

## **Town Government Study Committee Summary of Feedback re 2015 Survey of Wellesley Town Meeting Members**

**Appreciation:** The Town Government Study Committee (“TGSC”) wishes to express our gratitude to Beth Sullivan Woods for the enormous time and energy she devoted to creating and analyzing a survey of Town Meeting Members on behalf of the TGSC. We appreciate her professionalism and her objectivity. This information has been very helpful to the TGSC and we believe the Town Moderator, the Advisory Committee and the Board of Selectmen will also find it extremely useful.

**Background:** This study was conducted immediately following the 2015 ATM to assess the satisfaction levels of current Town Meeting Members and identify ways to improve the Town Meeting experience. Areas covered included:

- Motivations for running for Town Meeting
- Satisfaction levels with the Town Meeting experience
- Perceived value of being a Town Meeting Member
- Likelihood to re-run for Town Meeting
- Expectations from Advisory
- Specific feedback on Town Meeting scheduling issues (hours for each session, STM timing, etc.)
- Suggestions for improving Town Meeting

### **Survey Methodology and Response Rate:**

All current Town Meeting Members were sent email invitations and reminders to participate in an online survey. Data collection began on April 10 and was completed on June 11.

- Survey was hosted online and participants were assured of confidentiality in their individual responses.
- 80% of TMM responded to the survey: 152 people completed the entire survey and 39 people completed only some of the questions
- In addition to completing the pre-defined questions, respondents provided thoughtful and thorough responses to the open-end questions about their assessment of current Town Meeting as well as suggestions for improvements

The implications of the findings of this study will be addressed by a combination of TGSC, Board of Selectmen and Advisory.

For purposes of planning and identifying improvements to the Town Meeting experience, the findings can be grouped into tactical and more substantive areas. The following pages outline initial thinking on the specific findings and an action plan for addressing the key issues.

Take away messages include the following:

1. There were a number of areas on which there was no consensus in support of change, including:

Ideas that didn't garner support for change:
a. Only 20% supported reducing the number of TMMs below 240
b. Saturday sessions were unacceptable to over 2/3 of the respondents (80% prefer all week night sessions)
c. Eliminating the break got a mixed response with over 1/3 finding it unacceptable
d. Reducing the time allocated to speakers got a mixed response with over 1/3 finding it unacceptable
e. 2/3 of TMMs prefer to have a printed copy of the Advisory Report mailed to their homes.

As a result, the TGSC has not made any recommendations related to those ideas or suggested that other town Boards/officials consider implementing changes related to those ideas.

2. There were several responses that lend themselves to concrete changes related to the timing and conduct of Town Meeting so the TGSC suggested that the Moderator review them. She concluded that some immediate responses were possible/appropriate and has announced scheduling changes. She has also discussed the results with the Chair of the Advisory Committee. Expected changes are indicated below:

Finding	Responsive Action	Responsible Party	Timetable
Responses that lend themselves to an immediate concrete response:			
a. Keep TM sessions to 3 – 3.5 hours	Goal will be a shorter TM, recognizing that this could increase the number of sessions required to finish the work.	Moderator	Upcoming STM
b. Start TM at 7 PM	The upcoming STM will start at 7 PM.	Moderator – will send an announcement to TMMs and others (cable TV; custodial staff, etc.)	Announcement has been sent out
c. End TM by 11:00 PM , and ideally by 10:30	Goal will be to complete sessions at the upcoming STM by 10:30 PM, recognizing that predicting the amount of discussion that will be generated in response to each proposal is an inexact art.	Moderator – with the cooperation of TMMs	Attempt to implement at upcoming STM

d. Advisory should avoid repeating the sponsor’s presentation when presenting its recommendations	Moderator discussed this issue with Chair of Advisory Committee and efforts to be responsive should be noticeable at the upcoming STM	Chair of the Advisory Committee	Upcoming STM
e. TMMs want more information about how proposals evolved before they were approved as well as an independent assessment of the pros/cons of each proposal	Moderator discussed this issue with Chair of Advisory Committee and efforts to be responsive should be noticeable at the upcoming STM	Advisory Committee	Upcoming STM
f. Discussion should stay on topic and avoid redundant comments	Moderator will attempt to enlist TMMs in an effort to reduce redundancy and stay on topic – but this will require the cooperation/assistance of TMMs	Moderator	Upcoming STM

3. Other responses suggest areas of change that the BOS can work on implementing and TGSC is suggesting that the BOS review them in an effort to decide on and implement appropriate responses:

Finding	Responsive Action	Responsible Party	Timetable
<b>Answers that suggest areas of change that BOS can work on implementing:</b>			
a. 63% were very supportive of having predictable dates set well in advance of fall special town meetings	The date of the November 2015 Special Town Meeting was set last spring. The date was subsequently deferred by one week on account of a conflict.	Board of Selectmen	
b. 59% were very supportive of reserving fall town meeting for critical needs that cannot wait until the ATM	The Selectmen have made a concerted effort to limit action at the November 2015 Special Town Meeting to only those matters that cannot wait until the 2016 ATM.	Board of Selectmen and other boards and committees	
c. 58% would like to have more articles on the Consent Agenda (but note that others miss getting some of the information)	A consent agenda was used for the first time at the 2014 ATM. The Moderator and Selectmen expect to make greater use of this approach at future town meetings.	Board of Selectmen in collaboration with the Moderator and other boards and committees	

d. Have budget requests presented along with an update on past year's performance	Prior year actual vs. budget data by department is provided in the Town's Comprehensive Annual Financial Report, a copy of which is available on the Town's website.	BOS acting through Executive Director of General Government and Director of Finance with assistance of Town Boards and Committees	
e. Include more information about long-term impact of proposals	Agreed. Information regarding the long-term debt service impact of projects is provided at Town Meeting, and summarized in the CAFR. The impact of proposals (e.g., Tolles-Parsons Center) on staffing levels and operating costs has also been provided at Town Meeting.	BOS acting through Executive Director of General Government and Director of Finance with assistance of Town Boards and Committees	Upcoming STM, if applicable, and 2016 ATM

The TGSC notes that this grid is still in draft form and that it expects to be able to fill in some of the blanks in the Responsive Action and Timetable columns as consensus is reached on our annual budget process recommendations.

4. There were a number of responses that suggest "climate issues" that are of concern and warrant further inquiry, discussion and thoughtful responses – but do not necessarily lend themselves to structural or by-laws changes. The TGSC is turning these issues over to the Moderator, the Board of Selectmen and the Advisory Committee for further consideration:

Finding	Responsive Action	Responsible Party	Timetable
Climate issues that raise concerns and warrant further inquiry, discussion and thoughtful responses			
a. Only 53% feel comfortable expressing their views			
b. Only 32% report they have a real voice in town government			
c. Only 35% report they can make a difference in the decisions being made			

d. Some misunderstanding about the role of Advisory and how they can vote one way as members and another way as a TMM	Prepare a Q and A to cover some basic issues about the role of Advisory and the conduct of town meeting	Moderator	After the STM
e. Tension between wanting more efficient meetings and wanting more substantive meetings			
f. Want more engagement on the budgets			

Finally, it is fair to say that TMMs expressed considerable frustration that some TMMs do not prepare for Town Meeting, whether by engaging on issues in advance of Town Meeting, attending pre-town meeting prep sessions or merely reading the Advisory Report. A key question posed but not answered was: **What is the incentive for TMMs to be prepared?** This is an issue on which TMMs need to take more responsibility.