

APPENDIX III

2015 Survey of Town Meeting Members

The TGSC conducted an independent research study¹ among current Town Meeting Members (TMMs) immediately following the 2015 Annual Town Meeting. The purpose of the study was to assess the perceived functionality and relevance of Town Meeting in order to help the Moderator, the Board of Selectmen, the Advisory Committee, the boards and Town Meeting itself identify ways to improve the Town Meeting process. The specific areas explored in the research included:

- motivations for becoming a Town Meeting Member;
- assessment of the Town Meeting experience, including level of satisfaction;
- specific evaluation of components of Town Meeting (presentations by proponents, role of the Advisory Committee, participation by TMMs, etc.);
- preferences around preparation for Town Meeting and sources of information about warrant articles;
- structure of Town Meeting (scheduling, start times, ending times, length of the sessions, use of Fall Town Meetings, size of Town Meeting membership); and
- suggestions for ways to improve Town Meeting

The survey was conducted online. Invitations as well as reminders to participate were sent to all Town Meeting Members; the survey was available for completion for two months to allow time for all members to participate. An impressive 80% of Town Meeting Members responded, providing a reliable and valuable reflection of Town Meeting Members for the purpose of identifying issues that warrant a response.

TGSC and the Town Moderator are very appreciative of the participation of Town Meeting Members, and recognize the value of the candid responses that were provided. It is important to note that some of the findings will result in immediate adjustments, while others are more complex and require further reflection by the Moderator, Advisory Committee, and/or the Board of Selectmen.

Below are highlights of significant findings:

The **primary reason for running** for Town Meeting was to “have a voice in the decision-making process” (88%), followed by a desire to learn “how the Town operates and spends the money” (75%) and “wanting to give back to the Town” (72%). Interestingly, more than a third of members (36%) were motivated to run because of interest in a single issue.

There is general consensus **being a Town Meeting Member** provides an understanding of the issues facing the Town as well as how the Town operates and spends its money (more than 80% completely agreed with these statement areas). The sense of fulfillment and belief that an individual makes a difference as a Town Meeting Member more tenuous, with less than half completely agreeing that “it is personally fulfilling” (48%) and “you can make a difference in the decisions being made” (35%). Approximately 6 in 10 reported a strong likelihood to run for re-election.

¹ The Town Government Study Committee wishes to acknowledge with thanks the outstanding work of Town Meeting Member and Chair, Board of Trustees of the Wellesley Free Library Beth Sullivan Woods who is a marketing consultant and who gave many hours of her time preparing the survey and assessing the results.

Town Meeting Members provided thoughtful assessments of **ways in which the Town Meeting experience could be improved**. On a spontaneous basis, there were many comments related to having more substantive meetings, providing Town Meeting members with an opportunity to have a greater impact on the decisions being made (and not being a “rubber stamp”); there was also a desire for the Town Meeting sessions to be more efficient in terms of staying on topic and avoiding redundant debates.

When provided specific options, approximately two-thirds cited a desire for each of the following three improvements to the presentations at Town Meeting:

- Reducing the repetition in the presentations from Advisory and the Article sponsor, with many write in comments requesting a stronger pros/cons assessment of proposals;
- Having the budget presenters provide an update on the prior year performance with their annual request; and
- Including more detail about long-term cost impact of proposals.

There was a strong desire for **Advisory’s role** to be a full, independent and impartial assessor of the articles being presented. There was appreciation for the work of Advisory, along with significant frustration around Advisory’s frequent unanimous votes on articles and a desire for deeper analysis/presentation of the impacts of each proposal. When provided the opportunity to rate specific aspects of Advisory, approximately 4 in 10 rated Advisory “excellent” in terms of the quality of the report, level of in-depth analysis, and vetting of pros/cons of articles; satisfaction was lowest for “providing additional information about the article that was not presented by proponent presenter” (only 22% rated Advisory “excellent” in this regard) and “being impartial” (33% rated Advisory “excellent”). The write-in remarks reinforced these ratings. It is worth noting that the 2015 ATM School security recommendation/vote appeared to have exacerbated this assessment.

NOTE: The Moderator and Chair of the Advisory Committee have reviewed these findings and will be addressing them beginning with the Special Town Meeting this fall.

In terms of **meeting preparation**, the importance of the initial Advisory Report was clear: virtually all (92%) claimed they read the initial mailing from Advisory while about half (54%) reported reading the supplements in advance of ATM 2015.

From a **structural perspective**, most believe:

- 240 members is the right size for Town Meeting
- Fall Town Meetings should be used for critical needs that cannot wait for Spring ATM
- Having predictable dates for Fall Town Meeting is important
- Starting Town Meeting sessions by 7pm is preferable (85%)
- Ending sessions no later than 11pm is optimal (80%), with the goal of a 3-3.5 hour session (86%)
- Town Meeting Sessions should be on weekday nights only (79%) – Saturdays are not acceptable
- Time allocations for presentations are generally “just right” (ranging from 89%-66%), with most interest in improving the time allocation for presentation of the School Department budget and for special capital budget items
- The Advisory Report should continue to be mailed in hard copy; only 11% found shifting to downloadable/electronic reports only to be acceptable

NOTE: These structural findings have been implemented by the Board of Selectmen and the Moderator beginning with the Special Town Meeting this fall, including a new 7pm start time.

Detailed findings are available in a report on the Town website at http://www.wellesleyma.gov/Pages/WellesleyMA_TGSC/index