



Swampscott Town Meeting

WELCOME

Swampscott's Town Meeting is part of a proud tradition that predates the founding of our country. The first Town Meeting held on these shores goes back nearly 400 years to the original Mayflower Compact. This makes our Town Meeting part of the oldest continuous participatory democracy in the world.

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TOWN MEETING BASICS

What is Town Meeting?

Town Meeting is the legislative body for the Town of Swampscott. It is a representative body, with 18 members elected from each of our six precincts. Members serve for 3 years at a time, making for a total of 324 Town Meeting members.

What does Town Meeting decide?

Town Meeting decides three major things:

- It sets the salaries for the elected officials.
- It votes to appropriate money to run the town.
- It votes on the town's local statutes, which are called by-laws.

What determines whether a town has an open Town Meeting or a representative Town Meeting?

Towns with fewer than 6,000 inhabitants must have an open Town Meeting. Towns with more than 6,000 inhabitants may adopt either form of Town Meeting at their discretion. Swampscott adopted the Representative Town Meeting form of government in 1927.

What's a Town Moderator?

Generally, the moderator's job is to run Town Meeting. Specifically, the moderator rules on question of order and declares the outcome of votes. He or she also appoints the Finance Committee and the Capital Improvements Committee, as well as certain other positions within the Town.

What is the Finance Committee?

The Finance Committee is appointed to advise Town Meeting on all question that have a financial bearing on the Town. They review all budget items and other appropriations, as well as proposed by-laws or other changes that may have a monetary impact.

What is the Capital Improvements Committee?

The Capital Improvements Committee reviews and advises Town Meeting on all proposed capital projects and improvements which have a useful life of at least 3 years and a cost over \$20,000. They also prepare and maintain a long-term capital plan for the Town.

What's a selectman or selectwoman?

The 5-person Board of Selectmen is Swampscott's executive body. In addition to setting Town policy, they hire and supervise the Town Administrator, who in turn, runs the town and supervises town workers. They are also responsible for calling Town Meeting, assembling the Warrant, and (through the Town Administrator) preparing the budget.

What does the town clerk do?

At the Town Meeting, the clerk records all votes and takes minutes.

What is a town counsel?

The town counsel is a lawyer who represents the Town. During Town Meeting, the town counsel often answers legal questions that come up. He or she is appointed by the selectmen.

ANNUAL AND SPECIAL TOWN MEETINGS

What's the difference between annual and special meetings?

Each town must hold an annual Town Meeting. Additional Town Meetings are called special meetings. They may be called as many times during the year as necessary.

When is Annual Town Meeting?

Annual Town Meeting is held the third Monday of May.

When is Special Town Meeting?

Special meetings, by their very nature, are not held at the same time every year. The Selectmen will announce the date for a Special Town Meeting well in advance. Town Meeting members will be notified and receive a copy of the Warrant no later than 14 days prior to a Special Town Meeting.

Who calls Special Town Meetings?

Generally, the selectmen call Special Town Meetings.

May voters call a Special Town Meeting?

Yes, voters may call a Special Town Meeting. Two hundred registered voters' signatures are required to request a Special Town Meeting, which must then be held no later than 45 days after the Board of Selectmen receive the request.

THE WARRANT

What's a Warrant?

The warrant lists Town Meeting's time, place, and agenda. Town Meeting cannot take action on any topic unless the subject was listed on the warrant.

When is the warrant available?

A warrant is available at least 7 days before an annual meeting, and at least 14 days before a special meeting.

Who makes up the warrant?

The selectmen, who "issue" it.

What are articles?

Articles are items on the warrant, essentially the "agenda" for Town Meeting. The budget is actually several combined articles considered together but individually separate items.

May voters place articles on the warrant?

Yes, voters may "insert" articles in the warrant. To insert an article in the warrant for an annual Town Meeting, at least 10 registered voters of the town must sign a written request and submit it to the Board of Selectmen by the first Thursday in February.

It's always a good idea to review ideas for a voter petition article with Town officials before submitting it. Errors, omissions, complexities, or unforeseen consequences of your petition cannot be changed by Town officials (although you can amend your article on Town Meeting floor, but it's better to avoid that sort of confusion).

If you want a sample of an article to use to draft your article, review past Town Meeting warrants or the Town's annual reports, found on www.town.swampscott.ma.us

For further assistance, contact the town clerk or town moderator.

Citizens may also insert an article in the warrant for a special Town Meeting, but this requires the signatures of 100 registered voters.

HOW TOWN MEETING OPERATES

What is the quorum for Town Meeting?

163 members must be present for Town Meeting to conduct business.

Who may attend?

Any member of the public may attend Town Meeting.

Who may speak?

All of a town's registered voters are eligible to speak at Town Meeting, though the moderator may give precedence to elected Town Meeting members. In certain circumstances, non-voters may address Town Meeting at the moderator's discretion.

Is the Warrant the agenda?

Yes, the warrant generally states the things to be voted on, but the moderator may interpret the articles liberally. Usually, Town Meeting considers the warrant's articles in order. However, the moderator or Town Meeting itself may change the order.

How do I know which Article Town Meeting is considering?

The moderator summarizes each article or reads it entirely before starting debate.

How is the budget considered?

The budget appears as a single article in the warrant, but each numbered line item represents an individual appropriation and may be debated and amended separately. After the finance committee has made their overall recommendation, the moderator will review the line items on each page of the budget in the printed warrant and ask if there is any debate before moving to the next page.

Once Town Meeting has reviewed all budget items and voted on any amendments, Town Meeting votes on the finance committee's motion as originally presented or amended.

PARTICIPATING IN TOWN MEETINGS

How do Town Meeting members vote?

There are four different methods used to vote.

Show of hands: The moderator asks that all members in favor raise their hands. Then the moderator asks that all opposed raise their hands. The moderator looks at the number of hands in general and announces which side has prevailed.

Standing vote: If the moderator is in doubt after a show of hands he/she may call for all members in favor to stand. Appointed 'tellers' count the standing members. Next, all members who are opposed are asked to stand. They are counted in the same way and the results announced. A standing vote may also be called if seven members rise immediately to doubt the announced show of hands vote result.

Roll call: If 30 members rise immediately to doubt a standing vote result, the town clerk will call each member by name and they must answer "Yes," "No," or "Present."

Secret ballot: If 2/3 of Town Meeting request it, voting is done by secret ballot, though there is no record of this occurring in recent memory.

How do I speak in debate?

If you wish to speak, raise your hand or stand wait to be acknowledged by the moderator. Once the moderator recognizes you to speak, state your name and your precinct (or your street address). Speak about the topic being discussed. Don't speak about a previous topic (unless there is a motion to rescind or reconsider).

Make your comments to the moderator, not to Town Meeting or individual Town Meeting Members. For example, do not say, "I have something to say to Town Meeting," or "Mr. Smith, you said something as a Town Meeting Member that I want to respond to." Instead, say something like, "Mr. Moderator, these are my thoughts on this article."

You may attack a previous speaker's argument, but do not attack a previous speaker. For example, do not say, "The previous speaker is dead wrong." Instead, say something like, "I disagree with the argument we just heard." Try to avoid referring to previous speakers by name. For example, try not to say, "I agree with Mr. Jones' argument." Instead, say something like, "I agree with the argument that we can afford this budget item."

Since you make your comments to the moderator, you may not directly debate or ask questions of a previous speaker. For example, do not say, "Mr. Johnson, you say that we should make another exception to the zoning law. I'm asking you: When do we draw the line and stop making exceptions?" Instead, say something like, "Mr. Moderator, we have heard the argument that we should make just one more exception to the zoning law. But I say it's time to stop making exceptions."

PROCEDURE AND MOTIONS

Do I need to know “parliamentary” procedure to attend Town Meeting?

No, you do not need to know “parliamentary” procedure to attend a Town Meeting. The moderator will assure that the proceedings are both orderly and legal.

Is Town Meeting run according to Roberts’ Rules of Order?

No, Town Meeting uses a procedure manual titled “Town Meeting Time” which differs from Roberts in a number of ways (which generally make things simpler and more efficient for Town Meeting). A copy is available in the Public Library.

Does the majority always rule?

No, the majority does not always rule. Sometimes a super-majority (more than a simple majority) is needed for votes on some specific issues. For example, authorizing borrowing, changing zoning, or directing the selectmen to purchase or take land by eminent domain requires a 2/3 vote.

What do the following terms mean?

“Postpone an article indefinitely” means to defeat it.

“Move the previous question” means to cut off debate and vote on the issue at hand.

I’m not familiar with making motions, how do I make one?

Rather than make a motion that may require the moderator to untangle and decode it, stand up and ask the moderator from the floor how to make a motion to achieve what you want to do.

How do I call for a vote?

Move the previous question, which means to call for a vote. If 2/3 of the members agree, all debate is over and the vote is taken.

What’s the difference between reconsideration and rescission?

A vote to reconsider a previous vote temporarily postpones final action on that vote. A vote to rescind a previous vote cancels it.

What’s the difference among adjourning, recessing, and dissolving?

Dissolving the Town Meeting means that it is over until the next Town Meeting, which must be called by a new warrant. If the Town Meeting has not dissolved, but is taking a break, and will resume on the same day, it has recessed.

AFTER THE REPRESENTATIVE TOWN MEETING DISSOLVES

Is there any other control over the votes of Town Meeting Members?

Votes of Town Meeting do not take effect until 5 days after the Town Meeting expires, except for certain votes effecting borrowing in the current year. If 5% of registered voters (approximately 525 voters) sign a petition to reconsider an action taken by Town Meeting within those 5 days, a special election will be called to allow all voters in town to vote on the matter.

Where do I find the statutes governing Town Meetings?

The town website publishes our Charter and By-Laws. You may also want to review Massachusetts General Laws, chapters 39 and 43A.

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