meal	19%		(13)
If there was childcare	16%		(11)
Other: What would get you to consider attending?	30%		(21)

Comments:

- I will attend, have for 40 yrs
- Evening or weekend
- I'm OK with Town Meeting as it is
- I already do attend, not sure why this question is for all.
- When I was working full time, Sat or eve would have helped
- Fine, the way it is; in person not virtual.
- Wouldn't miss it no matter what.
- I love Town Meeting
- These ideas are great but don't apply to me; I'd attend with no changes.
- It would be nice if ALL voters had the option to vote attending or not
- Australian ballot
- Remote access
- TM turned into a discussion/amendment forum, then Australian ballot for voting
- I always DO attend
- OK, again: those of us who work for national companies (or anything other than the state public school system) are not given the opportunity to take an unpenalized day off to attend a Town Meeting.
- Topic
- I already attend but would still attend if these ideas were tried
- I'm happy with the traditional day but would consider Saturday
- I will most likely attend no matter what the time or setting. But I am interested in any hybrid that will be more inclusive.
- Can't attend
- I've always attended on traditional meeting date
- Saturday a.m. meeting

18) If you have not attended a Woodbury Town Meeting, why not? Chose all that apply:



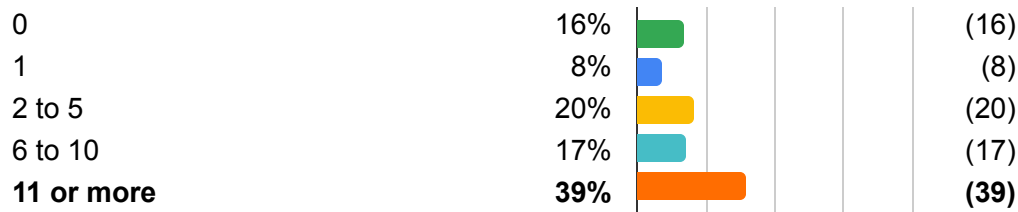
Comments:

- We attend.
- I try to attend Town Meeting, but some years I have other things going on that keep me from attending. These have usually been work related.
- Away all winter
- Hearing impaired
- In recent years, it conflicted with work or my schedule.
- Because it's only available to an extreme select few, it's a club. If you're not part of The Club (and I'm not), then I don't feel welcome. And I sure as heck aren't willing to sacrifice a day off from work for a place I don't feel welcome to air my equally legitimate concerns. And on another note: stop using the Pandemic as an excuse for people not attending. The real reason is much more practical: it's a club, and on top of that, most people don't have the time to get there.
- Not in Vermont during Town Meeting
- Lack of childcare

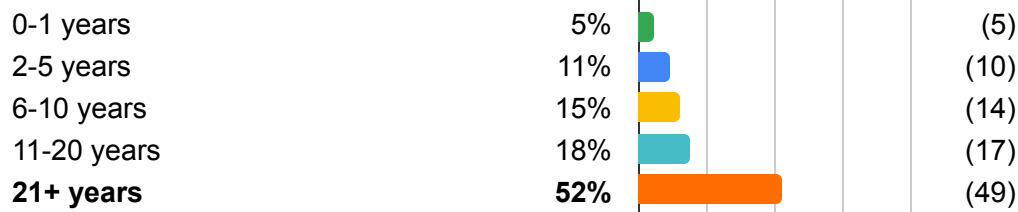
19) How would you rank these parts of Town Meeting in their importance to you?
(from 1-most important to 3-least important)



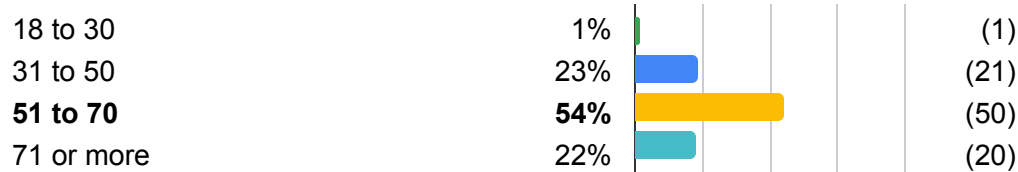
20) How many Woodbury Town Meetings have you attended?



21) How long have you lived in Woodbury?



22) What is your age?



23) Are you a member of and receive Woodbury Front Porch Forum?



24) Do you have ideas that could make Town Meeting better or easier to attend?

- *Child care is a big one for us. This would be huge! I also think that a way to get some info out ahead of time about "big vote" items could help streamline the discussion.*
- *I have heard of a hybrid that has two parts: a Town Meeting where issues can be discussed which then results in an Australian ballot on the issues identified and articulated at the Town Meeting. So if townspeople want input into what the articles on the ballot will be, they can come to the Town Meeting and help shape the articles. But all decisions are made by Australian ballot.*
- *Town Meeting could be held on (successive?) weekday evenings.*
- *Publicize Town Meeting through public postings, and through education and events at Woodbury Elementary School and Woodbury Community Library. Collaborate with the School and Library to decorate the School gym and other public places with artwork or projects relating to Town Meeting and Democracy. As explained in "All Those In Favor," include elements of celebration, and involve youth/students. Organize volunteers to offer rides to Town Meeting.*
- *Time limits for items to be discussed is a possibility. When special items come up, like four wheelers on class IV roads, it would be good to have honest information presented, not false, misleading information like last time.*
- *People whom can not attend Town Meetings should be able to vote on budgets and town officials.*
- *Too confusing this year whether it was in person or Australian voting*
- *Town Meeting sometimes drags on because of the unwieldiness of the process. But how else are we going to do it? Democracy is a difficult thing to pull off, people must recognize that. I think Mark Twain said two things you don't want to see being made are law and sausage. If we get lazy and don't continue to nurse our democratic institutions along by patient participation, we'll end up with a Stalin or a Pinochet. We don't want that. God help us, we don't want that.*
- *I think having the meeting on Saturday would help others attend. I think citizens need to expect a little effort is required to keep our democracy active and healthy, and that might mean rearranging the week's schedule, etc to attend Town Meeting. So be it.*
- *We are gone for the winter. Can we vote Australian Ballot?*
- *I think quality childcare would be very important to parents of young children...meal might help as well if it moves to evening.*
- *I'm sure there is a reason for some meeting items on the agenda needing Australian and/or In person voting but an option of both Australian and in person for all items is my preference, which was not an option.*
- *Offer web access to the meeting.*
- *Remote access, increase the internet bandwidth to do that.*
- *I would be happy with voting by Australian ballot and having a Town Meeting for everyone that can attend. This would be the best to me.*
- *It's been too long since I went but I remember being asked to vote on the supervisory school budget before it was presented in the old days. I think that doesn't happen now? Also, when there was more discussion of naming town roads than discussion of the town or school budgets, it seemed people either found budget discussion overwhelming or it was perfectly clear and Aust. ballot would have worked fine. But I haven't any experience with recent TMs*
- *Move the discussion aspect to a day prior to Town Meeting, keep Town Meeting as a voting event, with Australian ballots.*

- *Establish and promote norms for Town Meeting discourse. e.g. all voices matter, assume good intentions, speak for yourself, listen to learn and understand, etc. Community lunch and/or food trucks available. Collect clarification questions in advance of the meeting?*
- *Advance notice of agenda items if not already provided.*
- *More handicapped accessible parking Consideration of special needs, better sound, easier access ballot voting Better awareness of the Robert rules by those running the meeting. This past year, several vocal personages were allowed to intimidate and bully others. THAT SHOULD NOT BE TOLERATED! It was very offensive when young man was evicted. Disgusting! He had the right to speak as a resident, even if he chooses not to vote. Threatened violence was WRONG!*
- *Not sure if this could be changed but the complicated procedures of Robert's rules tend to elongate discussions in an inefficient way often, and can get people quite frustrated*
- *You covered it in the survey.*
- *More people to check in voters. Experienced helper to support new moderator with Robert's Rules. Coffee and doughnuts at 9:30.*
- *I prefer Tuesday...it is a state holiday and employers should be giving people the day off...not as unpaid leave or a vacation day. Although if Saturday works best for others, I would support that also day care if that helps get people to attend.*
- *Find out the time and day when most people would be able to attend; follow Town Meeting program schedule, without wasting time*
- *Make it a Saturday.*
- *For health reasons it is important to have adequate ventilation for the number of people in attendance. Ventilation should be on during the meeting and should be quiet enough*
- *If Town Meeting must exist, a different day and time. Otherwise I'd like to see an informational gathering at some point before Town Meeting Day to discuss topics up for vote.*
- *I learned that employers have to give people Town Meeting day off, but they don't have to be paid. If that is a barrier for some people maybe we could have a fund where people can apply for a stipend from the town to help them financially. I know there are lots of difficulties with that (the application process, sharing income info, who would administer the process) but I think it would acknowledge the reality for some people that they actually can't afford to attend the meeting.*
- *I like the idea of holding Town Meeting on a weekend or in the evening, so more people could attend without missing work. Child care could also be an important and helpful addition.*
- *Childcare*
- *Stronger moderation, keep conversation on track, have clearer explanations to avoid usual issue/process confusion.*
- *we just cannot attend during the week before 4....*
- *involve the school in learning about Town Meeting and local democracy; have civic activities throughout the year; speakers on issues pertinent to the town*
- *Better promotion of Town Meeting, including Tee-ing up issues to be considered then.*

25) Any other comments you wish to share?

- Thanks
- *Issues like building a new fire station would be good to discuss in person, so that people who oppose it could be accountable for their failure to support the fire station, the only town resource we have that is vital. We get no plowing, garbage, etc. We do need fire protection and the volunteers need to be respected.*
- *Thank you to all who put this survey together and are working to keep our democracy alive.*
- *Not clear on the "community meal" idea? I think having a local group selling lunch during the lunch break, as we were doing, is a fine way to support the local group and let others have a chance to sit and chat.*
- Thanks!
- *Thank you for your work in re-imagining Town Meeting! I hope we can find a way to preserve the relational/interpersonal aspect of this unique democratic practice while making it more accessible.*
- *Thank you all for doing this. I appreciate all efforts to preserve our tradition. It may be that people need help re-learning how to disagree civilly and accept political loss.*
- *I like the idea and history of Town Meeting, it seems like it made more sense when more people were farmers or small self employed craftsmen and the like. Now it seems like it gives undue influence to the wealthy or retired. So many of us commute to inflexible jobs away and it makes it hard for us to go. Even if you can, you likely have to use a vacation day, that's a big ask in a backwards country like this where people are lucky to get ten vacation days a year.*
- *My situation is specific - my job always requires me to attend other town's meetings. This contributes to a loss of voice in my own community, although I strongly value every single importance of Town Meeting as outlined in this document. I also have concerns that Town Meeting as currently implemented provides a socioeconomic barrier to democratic participation - only those with the privilege of requesting/being granted time off may attend and therefore have a voice in our town. While the tradition and act of grassroots democracy is essential in my opinion, we no longer have a localized economy supporting inclusive participation at 10am on a Tuesday.*
- Thanks for all you do.
- *Have a 50/50 lottery for the library*
- *Thank you all for working so hard for your town!*
- *keep meeting to 1 hour or less, then time to have coffee and snacks and discussions.... better use of website for information sharing would be helpful.*
- *keeping it simple.*
- *There is benefit in limiting town official positions; for example a Town Clerk serving two terms should wait at least two years before running again or for another position. Elected town officials, such as auditor & lister, should have defined training, clear, designated "tasks" & scheduled meeting times.*
- Thanks for the great work!
- *Special meeting (remotely) on enforcement of Zoning Regulations.*
- *I wonder if in Vermont civics including teaching how to participate in a Town Meeting is taught at the elementary or jr. high level?*

- *It would be helpful to put a link to this survey on the town's website. I initially ended up on the town website, likely because I skipped the prologue. (<http://mocka.mocka.bs>). Also, the zip code edit gave me fits, maybe that was due to autofill.*
- *Thank you for taking the time to work on this issue.*
- *I need to be a part of this democratic function and not leave everything to a small minority.*
- *Change the moderator*
- *Thank you for your work on this!*
- *The loss of an in person meeting would diminish the sense of community and the ability to collaborate*
- *Many thanks to the committee members for your time and energy to help solve this dilemma.*
- *Thanks to the Committee...*
- *While I prefer traditional Town Meeting, I was strongly considering different options because of the increased participation with Australian ballot, a strong argument in favor of Australian. Thank you for clarifying that issue.*
- *In-person Town Meeting reflects a centuries-long local custom (or traditional expectation?) of a higher, more personal level of participation by town residents in town government. Voting by Australian ballot diminishes that custom or expectation.*
- *Thank you for doing this.*
- *I have attended Town Meeting since 1984 and the number of people there has remained consistent. I also attended the recent special Town Meetings which were held on Saturdays and the number of people there was the same as Town Meeting. I don't think moving the time or the day is the answer, since not everyone works a traditional schedule anyway. Plenty of people have to work weekends or evenings. And I'm just not ready to give up our ability to debate and discuss town business.*
- *The ability to engage other residents helps to promote civility, and the recognition that we can work together even if we don't entirely agree. Town Meeting keeps us on that path.*
- *I love the idea of keeping Town Meeting but also incorporating Australian ballot. I would prefer that all the issues to be voted on be discussed as usual at the meeting but also printed on paper ballots. Voters at the meeting could cast votes by marking on the paper ballot rather than vocally. Ballots can be collected at the end of the meeting. Voters who choose not to attend the meeting or only stay for part can fill out and drop their ballots at any time throughout the day and into the evening. All ballots can be counted at the end of the voting day. That would be my ideal scenario.*
- *Thank you all for hard work and considering changes in Town Meeting to encourage more participation*
- *STRONGLY favor continuing Town Meeting - although Town officers could be elected by secret (Australian) ballot. Ability to amend articles is very important which can't be done by secret ballot. Have been attending open Town Meetings for over 40 years here & in much larger towns in Massachusetts. Don't want to give it up!*
- *I strongly support the continuance of Town Meeting, but am open to changes to accommodate more participation.*
- *Moderator's role is key, not just in umpiring but keeping the meeting friendly/civil and moving along. A moderator needs to be as much of a ring leader / emcee as parliamentarian.*

The survey was available online or on paper. (All but one response was online.)

- Notices were posted on the Woodbury town web site, and four times on Front Porch Forum (June 19, 24, 29; July 5).

https://www.woodburyvt.org/2022/06/19/town-meeting-survey/

Woodbury, Vermont

Home News/Updates Calendar Town Community Records Forms History Gallery Map Contact

Town Meeting Survey

WOODBURY VOTERS, WE'D LIKE TO KNOW WHAT YOU THINK.

Woodbury's Select Board has appointed a committee to look into how to improve our Town Meeting / Elections / Voting. We are conducting a survey to gather your thoughts. It's short – takes 5-10 minutes to complete – and we'd greatly appreciate your participation.

The survey is online at <https://woodburyvt.org/survey>

If you prefer a paper version of the survey, please pick it up at the town office, one for each Woodbury voter in your household. Or call the town office at (802) 456-7051 to have it mailed to you. Thank you!

— Woodbury Town Meeting Solutions Committee

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- May 2022
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- March 2022
- March 2021
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- January 2021

Woodbury Town Meeting Survey Woodbury, VT **Announcement**

Woodbury – No. 2492 • John Reid

Jun 29, 2022

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A survey about town meeting <https://woodburyvt.org/survey>

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-- Woodbury Town Meeting Solutions Committee

Email Author Reply to Forum

- This postcard followup was mailed to all Woodbury voter households:

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Town of Woodbury
PO Box 10
Woodbury, VT 05681

If you wish to discuss aspects of
Town Meeting or the survey, feel
free to contact a committee member:

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