

# Making Town Meeting Work Better

League of Women Voters – Acton Area  
Post Office Box 817  
Acton, MA 01720  
[www.lwv-aa.org](http://www.lwv-aa.org)

December 11, 2008



LWV-AA Government Team

Ann Chang, Chair  
Mary Ann Ashton  
Jo-Ann Berry  
Pat Clifford  
Doré Hunter  
Marilyn Peterson  
Nancy Tavernier  
Suzanne Shanahan

# Table of Contents

Methodology ..... 4

Town Meeting Observation Results..... 5

Survey Results..... 7

Recommendations..... 12

## METHODOLOGY

### Program Planning

On an annual basis the members of the League go through a Program Planning exercise to select issues and set priorities for education, study, and action for the upcoming year. Program is the League's reason for being, the basis for both advocacy and education efforts. League advocacy is based on member study and agreement on selected issues and involves concerted efforts to influence public policies consistent with League positions. The Acton League has an existing position on Town Meeting Procedures, one that was developed through study and member agreement. This position supports periodic evaluation of Open Town Meeting with consideration given to attendance, population, and representativeness. Through the Program Planning process last spring, Acton League members chose as their top priority “Town Meeting – A comprehensive review of the Acton Town Meeting with an evaluation of procedures including dissemination of information.” Past League studies of Town Meeting procedures resulted in the adoption the Consent Calendar, the hosting of Pre-Town Meeting sessions by the Moderator to review presentations, Pro and Con microphones, and guidelines for the legibility and clarity of presentation slides.

### Observe Town Meetings in other towns

By beginning the review of Acton’s Town Meeting in April, League members had a unique opportunity to gather real time information on other Town Meetings by observing or gathering information on the town meetings that were held later than Acton’s in other area towns. Information was gathered on the meetings in Acton, Andover, Boxborough, Concord, Littleton, Stow, Sudbury, and Westford. Members observed 28 different characteristics of the meetings, recording the information on an Observation Form. The key areas included: voter turnout, the Warrant and other information, timing of meeting, time limits, location of participants and presenters, who presented the budget, use of a consent calendar, use of pro and con microphones, and how votes were taken.


### Compile lists of successful practices


League observers made lists of successful practices found in other towns that could be considered appropriate for Acton’s Town Meeting. Procedures that worked well in other towns were noted and presented as suggestions to League members in the fall for input as a precursor to gathering town wide support for potential changes for Town Meeting.

### Survey October Special Town Meeting attendees

Once a Special Town Meeting was called for October, the League and the Town Moderator recognized there would be an opportunity to survey a significant number of Town Meeting voters. The successful practices that gained League member agreement became the basis of the one page survey that was handed out to the October Special Town Meeting attendees. The results of the 636 surveys that were returned to the League have in turn validated many of the recommendations the League is presenting tonight as proposals for adoption to improve the attendance and productivity of Town Meetings in Acton.

## Town Meeting Observation Results

	Acton	Andover	Boxborough	Concord	Littleton	Stow	Sudbury	Westford
<b>Turnout (Number and/or Percent of Registered Voters)</b>	390	Very Low	405; 12%	338	300; 5%	214; 4.7%	536; 4.9%	395; 2.7%
<b>Warrant Copy</b>								
Selectmen Recommendations	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
FinCom Recommendations	Partial	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	yes	Yes	Yes
Article Summaries	Yes	Yes		Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Town Meeting Guidelines	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No
Articles Ordered for Best Participation	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes		No	Yes
How Distributed	Mail	Mail	Mail	Mail	On line 2 weeks before meeting, Clerk, TM		Scouts deliver to homes	Mail
Comments		Articles ordered by Moderator/ Town Clerk	On some articles, BoS and FinCom recommendations provide more information	Separate report containing final warrant and FinCom report mailed. Moderator requires voters to read Guidelines.	Glossary only; Budget Article #4 (Town and Schools) early first night	Some of the FinCom articles have summaries; materials were on tables outside the door.	Many expensive items fell late at night or on later days.	Warrant and Motion booklet available only at TM; vote taken at start to dispense with reading of all motions; BoS recommendations in Motion book only; budget article presented early in meeting.
<b>Time:</b>								
Meeting Called to Order	7:03	7:00	7:10	7:00	7:00	7:01	7:30	10:00 AM
1st Article Presented	~8:30	7:00	7:37	7:20	7:15		8:30	10:10 AM
Last Article Presented				10:00 by motion				1 hour lunch break 12:30 PM
Meeting Adjourned	11:15	9:55		9:00	10:30	10:30	10:32	
Continuation Date/Day, if necessary	Next hight			Next night	Next night	Next night	Next night	
<b>Time Limits:</b>								
Main Presentation	None	5 minutes		Negotiated in advance, usually 8 minutes.			10 minutes	
Con Presentation	None			Negotiated in advance, usually 4 minutes			5 minutes	
Comments from the floor	None	3 minutes		Limited by meeting agreement to 3 minutes			5 minutes	
Comments		Dense articles with presentations were not spaced out; 2/3 vote to move question - moderator did not announce; clock kept by moderator					Did not read motions in full; none of the presentations were long; there were no presentations from the floor.	

	Acton	Andover	Boxborough	Concord	Littleton	Stow	Sudbury	Westford
Finance Committee	Stage		In front of stage	Front floor	Floor	Floor	Stage	Floor
School Committee	Front floor		In front of stage	Front floor	Audience	Audience	Audience	Floor
Presenters of Articles	Center mic.	Center mic	Podium	Podium	Selectmen with mic	Floor	Floor	Town Manager presents budget
<b>Budget Presenter:</b>								
	BoS; School Committees	FinCom	FinCom presents budget; BoS presents amendments from floor	FinCom	FinCom	Town Manager	FinCom presents; BoS give part of presentation; Town Manager fields questions	Town Manager
Comments	FinCom provides overview					Have a line item budget; went through it like Consent Calendar		
<b>Consent Calendar</b>								
	Yes		No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Pro and Con Microphones</b>								
	Sometimes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
<b>CPC Articles:</b>								
Combined in single article	Yes			Yes	Yes		No	Yes
Presented individually	No			No	No		Yes	No
Comments				CPC articles are grouped like Consent Calendar unless combined with Town funding requiring borrowing				
<b>Votes:</b>								
Voice vote	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Standing vote	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	
Paper ballot vote	No		Yes	Yes	Yes			



## Acton Town Meeting Survey Results Fall 2008

### INTRODUCTION:

A one-page survey, soliciting input on ways to improve Town Meeting and increase attendance, was distributed to voters at the Special Town Meeting on October 2. Six hundred thirty-six (636) returned their surveys with a response rate of:

- 40% those voting on Article #1 (1587)
- 37% total number of people who checked in (1702)

Responses can be seen on the following pages. In addition to the fifteen questions, respondents had an opportunity to add comments if they wished.

### RESULTS:

- Approximately half of the respondents did not attend any of the 2008 Annual Town Meeting.
- Although the numbers were close on Question 2, more respondents chose to keep the 7:00 pm start for Town Meeting.
- There was overwhelming support for Question 3, “No new article taken up after 10:30.”
- There was strong support for Questions 4 through 10, which addressed equitable time limits, microphones, timely availability of budget information, and presentation of all budgets on the first night.
- The number of blanks (299) on Question 11, “Holds on Consent Calendar,” indicated that this question was not understood, and corresponded with the number of those who did not attend the 2008 Annual Town Meeting (302).
- Support for Representative Town Meeting received 25% of the responses. This, plus the 29% of blanks (183) on Question 12, indicates this needs more study.
- There was considerable interest in providing transportation and babysitting for Town Meeting.

### COMMENTS – AREAS OF MULTIPLE AGREEMENT:

Start and finish time:

- Continue with 7:00 pm start.
- Start on time – dispense with awards and non-warrant issues.
- No new articles should be started after 10:30 pm.

Budget:

- Voters want timely budget information before Town Meeting.
- Recommendations by the Selectmen and Finance Committee should be in the warrant.
- Summary of all financial articles should be made prior to discussing budgets.
- There was general support for presenting all budgets on first night; but there was concern that attendance could drop off for remainder of Town Meeting.
- Top level budget should be accessible easily from Town’s website’s home page; those who are interested should be able to drill down to more detailed levels.

Time Limits and Presentations:

- There was overwhelming support for strictly enforced time limits.
- Presentations should be no more than 15 minutes long; less is preferable.
- Pro and con statements should be limited to 2 – 5 minutes.

- There was support for visible timing mechanism.
- Improve readability of slides.

Representative Town Meeting:

- The 25% who favored Representative Town Meeting felt strongly about it.
  - o They believe that Representative Town Meeting allows their positions to be represented and that Open Town Meeting disenfranchises those who are unable to attend.
  - o Acton has gotten too large for Open Town Meeting.
- The 46% that did not support Representative Town Meeting felt strongly about retaining Open Town Meeting.
  - o Modifications are needed to streamline the process.
  - o Open Town Meeting provides the best opportunity for the individual to have his voice heard.

Saturday Town Meeting:

- Support for Saturday Town Meeting included concerns for the elderly driving at night, people who travel, and those with family commitments.
- Opposition to Saturday Town Meeting cited concerns for it being the Jewish day of worship and a day of family activities and children's sports events.

Transportation and Babysitting:

- Transportation and babysitting for Town Meeting should NOT cost the Town anything and be provided by volunteers.

Alternate ways of voting:

- Strong feelings were expressed for finding alternate means for voting on budget and other financial articles in excess of \$100K. Concern was expressed for those who travel, are elderly, or have small children at home (only one parent available to attend Town Meeting). Suggestions included:
  - o Annually at local town election
  - o Internet/Web-based voting with ID and password
  - o Absentee ballot
  - o Proxy voting
  - o Secret ballot
  - o Representative Town Meeting
  - o Saturday Town Meeting

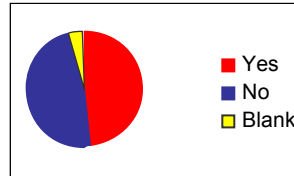
**CONCLUSIONS:**

- Voters care about Town Meeting, as reflected in the high response rate to the survey.
- Voters recognized that changes need to be made and responded favorably to suggestions for making Town Meeting more effective.
- If there is a contentious issue, voters will attend Town Meeting.
- Special arrangements for efficient check-in need to be made when large turn-outs are anticipated.
- Efficient procedures are needed to address the use of multiple venues for overflow during large turn-outs.
- The meeting needs to start on time and use voters' time efficiently.
- Budget information needs to be timely and readily available to voters.
- Areas needing more investigation before changes can be considered:
  - o What does moving to Representative Town Meeting mean:
    - Legal implications of governmental change, i.e., changes to Town Charter.
    - Costs associated with change to Representative Town Meeting.
    - How Representative Town Meeting works.
    - How representatives to Representative Town Meeting are chosen.
  - o Starting Town Meeting on Saturday.
  - o Alternate ways to vote on budget items over \$100K.

## Acton Town Meeting Survey Results Fall 2008

1. Did you attend any part of April 2008 Annual Town Meeting?

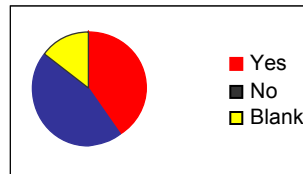
Yes	No	Blank
306	302	28
48.11%	47.48%	4.40%



**Which of the following suggestions to improve Town Meeting and increase attendance would you support?**

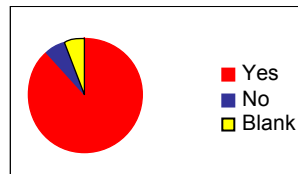
2. 7:30 start for Town Meeting

Yes	No	Blank
258	285	93
40.57%	44.81%	14.62%



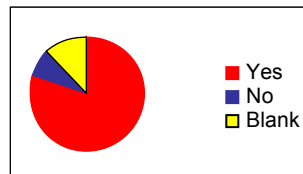
3. No new article taken up after 10:30

Yes	No	Blank
561	36	39
88.21%	5.66%	6.13%



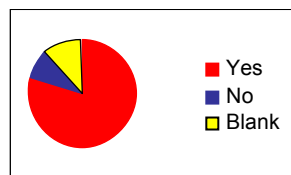
4. Equitable time limits for pro and con presentations

Yes	No	Blank
540	34	62
84.91%	5.35%	9.75%



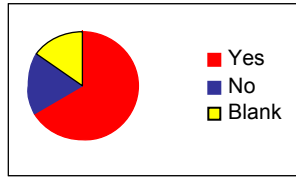
5. Equitable time limits for comments from the floor

Yes	No	Blank
508	52	76
79.87%	8.18%	11.95%



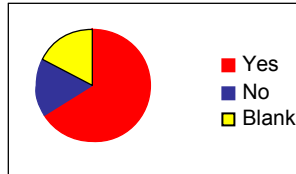
6. Pro & con microphones

Yes	No	Blank
420	117	99
66.04%	18.40%	15.57%



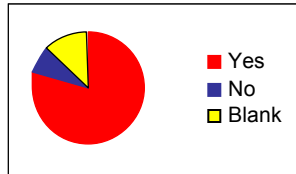
7. "Questions-only" microphone

Yes	No	Blank
419	108	109
65.88%	16.98%	17.14%



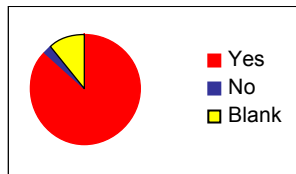
8. Complete budget information provided in the Warrant

Yes	No	Blank
504	51	81
79.25%	8.02%	12.74%



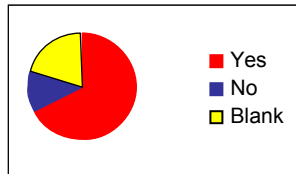
9. Budget available on the Web

Yes	No	Blank
550	17	69
86.48%	2.67%	10.85%



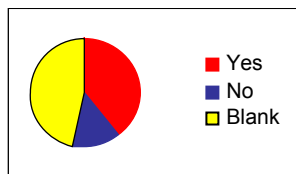
10. All budgets (Town and three Schools) presented on the first night

Yes	No	Blank
426	82	128
66.98%	12.89%	20.13%



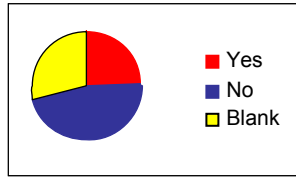
11. "Holds" on the Consent Calendar taken up immediately after Consent Calendar voted

Yes	No	Blank
249	88	299
39.15%	13.84%	47.01%



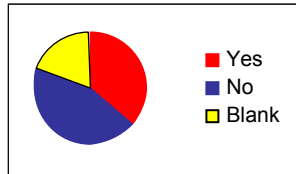
12. Representative Town Meeting

Yes	No	Blank
161	292	183
25.31%	45.91%	28.77%



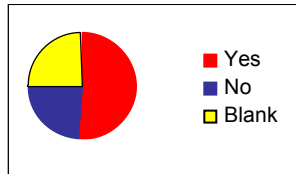
13. Saturday Town Meeting

Yes	No	Blank
230	280	126
36.16%	44.03%	19.81%



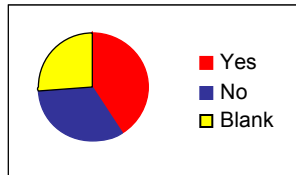
14. Transportation to Town Meeting available

Yes	No	Blank
327	146	163
51.42%	22.96%	25.63%



15. Babysitting for Town Meeting available

Yes	No	Blank
257	209	170
40.41%	32.86%	26.73%



## **Making Open Town Meeting Work: Responsibilities Before and During**

Based on its observation of successful practices at Town Meetings in other communities, feedback collected from a survey of Acton Town Meeting attendees in October 2008, and its own research, the League of Women Voters-Acton Area recommends that the following procedures be adopted to improve the attendance and productivity of Town Meetings in Acton. Some of the procedures may already be current practices, but in our observation we have seen less robust adherence to these procedures in recent years. We have organized our recommendations by the person or entity that would have responsibility for ensuring that the recommendations are acted upon.

### **For the Town Clerk:**

1. The area for the sign in needs to be clearly marked and within a short distance from the entrance to the meeting.
2. The check-in people need to be trained so they do not become flustered by crowds of voters clustering in at once.
3. All hand-outs should be reviewed by the Clerk and the Moderator.
  - a. Official documents must be clearly marked and in a readily accessible place.
  - b. All hand-outs must be signed and have means to contact the authors. This applies to official handouts, advocacy handouts, or informational handouts.
  - c. Informational or advocacy handouts may not be placed on the same table as the “official” materials generated by the town and required for active participation in Town Meeting.
  - d. Tables with official material should be located just outside the auditorium entrance. Consider an additional table (for those who might have missed the handouts) inside the auditorium. Consider requesting assistance from a group of high school students to act as “legislative pages” and distribute materials in the auditorium.
  - e. To avoid crowding around the entrance and allow voters a clear path to the door and counting by the check-in person, representatives of groups who wish to distribute handouts (informational or advocacy) may not do so in front of the entrance door to the meeting. They may distribute materials outside, or they may place them on a table inside (designated by the Town Clerk or designee) and stand behind the table to encourage voters to take their materials.

### **For the Moderator:**

#### **Before Town Meeting**

1. Hold a **mandatory** pre-Town Meeting session for anyone who wishes to present to Town Meeting. At this meeting, the Moderator should
  - a. Set total time that should be devoted to a specific article, given its relative importance
  - b. Review presentation times required by individual presenters, and adjust as necessary
  - c. Determine debate times for individual comments from the floor
  - d. Review final slides for clarity and length
  - e. Ensure that presenting boards are not repeating other presentations; shorten as necessary

Our rule-of-thumb recommendation would be that “official” presentations be no more than 12 minutes. Opposing sides should have an equitable time to make formal presentations.

Anyone wishing to make such an opposing presentation would need to be present at the pre-Town Meeting session (as noted above). During the debate, individual town meeting speakers should be limited to two minutes.

2. Work with the Board of Selectmen (as below) on ordering of the warrant, so that main budget articles (municipal and Acton Public Schools budgets, Acton-Boxborough and Minuteman assessment) could be taken up on the first night.
3. Require that any resolutions or amendments be submitted in writing ahead of time, where practical, to ensure that these can be vetted by Town Counsel and displayed to town meeting attendees.

### **During Town Meeting**

4. At the start of the Town Meeting, designate a Deputy Moderator. This deputy would serve for the entire year and substitute for the regular moderator if he is ill or unavailable for a meeting. The deputy would also serve as the moderator for any overflow crowds in a separate location.
5. Designate a microphone for questions only (no comments) which would be used prior to the start of actual debate. To manage this particular microphone, the questioner could be limited in the number of questions and the answering board(s) or petitioners will collect questions and answer them in a block rather than as individual questions. This will avoid a dialog between the questioner and the responder.
6. Establish pro and con microphones for controversial articles.
7. Adhere to agreed-upon time limits. Use a timing device that is visible to town meeting attendees to track the length of presentations and individual speakers, and to assist the Moderator.
8. Motions should be displayed on the screen at the time an article is taken up, and at least one screen should maintain the wording of the motion throughout the presentation and debate.
9. Amendments to motions should similarly be displayed.
10. With the cooperation of the Board of Selectmen, we recommend that Article 1 (Elect Town Officers) could be taken up as usual, but then the next order of business would be a fiscal overview presentation by the Finance Committee, followed by the four main budget articles (described above).
11. With the cooperation of the Board of Selectmen, we recommend that the Consent Calendar be taken up following the main budget articles. Once the Consent Calendar has been voted, ask the voters who held items from the Consent Calendar to explain their reason for requesting a hold so that presenters do not deliver a lengthy presentation for what might be addressed with a simple answer. Each article held from the Consent Calendar would be voted at that time (once clarifying question had been resolved), rather than taken in warrant sequence order.
12. No new articles begun after 10:30 in the evening.

**For the Town Manager:**

Working with the Board of Selectmen, ensure that town meeting attendees have materials required to participate.

1. Prepare complete warrant, which includes financial information, understandable summaries, and voted recommendations.
2. Ensure that complete budget information is available in the warrant and on the town website. Prepare and post object budget of major budget categories.
3. Ensure adequate equipment onsite so that presentations can be seen and heard by all audience members and so presentations engage the audience.
4. Prepare book of Town Meeting motions to be distributed as official information to town meeting attendees.

**For the Board of Selectmen:**

Working with the Town Moderator and Town Manager, ensure that town meeting attendees have materials required to participate and adequate information with which to make a decision.

1. Order the warrant to enhance attendance and participation.
  - a. Order the main budget articles (municipal and APS budget, AB and Minuteman assessment) be taken up on the first night.
  - b. Recommend that Article 1 – Elect Town Officers, be followed on first night by fiscal overview presentation by the Finance Committee, followed by four main budget articles.
  - c. Consent Calendar could be the next motion considered, with individual “holds” being discussed and voted on the same night as the Consent Calendar.
  - d. Town reports and recognitions should be kept to a minimum and taken up following the disposition of main budget articles.
2. Prepare complete warrant, which includes financial information, understandable summaries, and voted recommendations.
3. Ensure that complete budget information is available in the warrant and on the town website. Prepare and post object budget of major budget categories.
  - a. Budget in an easily accessible format should be posted on the web.
  - b. Provide budget materials in hard copy at Town Meeting and prior to Town Meeting at the March election. The budgets should be clearly marked to distinguish the Town’s from the Schools’.
  - c. Recruit volunteer editors to review the warrant prior to publication for completeness and accuracy, and to help ensure that the language and ideas are readily understood.
  - d. Ensure that sources of funds are identified in each “money” article.
  - e. Consider including a map of Acton with key locations labeled as needed (e.g., sites of Community Preservation projects, proposed zoning changes, land purchase).

4. Work with the Finance Committee to prepare a “scorecard” of warrant articles and final recommendations, to be distributed at Town Meeting as an official document (see *sample* attached).
5. Provide seating for Board of Selectmen and Finance Committee and staff on the floor of Town Meeting, rather than on the stage.
6. Provide seating on stage only for Town Clerk, Town Counsel, and Moderator.
7. See additional recommendations for presenting boards.

**For the Finance Committee:**

1. Work with the BOS to ensure complete financial information is available.
2. Provide brief overview presentation on town finances before presentation of budgets, which identifies the sources and proposed uses of revenues, and outlook for the next year.
3. Be a resource for the BOS, School Committees and Town Meeting on financial information published in the warrant and on the town and schools’ website.
4. Prepare a “scorecard” of warrant articles and final recommendations, to be distributed at Town Meeting as an official document (see *sample* attached).
5. See additional recommendations for presenting boards.

**For the Presenters (including Board of Selectmen, School Committees, Finance Committee, Community Preservation Committee, Planning Board, etc.):**

1. Attend pre-Town Meeting session with the Town Moderator, and be prepared to show final slides *at that time*.
2. Consider printing a FAQ for the any complex articles.
3. Provide information to Town Meeting attendees ahead of Town Meeting in whatever way possible.
4. Presentation slides should be used sparingly to present information clearly.
5. All slides should be readable – use graphics rather than words to demonstrate points.
6. Present information as succinctly as possible. Be respectful of town meeting attendees’ time. Presentations should conform to the requirements established by the Town Moderator but should never take longer than 12 minutes.

**For the Town Meeting Attendees:**

1. Consider seriously your responsibility to attend and participate in open Town Meeting.

2. Review materials that are provided to you (warrant mailed to your residence, information available at the polls and posted on the town and school websites).
3. Ask questions ahead of time, if possible.
4. Pick up official materials at door.
5. Be respectful of others' time.
6. Come prepared to listen to fellow citizens and be prepared to decide.

**No Recommendations – Need Further Study**

As noted in the survey results, the League of Women Voters-Acton Area has not offered recommendations in these areas, as we believe that they require more investigation before changes should be considered.

1. What does moving to Representative Town Meeting mean:
  - a. Legal implications of governmental change, i.e., changes to Town Charter.
  - b. Costs associated with change from Open Town Meeting to Representative Town Meeting.
  - c. How Representative Town Meeting works.
  - d. How representatives to Representative Town Meeting are chosen.
2. Changing the day and time of Town Meeting from a weeknight to a weekend day.
3. Alternate ways to vote on budget items over \$100K.

