

## ***Guide to Town Meeting Procedure***

### ***Wareham Town Meeting***

Every town has a different way of running its Town Meeting depending on its Charter, by-laws or its traditions. This guide is a general outline of the Town Meeting basics, is not intended to be all inclusive, but is merely an overview designed help you understand the formalities of Town Meeting .

Wareham is required by our Charter to hold two meetings per year; one meeting in April, called the Annual Meeting and second meeting in October, called the Fall Town Meeting. It may hold special meetings as well.

The Annual Meeting is held on the first Tuesday in April, when the polls are open and votes are cast for the election of town officers and then adjourned by a provision in the Charter until the fourth Monday, at which time the general business of the town is transacted. The Fall Town Meeting is held on the fourth Monday in October.

Both meetings are called to order at 7:00 PM and adjourn no later than 10:00 PM except when continued beyond by a two-thirds vote of those present and voting.

#### ***Who Participates in Town Meeting?***

One hundred (100) voters shall constitute a quorum at any town meeting, except that a quorum of one hundred fifty (150) voters is necessary to vote upon any appropriation of Five Thousand Dollars (\$5,000) or more.

***The Voters-*** Every registered voter in town is a legislator, with full power to participate. The job of the voter is to listen, to ask questions, to offer arguments for or against a question, and to vote to decide each article on the warrant.

Anyone who is not a registered voter of the Town is welcome to attend Town Meeting, but may not vote, and can address Town Meeting only with permission of the body. Non-registered voters sit in a specially designated section.

***The Moderator-*** The elected official who presides over Town Meeting and is responsible for its conduct consistent with the Charter and by-laws of the Town as well as parliamentary procedure.

***The Town Clerk-*** The elected official responsible for maintaining town records, conducting elections, and the recording of votes and actions taken at Town Meeting.

***Town Counsel-*** An attorney who provides legal services to the town and who attends town meeting to offer advice as to the legality of proposed actions the town may be considering.

**Board of Selectmen-** The Selectmen prepare the Warrant and make sure the Warrant is properly posted, as well as making recommendations on each article by vote of the Board.

**Finance Committee-** All articles contained in the warrant for town meeting shall be referred to the Finance Committee for its study, review and report. The Finance Committee reports its recommendations on each article contained in the warrant.

**Boards and Committees-** Boards or committees may present articles or give a report. For example, the Planning Board may submit a zoning article or they may issue a report on a particular matter relative to a public hearing held if required under the law. There may be articles that relate to such matters as conservation, health regulations, schools, etc. that may require explanations from the respective board to help voters understand why it appears on the warrant.

**Petitioners-** Any ten voters have the right to petition the Board of Selectmen to put an article on the Annual and Fall Town Meeting Warrant. Petitioners will often be asked to offer the main motion for their petitioned article, give a presentation, or supply information about the article.

#### ***What is a Warrant?***

The Warrant is the agenda for Town Meeting. The warrant is issued by the Board of Selectmen, states the time, place, and by separate articles, the subject matter which may be legally acted upon. Town Meeting should not end until all agenda items on the warrant have been decided; either by approval, defeated, or no action deliberately taken.

#### ***What happens at Town Meeting?***

Articles are generally considered in the order in which they appear on the warrant, but may be taken out of order by a majority vote.

**Motions-**The Moderator asks that a motion be made recommending the action to be taken on the article. The motion is then seconded. Voters should listen closely to the motion as stated since the vote and debate is on the motion, which may or may not be worded slightly different than the article as printed in the warrant. Proponents of the article may offer background information as well as reasons as to why it should be passed (or in some cases, withdrawn). The Moderator then asks for recommendations on the article from the Finance Committee or other reporting committees.

**Debate-**Following the recommendations, debate is open. Voters must be recognized by the Moderator in order to speak and must clearly state his or her name before speaking. Any registered voter may speak to an article, ask questions, voice comments or, or offer information. Speakers should be civil and respectful of all others at the meeting and limit remarks to the content of the article.

All comments are directed to the Town Meeting body through the Moderator. Speakers should not engage one another through direct discussion. Interruptions are not permitted except in the case of another voter rising to a “point of order” (described below). New speakers and new points of view are encouraged, but brevity is appreciated and voters are encouraged to add new information to the debate rather than repeating what others have said.

**Voting-** Voters at Town Meeting are given a card when they check in with the Registrars in the lobby prior to entering the hall. When the Moderator calls for a “counted vote” you must be seated and you must raise your card to be visible to the tellers for counting. On a voice vote, you can call out either “aye” or “nay”.

Most articles are decided by a simple majority vote, however, some articles may require a 2/3 or greater quantum of vote. Votes can be made by voice, a show of hands and on occasion by paper ballot. The Moderator declares the outcome of the vote. Whenever a two thirds vote is required by statute, such a vote may be declared by the Moderator without a count (the Moderator tries for a unanimous vote or an obvious show of hands indicating what appears to be more than 2/3) and is recorded as such by the Clerk. However, if seven or more voting members of Town Meeting doubt the vote, a counted vote shall be taken.

**Amendments-** Amendments can be offered to any article being debated, so long as they don’t substantially change the original scope of the article. To offer an amendment, the voter is generally asked to provide it in writing so that it can be properly recorded. The Moderator will then recognize the mover of the amendment and the amendment will be voted after debate, up or down, before returning to debate the amended or not amended article as a whole. Amendments to amendments are not allowed.

**Consent Agenda-** Articles on a consent agenda are exceptions to the general process of Town Meeting. In consultation between Town Counsel, the Moderator, the Finance Committee, and the Selectmen, articles related to each other, not likely to be controversial and not likely to generate debate, can be put on a consent agenda to allow a motion that they be acted upon as one unit. At the call of the consent agenda, the Moderator refers to the articles, one by one. If any voter calls out “hold” in loud voice, that particular article is removed and restored to its original position in the Warrant. Once the articles have been included in a consent agenda, the Moderator asks for a motion to act upon those articles all at once, with a single vote.

**Operating Budget** -At the Annual Spring Town Meeting, the Town Moderator may review the operating budget by line item. As the Moderator reads the line item a voter can call out “hold” on a specific line which the Moderator will then so note. Once the budget has been read line by line in its entirety, the Moderator will return to those line items “held” by voters and amendments and debate take place. There is also the

opportunity to speak generally about the budget as well. Once discussion is complete, the Moderator calls for a vote on the entire budget.

One note concerning the school budget; voters may request and be provided with detailed information, but state law prohibits Town Meeting from voting on anything but the bottom line of the school budget.

**Reconsideration-** A motion to reconsider, if approved by a simple majority, enables a majority in an assembly, to bring back for further consideration a motion that has already been voted on. The purpose of reconsidering a vote is to permit correction of hasty, ill-advised, or erroneous action, or to take into account added information or a changed situation that has developed since the taking of the vote. After much thought .....and review of practices in other towns, based on prior Town meeting tradition in Wareham my policy on the motion for reconsideration is that:

1. It must be moved on the same day the vote to be reconsidered was taken.
2. it must be made by a member who voted with the prevailing side
3. it must be seconded and is debatable
4. It will only be permitted if there was a hasty, ill-advised, or erroneous action, if there is additional information that was not previously available, or there is a changed situation that developed since the taking of the vote.

***Other Motions and Points of Order-***

***A motion to move the question or previous question*** terminates all debate and calls for an immediate vote. This motion cannot be debated and requires a two thirds majority to pass. The Moderator, will usually accept this motion unless it is very clearly premature and both sides of the argument have yet to be heard. In such cases, the Moderator can use discretion to allow more debate.

***A Point of Order*** is a question. On a point of order, a voter may raise one or more of the following questions and NO others.

1. Is the speaker entitled to the floor
  2. Is what the speaker saying irrelevant or contrary to the article being proposed. Is the conduct of the speaker out of order?
  3. Is action being taken that is contrary to procedure?
- The Moderator will immediately stop discussion, listen to the point of order and rule on it.

**A Motion to Lay on the Table** is a motion that allows an article to be placed “on the table” for consideration at a later time during the meeting. It is not debatable and requires a two thirds vote.

**A Motion to Take off the Table**, if passed, brings the article back before Town Meeting for debate .The motion to take an article off the table cannot be debated or amended and requires only a simple majority.

**A Motion to Adjourn** may be made at any time. Adjournment must be to a scheduled time and place

**A Motion to Dissolve** is only made when all articles in the warrant have been disposed. A motion to dissolve ends the meeting.

**What do the following terms mean?**

“Postpone indefinitely” ..... defeat it

“Take no action on an article” .....defeat it

If you have any questions regarding specific procedures or need more information, please do not hesitate to contact the Town Moderator.

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