

Town Meeting Day

A Vermont Tradition



"TOWN MEETING MAY HAVE TAKEN A BIG TECHNOLOGICAL LEAP,
BUT THE MARSHMALLOW JELLO HASN'T."

Published By
Deborah L. Markowitz
Secretary of State
and Kids Voting Vermont
2003

Town Meeting Day

A Vermont Tradition

On Town Meeting Day, the first Tuesday in March, citizens across Vermont come together in their communities to discuss the business of their towns. For over 200 years, Town Meeting Day has been an important political event as Vermonters elect local officers and vote on budgets. It has also been a time for neighbors to discuss the civic issues of their community, state and nation.

This booklet is designed to help you learn about Vermont's Town Meeting Day, its history and how it works today. We also hope that the materials in this booklet will help you think about how town meeting can continue to be an important part of Vermont's community experience.

The booklet also includes some suggestions for classroom activities to help you learn the value of participatory democracy and experience the concepts addressed in the written materials.

"Town Meeting Day – A Vermont Tradition" is a project of the Office of the Vermont Secretary of State and Kids Voting Vermont with support from the Vermont Institute for Government and the Center for Civic Education.

I would like to thank social studies teachers, Shawn Martin, Renate Wheelock, Chuck Webster and Bill Haines for reviewing the contents of this book and teacher's guide, and for making suggestions for its improvement. Special thanks also goes to University of Vermont political science professor Frank Bryan, author and editor Kevin Goddard and Ben Grosscup, student intern at the Institute for Social Ecology for permitting us to use their articles in our supplementary reading materials. I would also like to thank cartoonists Jeff Danziger (and the Barre-Montpelier Times Argus), Tim Newcomb, Don Hooper and Josh Saxe for their great artwork.

We hope you enjoy learning about Vermont's town meeting!



Deborah Markowitz
Secretary of State

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- A. Is Town Meeting an Appropriate Forum to Discuss Social And Political Issues?
- B. Do Vermont's traditional town meetings have a future?

**These materials and
activities are aligned with
Vermont's Framework of
Standards:**

**Communication and Language
Arts :** 1.3, 1.8, 1.11, 2.1, 2.2

Personal Development:
3.7 and 3.9, and

History and Social Studies:
6.9, 6.10, 6.11, 6.12, 6.13, 6.14,
6.17

Grades 5– 8

1. What is Town Meeting Day?

On the first Tuesday of every March most Vermont towns hold a meeting to elect local officials, approve a budget for the following year, and conduct other local business.

Vermont town meetings (with one exception) are the practice of **direct democracy**. That is, all the eligible citizens of the town can discuss and vote on specific issues that are announced through a **warning**.

According to Vermont law:

"A meeting of legal voters of each town shall be held annually on the first Tuesday of March for the election of officers and the transaction of other business."

17 V.S.A. § 2640.

The town meeting **warning** tells us when and where town meeting will be held, and it lists all of the **articles** (topics) that are going to be discussed and voted on by the meeting. The warning must be publicized at least 30 days before the meeting.

Town meetings can last a few hours – or they can go all day. The length of the meeting depends on how many articles are on the warning and how much discussion there is over the issues raised by the articles.



Direct democracy is the oldest form of democracy and is different than **representative democracy**. Representative democracy is when voters elect officials to make decisions for them. Voters, for example, elect state legislators to represent their district. (A district may be a single town, several towns, or a portion of the town. Each district has a roughly equal number of citizens). The representatives, not the citizens, draft, discuss and vote on laws and decide how to spend the taxpayers' money.

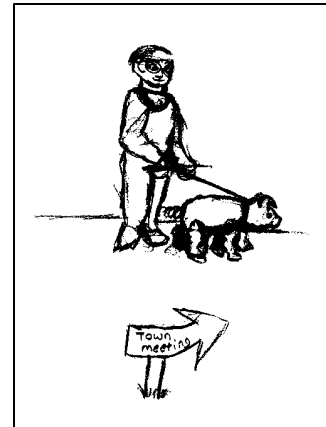
In town meeting there are no representatives (except in Brattleboro, which adopted a system of representative democracy for its town meeting). Citizens speak directly for themselves, seeking to clarify or amend items to be voted, or to persuade those present on whether or not to vote for a particular measure.

2. The Origin of Town Meeting Day

The first town meeting in America was in Massachusetts in 1633, but the practice of direct democracy dates back to around 400 B.C. in Athens of ancient Greece. Unlike town meetings today, in ancient Greece women, children and slaves could not vote, and meetings required the presence of at least 6,000 citizens!

Vermont town meeting is a tradition dating back to before there was a Vermont. The first town meeting was held in Bennington in 1762, fifteen years before Vermont was created.

In the late 1700s, as today, town citizens in Vermont held town meetings so that they could address the problems and issues they faced collectively. Popular matters of legislation in earlier town meetings included whether or not to let pigs run free or whether smallpox vaccinations should be allowed in the town (some thought vaccinations were dangerous). Voters also decided what goods or labor could be used as payment for taxes.



"Walking a Pig," by Josh Saxe

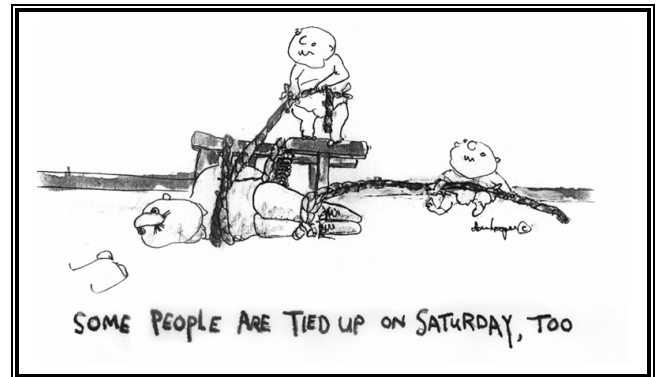
Town meeting also serves a social function. It brings people together who might not otherwise know each other, which can strengthen social ties within a town and help people work together to tackle community problems.

3. Town Meeting Holiday?

Vermont law makes town meeting a holiday for employees of the state government. Business owners can choose to give their employees the day off to attend town meeting, but many do not. For this reason, a law was passed to permit communities to hold their town meeting on the Friday, Saturday or Sunday before Town Meeting Day. Most towns have kept their town meeting on the first Tuesday in March, but a few have chosen to hold their town meeting on Saturdays.

14% of Vermont's Towns hold their meeting on Saturday. Many people were surprised to discover that turnout for Town Meeting did not increase with Saturday meetings.

Many factors can affect turnout at town meeting. For example, in 2001 there was a big blizzard. That year many towns postponed their meetings. Towns that went ahead with their meeting had very few people attending. Also, because many of Vermont's schools are not in session the week preceding town meeting, voters who are parents of school children may be away on vacation.



Questions:

1. Why do you think Town Meeting is held in March?
2. Is Tuesday the best day to hold town meeting? Why/Why not?
3. Provide a reason for and against using direct democracy.
4. Provide a reason for and against using representative democracy.
5. Should all Vermont businesses be required to give their employees the day off to go to their town meeting? Why/why not?

4. What Happens on Town Meeting Day?

Over the past 200 years little has changed about what actually happens at town meeting. The meeting begins with each town electing a **moderator** who runs the town meeting. The town clerk keeps minutes of the discussion and records the votes.

Every town begins its meetings in its own way. After the moderator “**calls the meeting to order**” (by banging the gavel and asking everyone to quiet down so the meeting can start), many towns begin with the Pledge of Allegiance. Some introduce the selectboard or school board, some thank the volunteers who are providing food or displays at the meeting, some welcome and recognize the oldest or newest members of the community, and some simply get down to the business of the day.

The **moderator's** job is to ensure that the meeting is orderly and fair. He or she calls for votes on each item of business and announces the decisions of the voters. The moderator must also interpret and apply rules governing how the discussion and votes proceed.



The moderator begins the work of the meeting by announcing the first article listed in the warning. After an article is voted on the moderator announces the next article listed in the warning. Unless the voters decide to pass over an article or rearrange the order of the articles, the meeting will address each article in turn, from the first to the last, until they are all addressed.

Vermont law requires the moderator to use a very formal procedure to run the meeting called **Robert's Rules of Order**. Robert's Rules of Order sets specific rules for the meeting to help the moderator keep order and ensure that the meeting is fair. These rules are published in a small book that can be referred to during the meeting if necessary.

Typical Procedure Using Robert's Rules Of Order

- a) The Moderator reads the article: **“Shall the Town give \$2000 to the ice rink for their youth hockey program?”**
- b) A voter raises his or her hand to be **recognized** (called on). The moderator recognizes the voter and the voter stands up and makes a motion to adopt the article. **“I move the article.”**

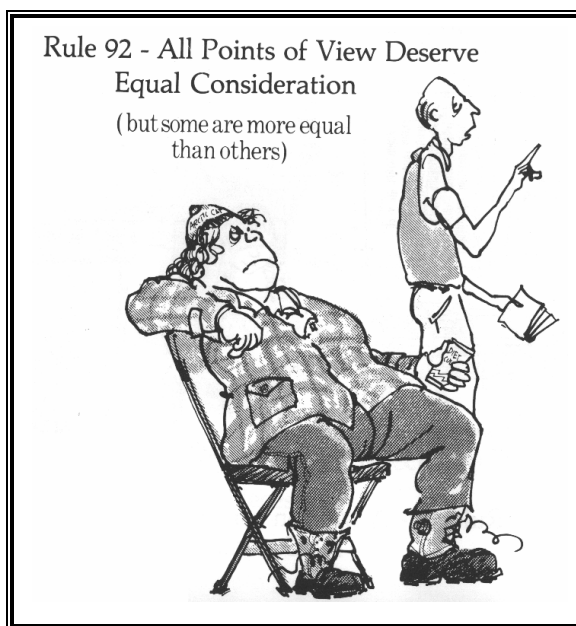


c) The moderator asks if there is a “second to the motion” (another voter who wants to discuss and vote on the article): **“Do we have a second to the motion?”**

d) A second voter “seconds” the motion: **“I second the motion.”** If there is no second the article is “passed over” (not discussed or voted on.)

- e) After the “second” the moderator asks for any discussion on the motion: **“Would anyone like to begin discussion on the motion?”**
- f) Voters raise their hands to be recognized by the moderator. When a person is called on he or she speaks to the moderator. Voters may make statements in support of or against the proposal. This discussion is called **debating the motion**. At any time, a voter can move to close the debate. A motion to cut off debate needs a 3/4 majority to pass.

- ☞ The moderator ensures everyone who wants to speak has a turn before anyone is allowed to speak a second time. This prevents the debate from getting personal, and makes sure everyone has an equal opportunity to participate.



by Jeff Danziger

g) A voter may move to amend the article: **“I move to amend the article by reducing the proposed amount to \$1500.”** An amendment can be rejected by the moderator (ruled **“out of order”**) if it is not **germane** (relevant) or if it is **hostile to** (against) the article. For example, an amendment that proposes to take the \$2000 for the ice rink, and use it instead for repairs on the town pool would be rejected as hostile.

Amendments must be germane because voters can only make decisions about topics that were included in the town meeting warning. For that reason amendments cannot propose an action that was not warned.

- g) After an amendment is made, the moderator asks for a second, and if there is one, the moderator will see if people want to discuss the amendment. At the end of discussion there will be a vote, first on the amendment, and then, if discussion is complete, there will be a vote on the original motion, as amended.
- h) Each article on the warning can be amended only twice. The votes go in reverse order:

Vote 1

Shall we amend
the proposed
amendment to the
article?

Vote 2

Shall we amend
the article?

Vote 3

Shall we approve
the article (as
amended)?



By Jeff Danziger

There are three ways for the town meeting to vote on an article.

1. **“Voice vote:” “All in favor indicate by saying Yea.” “All against signify by saying Nay.”**
 2. If the moderator cannot tell the outcome of the voice vote he or she can ask for a **“hand count:” “All in favor of the motion please raise your hand.”**
 3. If seven voters move to **“divide the assembly”** the motion is voted by **“paper ballot:” “I move to divide the assembly.”** The moderator asks **“Are there six more voters who ‘second’ this motion?”** If so, paper is passed out to all voters and they indicate their vote by writing yes or no. The votes are usually counted by the clerk and **board of civil authority** (local officials who help run the election) and are then reported to the moderator.
- ☞ No matter which voting method is used, a voter must be present to vote at town meeting. A person cannot go home early and ask a friend or family member to cast his vote for him.

Australian Ballot Voting

Most towns use the **Australian Ballot** for some of their articles. The Australian Ballot is an alternative to voting on issues at a traditional town meeting. We have devoted a section below to explain how the Australian Ballot works and how it relates to town meeting.



- k) After the vote is announced, the moderator moves to the next article on the agenda by reading it to the assembly. If a voter interrupts this reading by moving to reconsider the prior vote, the moderator must stop his reading and ask if there is a second to the motion to reconsider. The meeting may only reconsider a vote once before going to the next item on the agenda.

6. Who May Participate?

Only legal voters may participate in Town Meeting. This means that non-voters (people who live in other towns, young people or people who live in town but who are not registered to vote) do not have a right to speak at town meeting. Of course, non-voters may never vote at Town Meeting.

The meeting may vote to allow a non-voter to speak at town meeting.

To do this, the voters must pass a motion to allow the individual to “address the assembly.”

This motion must pass by a 2/3-majority vote.

There is a well-known story about a governor who visited one of Vermont's town meetings and asked permission to address the assembly. The town was unhappy about some piece of legislation the governor had supported and as a result, the vote to permit her to speak to the meeting initially failed. After some debate a motion to reconsider was passed and the governor was allowed to address the meeting.

Questions:

6. Why are rules of procedure like Robert's Rules of Order important?
7. How might the rules of procedure protect the rights of those with a minority viewpoint?
8. Why do you think only voters are allowed to participate in town meeting? Should the governor be able to speak at the meeting, even if it is not his or her own hometown?



Rule 473 - Acceptance Speeches Are Not Necessary

by Jeff Danziger

7. The Business of the Meeting

At town meeting voters hear and approve of reports from town officers, they elect new officials, review and approve a **budget** for the town.) Voters also decide whether to raise money from taxes to give to groups that serve the town, like a youth center, a homeless shelter or transportation for the elderly. Some communities also vote on the school budget (at a school district meeting warned for the same day as town meeting.)

The **Budget** is the amount of money spent to support the town government. It pays for town buildings, roads, town employees, the town library, etc . . . The budget is paid for by taxing the property owned by individuals and businesses in the town.

Most items on the warning for town meeting are required by Vermont law, but some articles are added by the **selectboard** (the board of 3 to 5 people who are elected to run the town) so that the board can get feedback or

One selectboard asked the voters to decide where the new town hall should be built. This was an issue the selectboard could have decided on its own – but it preferred to let the townspeople help make such an important decision.

approval from the citizens on an issue facing the town. Other articles can be added by local officials or by citizens who bring in a petition signed by 5% of the registered voters of the town.

Some towns discuss social issues facing the state or the country like whether to ban genetically engineered seeds, whether to close Vermont's nuclear power plant or whether the country should go to war.

These articles are usually added to the Town Meeting warning by voters who bring a petition to the selectboard, but occasionally a selectboard will agree to put the articles on the warning without a petition.

Not every petitioned article must be included in the warning – the topic for discussion must be an issue that the voters have the power to decide.



8. Elections of Local Officials

Vermont law requires voters to elect a variety of officials at town meeting. Some are elected to serve for one year. Others are elected to serve for as long as a three-year term.

Vermont law requires local officials to be elected by paper ballot (unless they are elected by Australian Ballot.) The moderator asks for nominations for each office and then, once nominations are closed, paper is passed out and voters write out their preference.

If there is only one person nominated for a position, a voter can move to direct the clerk to cast a single ballot in favor of the person nominated. This saves time and paper!

In many towns it is difficult to find people willing to run for every town office. If no one is elected at town meeting, the office is “**vacant**”. The selectboard must appoint someone to fill the vacancy.

Examples of local officials who are elected at Town Meeting:

Moderator—Runs the annual town meeting and any special meetings of the town held during the year.

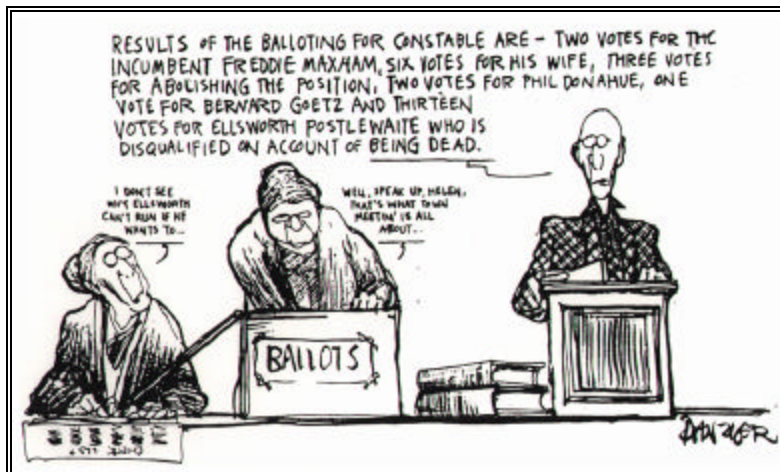
Selectboard – a board of 3 to 5 people who run the town. They implement decisions made at town meeting. (In cities voters elect a city council and mayor instead.)

Town Clerk—Keeps land records and records of marriages, births and deaths and runs the elections.

Treasurer—Oversees the town's finances, pays bills and balances the accounts.

Listers—Decides the value of land and buildings in the town. (Properties that have a higher value pay a larger tax.)

Auditor—Reports on whether the town is handling and spending its money correctly. The auditor's report is discussed at town meeting.



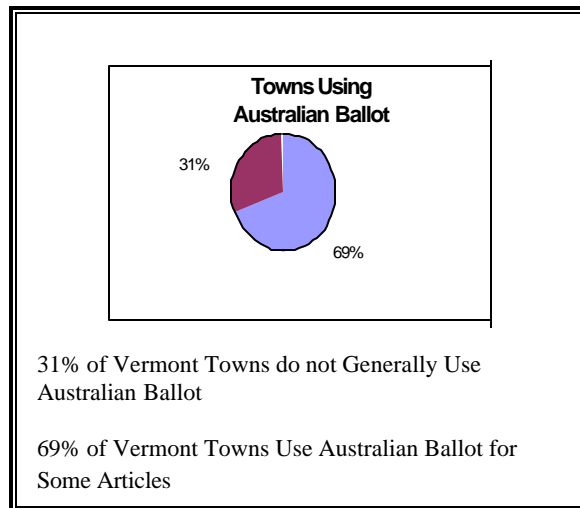
Questions:

9. Should we limit discussion at town meeting to local issues? What are the pros and cons of discussing national and international issues at town meeting?
10. Should the voters be able to petition for a vote on any town issue they choose? What about voting on whether the selectboard should fire an unpopular town employee?

9. The Australian Ballot Alternative

Most towns have adopted the **Australian Ballot** system of voting for at least some of the articles at town meeting. We also run our state elections using Australian Ballot.

The Australian Ballot is a secret ballot. Under this system of voting polls are open from at least 10:00 in the morning until 7:00 at night and voters can show up at any time to vote by marking a printed ballot.



Australian Ballot Voting was adopted in Vermont in 1892. It was the system of voting that was being used at that time in Australia!

By Josh Saxe

In contrast to floor voting at a traditional town meeting, the Australian Ballot allows people to vote quickly and at a time that is convenient for them. This system also allows a person who is sick or out of town, or who prefers not to come to the polls on election day to vote early or vote by mail by an **absentee ballot**. Ballots are delivered to sick or disabled voters. At a traditional town meeting you have to be present to vote -- if you are sick or at work you miss out.

It is not surprising that towns that use the Australian Ballot generally have much higher voter participation rates than those that do not.

Turnout of Registered Voters 2002 Town Meeting

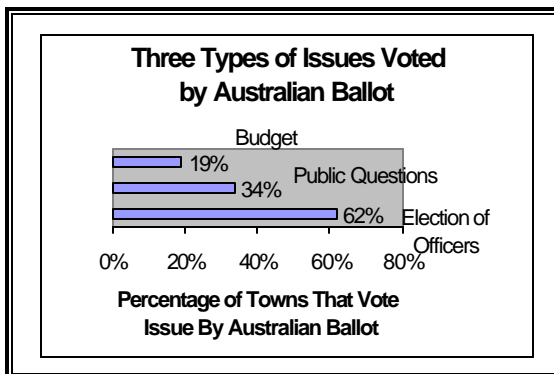
Towns that held both traditional town meeting and Australian Ballot Voting:

14% turnout -traditional meeting
30% turnout - Australian ballot
9% voted by absentee ballot

Towns that held only a traditional town meeting had 20% turnout.

Towns that voted only by Australian Ballot had 30% turnout.

Check our website to see your town's numbers.
www.sec.state.vt.us/Kids/



A town must vote to use the Australian Ballot system. Most towns choose to vote on some topics this way and vote others at the traditional meeting. The law also requires certain votes be by Australian Ballot – such as votes on whether to borrow money for over ten years to build a new town building. Most towns use Australian Ballot to elect town officers.

In contrast to traditional town meeting where articles are routinely amended, the Australian Ballot system requires voters to vote yes or no to an article. There is no way to make an alternative suggestion.

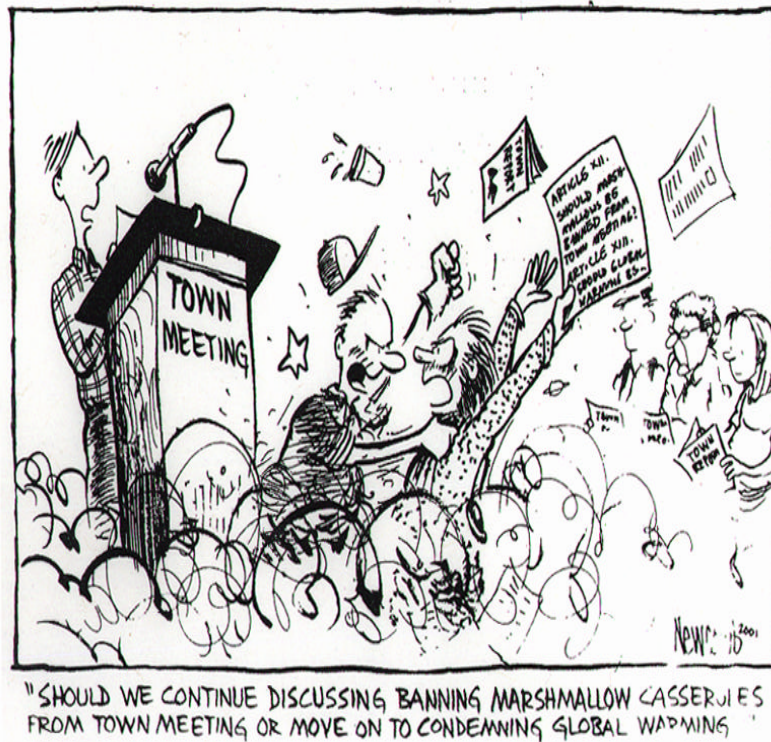
Under Australian Ballot voting, a warned article calling for the town to spend up to \$180,000 for a new fire truck lets voters either accept or reject the proposal. If a voter thinks the selectboard is asking them to pay too much for the truck, all the voter can do is vote no – the voter cannot write in an alternative proposal.



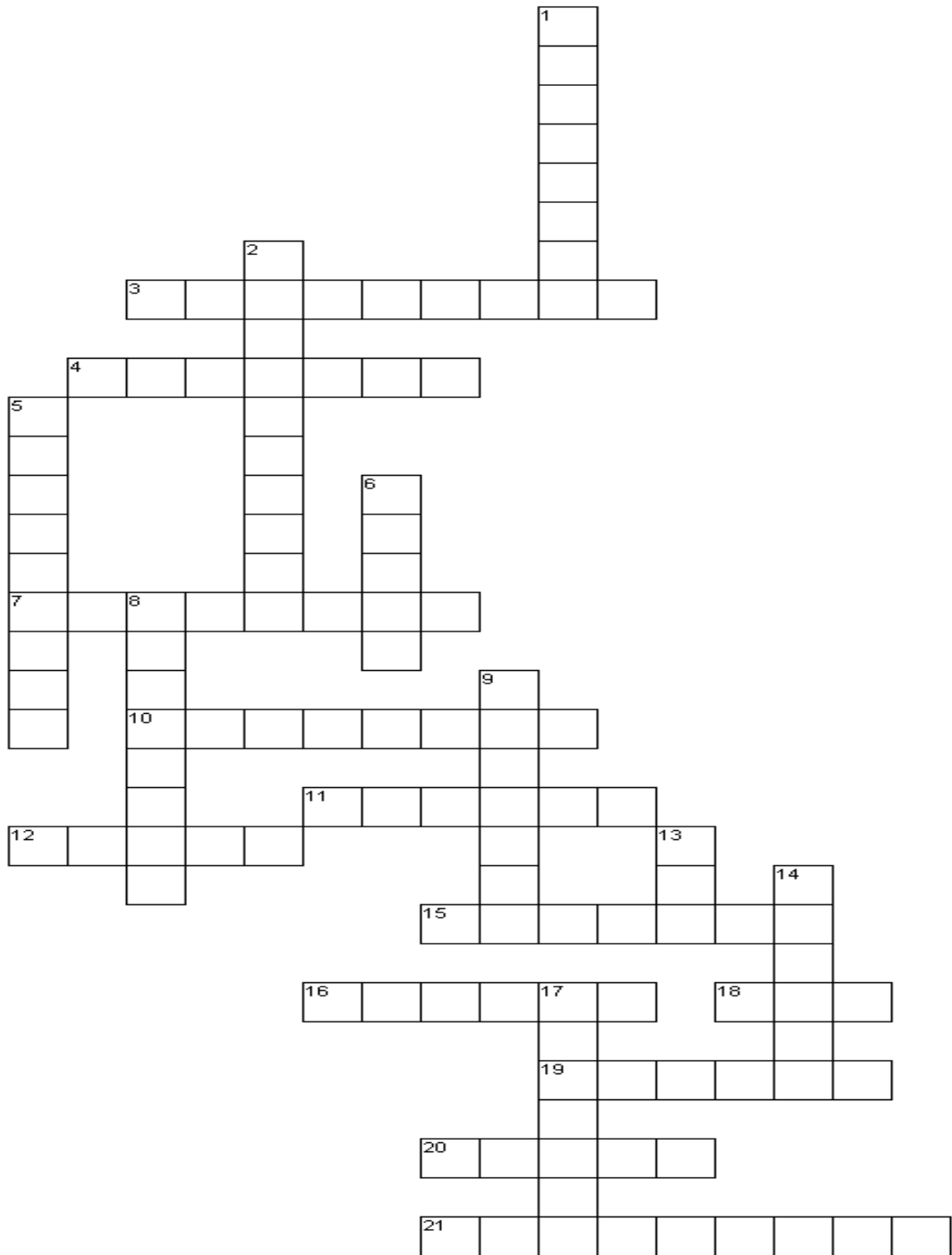
If the article is rejected, the selectboard can choose to not buy the truck or it can call a second vote at some later date, proposing a smaller amount to be spent for the truck. In contrast, at traditional town meeting any voter may suggest amending the article to allow the town to spend less for the truck. It can all be done at the same meeting – with no need to call a second vote.

QUESTIONS:

11. How is Australian Ballot voting different from voting at traditional town meeting?
12. What are the benefits of Australian Ballot voting?
13. What are the benefits of voting at traditional town meeting?



Vermont Town Meeting Puzzler



Across

- 3. Method for changing the article to be voted
- 4. Tells voters when town meeting will be held
- 7. A person who is sick can vote by " _____ " ballot if the town uses the Australian Ballot
- 10. Most towns use the Australian Ballot to elect their " _____ "
- 11. Request for action by a voter
- 12. Local official who runs the elections
- 15. Another word for "relevant"
- 16. The only people who can speak at town meeting without a special vote
- 18. A vote "no" by voice vote
- 19. Money raised by taxes to run the town
- 20. Month that town meeting is usually held
- 21. Country whose voting method we adopted

Down

- 1. Method for citizens to get an article on the town meeting warning
- 2. First town to hold a town meeting in Vermont
- 5. Person who runs town meeting
- 6. Number of people needed to ask for a paper ballot vote
- 8. Before a motion can be discussed it must be " _____ ."
- 9. Topic of discussion for town meeting
- 13. A vote "yes" by voice vote
- 14. Discussion of an article at town meeting is also called a " _____ "
- 17. " _____ " Rules of Order

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Teacher's Guide

The supplementary articles and classroom activities in this Teacher's Guide are designed to compliment the students' reading. We hope our short answers to the puzzler and the student questions will help you stimulate classroom discussion. This teacher's guide also includes suggestions for classroom activities and student exercises to help your class learn the value of participatory democracy and experience the concepts addressed in the written materials. We include a variety of activities in the hope that you will find one or more that will suit the needs of your classroom.

**These materials and activities are aligned with
Vermont's Framework of Standards:**

Communication and Language Arts : 1.3, 1.8, 1.11, 2.1, 2.2

Personal Development: 3.7 and 3.9

History and Social Studies: 6.9, 6.10, 6.11, 6.12, 6.13, 6.14, 6.17

Grades 5– 8

We welcome your suggestions about how to improve these materials and classroom activities. Please send your comments to Deb Markowitz, 26 Terrace Street, Montpelier, Vermont 05609-1101, dmarko@sec.state.vt.us.

**For additional information about Vermont's town meeting visit the
Kids Voting section of our Kid's Page at www.sec.state.vt.us.**

Teacher's Guide

Puzzler Answers:

Across

- 3. Amendment
- 4. Warning
- 7. Absentee
- 10. Officers
- 11. Motion
- 12. Clerk
- 15. Germane
- 16. Voters
- 18. Nay
- 19. Budget
- 20. March
- 21. Australia

Down

- 1. Petition
- 2. Bennington
- 5. Moderator
- 6. Seven
- 8. Seconded
- 9. Article
- 13. Yea
- 14. Debate
- 17. Roberts

Student Question Answers:

- 1. Why do you think town meeting was held in March?** Most Vermonters were originally farmers. The weather and planting season made early March an ideal time for town meeting as it did not interrupt the farmer's chores.
- 2. Does it make sense to hold town meeting on a Tuesday? Why/Why not?** The tradition of meeting on the first Tuesday of March predated Vermont's statehood. However, with most Vermonters working off the land (not as farmers or foresters) and with many commuting to jobs in other towns, it is harder to get to town meeting during the week. Many people are not given the day off from work to go to town meeting. On the other hand, towns that have moved their town meeting to Saturday have not seen an increase in participation. So, perhaps it makes sense to hold on to our Tuesday tradition.
- 3. Provide a reason for and against using direct democracy.** With direct democracy every participant can have a direct effect on decision making for the town. People who are affected by the decisions get to make them. On the other hand, there is less protection of minority interests. With direct democracy there is less incentive to research complicated or technical issues and come up with compromises. More often those that share the majority opinion win and those with the minority viewpoint lose.

4. **Provide a reason for and against using representative democracy.** With representative democracy we charge our elected officials with researching all of the facts before making a decision. It is their job to hear from all sides on an issue, balance the wishes of the majority with the need or rights of the minority to come up with a decision which is best for all. This system better protects the rights and interests of minority groups or minority opinion holders. The enactment of our civil union law is an example of this. Some legislators disregarded the opinion of the majority of their constituents to protect the rights of a minority and to comply with the requirements of Vermont's constitution to provide equity. On the other hand, citizens are less directly involved with the decision-making and may feel disempowered and alienated from government and its decisions. Decisions that are not well researched by a representative may not meet the needs of the constituents.
5. **Should all Vermont businesses be required to give their employees the day off to go to their town meeting? Why/why not?** It is the civic responsibility of Vermont's employers to give their employees the day off to go to town meeting. On the other hand, many employers cannot afford to close for the day and some service providers, like hospitals, police and fire departments must stay open and fully staffed.
6. **Why are rules of procedure like Robert's Rules of Order important?** It makes sense to use a formal procedure to ensure that town meeting is fair. With an established procedure everyone has an equal opportunity to know what the rules are and to take advantage of them to affect the decisions of the meeting. On the other hand the rules are very formalistic and the meeting can get bogged down in discussions about whether the process is being followed correctly – wasting time that might be better used discussing the issues on the warning. In addition, people who know the rules will have a greater advantage over those who do not – and will have a better chance at influencing the outcome.
7. **How might the rules of procedure protect the rights of those with a minority viewpoint?** The rules of procedure ensure that everyone gets a chance to speak on an issue and prevents one person or group from dominating. It is not unusual for a person who expresses a minority perspective to convince others of the sense of their position, ultimately changing the outcome.
8. **Why do you think only voters are allowed to participate in town meeting? Should the governor be able to speak at the meeting, even if it is not his or her own hometown?** A town meeting is a meeting of the voters to make important decisions about the town – decisions that effect how they are to be governed (elections of officers) and how much they pay in taxes (adopting a budget). It therefore makes sense that only voters participate. On the other hand, sometimes a nonvoter can give information that will help the voters understand an article. For example, if the youth center is asking the town to appropriate \$20,000 to help support its activities, it may make sense to hear from a person from the youth center to learn why the money is needed – even if the person representing the youth center is not a voter. Most towns allow their representatives and senators to speak to the meeting so they can tell the voters what is happening in the legislature that could effect their town. It is a similar courtesy to allow the governor to speak.

9. **Should we limit discussion at town meeting to local issues? What are the pros and cons of discussing national and international issues at town meeting?** Pro: Town meeting provides an opportunity for people in a community to discuss all of the issues that concern them - including national and international issues. Why limit what can be discussed? Town meeting can be a forum where neighbors educate neighbors. Cons: Discussing national and international issues are a distraction from what town meeting is supposed to be about -- deciding local issues. It wastes time that is needed to talk about school budgets and town governance.

☞ To facilitate a more in depth discussion of this current issue please refer to the supplementary articles.

10. **Should the voters be able to petition for a vote on any town issue they choose? What about voting on whether the selectboard should fire an unpopular town employee?** Voters should be able to petition for a vote on many things - but there are some management decisions that must be made by the selectboard or the town manager. Decisions about whether to hire or fire an employee should be left to the managers of the town. Otherwise employees would risk being publicly humiliated at town meeting and no one would want to work for the town!

11. **How is Australian Ballot voting different from voting at traditional town meeting?** Australian Ballot voting is voting by secret ballot in a voting booth or by absentee or early voting ballot. It takes only a few minutes and you can vote at your convenience at any time on town meeting day. All votes are yes/no votes. There is no opportunity to amend any proposals. Traditional town meeting voting requires people to participate in a meeting that may last much of the day. Voters have the opportunity to debate the issues and propose amendments before there is a vote. Voting is either by voice vote, a hand count or by paper ballot.

12. **What are the benefits of Australian Ballot voting?** Australian Ballot voting is more convenient and more inclusive than the traditional town meeting. It increases voter participation and allows people who cannot come to a daylong meeting to vote. People who are sick, who have to work or who are out of town on Town Meeting Day can still participate by absentee or early voting ballots. This particularly benefits people with disabilities who would be denied the opportunity to vote at a traditional meeting if their disability prevented them from attending the meeting.

13. **What are the benefits of voting at traditional town meeting?** Traditional town meeting strengthens Vermont communities by bringing people together to discuss and decide on issues that effect the town. Face to face debates help neighbors better understand each other's perspectives and allows the town to forge compromises on potentially divisive issues, preventing repeated votes. It enables voters to be more educated on the issues and allows all citizens to contribute toward finding solutions to the problems that face the community. In contrast, the Australian Ballot System gives too much control to the selectboard. Under the Australian Ballot System, voters can't debate and change decisions on the spot; they have to vote "yes" or "no" on whatever questions the selectboard gives them.

Classroom Activities

Activity #1 - Mock Town Meeting: This activity is designed to allow students to experience town meeting and to encourage students to critically think about the difference between Australian Ballot voting and voting at traditional town meeting.

Set your town meeting warning (agenda). Start by asking students to list some of the rules in your classroom or school (ex. no spaghetti strap shirts, no soda in the cafeteria, after three in-excused late arrivals you get detention, etc. . . .) Come up with for ideas of other rules (or changes to the existing rules) that the class or school should consider adopting. (See below for issue ideas.) If you have financial resources available (some classes ask each child to bring in \$1.00) come up with a few ideas for how the class could spend the money (ex. for a class party, to buy books for a needy school, to redecorate the classroom . . .)

In the alternative, appoint three people to choose three voting issues for the class, and a proposal for how the classroom should spend its class money. As above, have the students begin by discussing school or class rules that currently exist and ask them to come up with new rules (or modification of existing rules) for the class's consideration. The committee of students should also brainstorm possible ways to use the class money – but they should agree on only one proposal to put to a vote of the class. The committee should deliver their three voting issues and budget proposal to the teacher who will write it up as a warning and post it in the classroom with the date and time of the voting.

Australian Ballot Vote. Ask one or two students (or ask the committee, if you had one) to briefly explain each of the proposal that will be put before the voters. Without discussion or debate (or limit questions to just a few) pass out ballots and ask the class to vote yes or no on each proposal.

☞ **Do not tally the results until after your traditional town meeting vote!**

Traditional Town Meeting Vote. First, six members of your class should be randomly designated as non-participants (draw numbers or pick names from a hat.) They are voters who cannot make it to town meeting because they are sick or disabled, or are at work. If you used a committee to come up with the articles, committee members should be the selectboard, and should be prepared to explain each of the articles. If your class came up with the articles together you should designate individuals in the class to be the selectboard explain each article. a group of students are picked to play the role of the selectboard.

The teacher should serve as the moderator of the classes' town meeting. The meeting begins when the moderator calls the meeting to order. The teacher should bring up each "article" in turn, ask for a motion and a second,. The moderator asks the "selectboard" to explain the proposal and tell the class why they recommend that the citizens vote for the proposal. The moderator then asks the assembly if there is any discussion on the proposal. The students should be directed to ask questions about what the proposal means or to make arguments for or against the proposal. (Groups could prepare these

questions and explanations in advance or the teacher could step in to clarify the proposal and to help students to think of questions on the spot.) Ask the students if any of them wish to offer an amendment to the proposal, and then discuss and vote on the proposed amendment. When discussion is complete ask for a voice vote on the issue – or a show of hands. If the issue is contentious you might even suggest a paper ballot.

When all of the articles are decided the moderator closes the meeting.

After the Vote. Compare the results of the Australian Ballot vote and the floor vote. Were there any surprises? As voters how was the experience different? How did it feel to be one of the people who were left out of the voting?

Issue ideas: Should the school require students to wear uniforms? Should the school have a dress code? Should there be more school busses so all students can take the bus? Should we have school year round? Should we have soda at school? Should the town build a hockey rink? Should pets be able to come to school? Should students be allowed to chew gum at school?

Activity #2 – Town Meeting Reporters: This activity is designed to give your students an actual experience of town meeting in your community. Students will observe and then evaluate their town meeting.

Town Meeting Reporters - For Communities with Traditional Town Meeting

If your town has a traditional town meeting, have your students attend town meeting and write a report or an article about this year's meeting for publication in the school's newsletter or the local newspaper's student page (if they have one.) *Note: In towns that decide some issues by Australian Ballot and others at the floor meeting, the floor meeting may be held on the Monday evening prior to Town Meeting Day. This meeting will include a discussion of the issues to be decided the next day by Australian Ballot. Be sure to investigate when your town's meeting is to be held. You can find this information in the Town Report.

Beforehand. Students should prepare for the meeting by reviewing a copy of the Town Report. We have included in the supplemental materials a short publication entitled "how to read a town report." Students should identify all of the issues on the agenda to be voted by Australian Ballot. Of the remaining articles (those that will be voted on at the traditional town meeting (sometimes called the "floor meeting") students should identify the issues they think might be interesting or controversial. Students can also be asked to look in the local newspaper and clip articles and letters to the editor that discuss town meeting issues.

At Town Meeting. During the town meeting students should take notes about what issues generated discussion and what issues passed with little or no debate. Before the meeting begins or at the lunch break students should interview voters to find out why they are at town meeting, and to find out what issues they are concerned about. Other students can interview the moderator to find out how he or she thinks the meeting is

going - and to ask what is the hardest and/or most fun part of being the moderator. Other students can interview the clerk and/or selectboard members to find out whether he or she thinks the meeting is going well, and to ask what he or she had to do to prepare for town meeting. Students can also follow the warned agenda and note what the final decisions were on each article. Finally, ask the students to observe the participants. Was there a broad representation (age, sex, socio-economic, native Vermont/newcomer) of the community present? Did some groups speak more than others?

Back in Class: Discuss what each of the students saw and heard at town meeting. Were there any surprises? If there was also Australian Ballot voting, what were the outcomes of the vote? Were there any contested races for local office? If so, could you tell what the issues were in the race? If there were no contested races, do you have any thoughts on why not? Do the students think any of the outcomes might have been different if the issues were voted at traditional town meeting instead of by Australian Ballot? Call the town clerk to find out how many people voted in the traditional town meeting, and how many participated in the Australian Ballot voting. Did many more people vote by Australian Ballot than voted at the traditional meeting?

Have students work in groups to write up a summary report or article about this year's town meeting. Send this report to your local paper or publish it in your class or school's newsletter. Also e-mail your report to me so I can include it on our kids page: dmarko@sec.state.vt.us.

Town Meeting Reporters - For Communities That Only Use Australian Ballot

If your town votes on all articles by Australian Ballot have your students study the issues, research the results of the vote, and report on the outcome of the votes. The report they come up with can be published in the school's newsletter or the local newspaper.

Beforehand: Students should prepare for the vote by reviewing a copy of the Town Report. Town Reports are available from the town clerk's office. We have included in the supplemental materials a short publication entitled "how to read a town report." Students should identify all of the issues on the warning and identify those they find interesting or believe might be controversial.

If students want to know more about any of the issues on the ballot encourage them to attend the informational meeting that the town must hold sometime within ten days prior to the vote. The time and location of the informational meeting should be included in the Town Report. Students should ask adults in the community (parents, teachers, administrators, neighbors or people-on-the-street) what they think are the important issues on the ballot. Students can also interview the town manager, mayor (if you have one) or members of the city council, selectboard or school board (if the school vote is also held on Town Meeting Day) to see what they believe are the important issues. Students can also be asked to look in the local newspaper and clip articles and letters to the editor that discuss town meeting issues.

After the Vote: If students went to the informational meeting, discuss what each of the students saw and heard at the informational hearing. Were there any surprises? Ask how

many people attended this meeting, (expect very few) and discuss how they think the voters who were not at this meeting might have gotten information about the issues they voted on. What were the outcomes of the Australian Ballot voting? Were they surprised by any of the outcomes? Were there contested races for any of the local offices? If so, could you tell what the issues were in the race? If there were no contested races, do you have any thoughts on why not? Do they think any of the outcomes might have been different if the issues were discussed, debated, perhaps amended and then voted at traditional town meeting instead of by Australian Ballot? Call the town clerk to find out how many people voted by absentee or early voting ballot?

Have students work in groups to write up a summary report or article about this year's town meeting. Send this report to your local paper or publish it in your class or school's newsletter. E-mail your report to me so I can include it on our kids page: dmarko@sec.state.vt.us.



BUT WAS THE STATE SEAL
EVER DEBATED AT TOWN MEETING

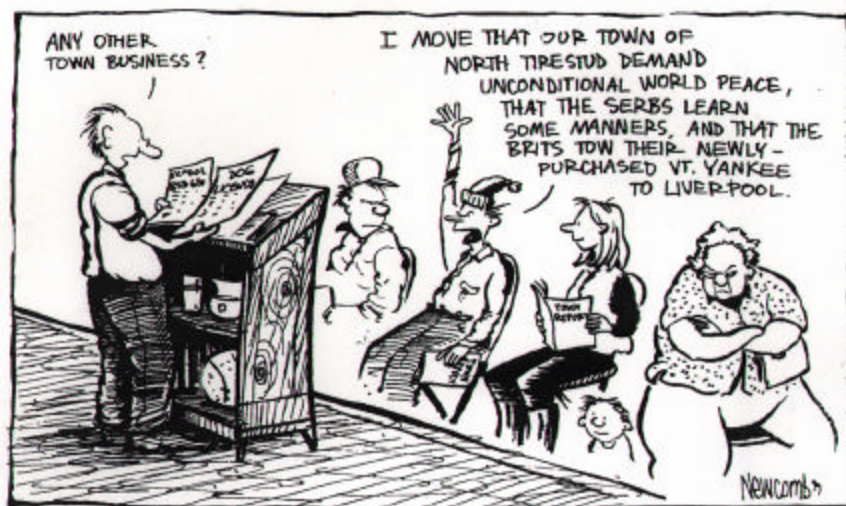
Supplementary Materials and Discussion/Essay Topics

A. *Is Town Meeting An Appropriate Forum To Discuss Social And Political Issues?*

Over the past two decades town meeting has increasingly been used as a forum to discuss social and political issues, such as whether to outlaw the death penalty, spend less on our national military budget or to ban gay marriage. Every year people across Vermont debate whether town meeting is an appropriate forum for these (arguably) non-local issues. These supplementary materials include two articles that express different perspectives on this issue. The first is by University of Vermont political science Professor, Frank Bryan entitled “*Trouble in the Vermont Hills*” and the second is an article by a student activist Ben Grosscup entitled, “*Why Organize A Town Meeting Campaign On Genetic Engineering?*” These articles are easy to read as well as thought provoking and can form the basis of a classroom discussion, debate or persuasive essay on the issue.

B. *Do Vermont’s traditional town meetings have a future?*

Every March those who observe Vermont’s civic life wonder whether Vermont town meeting is a healthy institution of Vermont democracy, or is it a thing of the past? With fewer and fewer people attending Vermont’s town meetings, and with more towns choosing to use Australian Ballot to decide the important issues facing the town there is a real question about the future of Vermont’s Town Meeting. These supplementary materials include two articles published in the spring 1986 issue of Vermont Life Magazine that debate the health of Vermont Town meeting. “*Town Meeting Debate: is our most famous political institution bright and bouncy? Or down for the count?*” was written by journalist and editor Kevin Goddard and University of Vermont professor of political science, Frank Bryan. (Reprinted with permission from the authors and from Vermont Life Magazine.) These articles are easy to read as well as thought provoking and can form the basis of a classroom discussion, debate or persuasive essay on the issue.



Town Meeting Day

A Vermont Tradition

Supplemental Materials

“How and Why To Read A Town Meeting Report,” by the Vermont Institute for Government

“Why Organize A Town Meeting Campaign On Genetic Engineering?” by Ben Grosscup

“Trouble in the Vermont Hills,” by Frank Bryan, published in Newsweek, March 5, 1984

“Town Meeting Debate: is our most famous political institution bright and bouncy? Or down for the count?” by Kevin Goddard and Frank Bryan, published in Vermont Life, Spring 1986

Facts about Vermont Local Government From the Office of the Secretary of State

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How and Why To Read a Town Report

Vermont Institute for Government

R.R. 4, Box 2298, Montpelier, Vermont 05602, (802) 223-6500

A few days before town meeting, it's time to sit down and look over the town report. Often it doesn't take that long, because it doesn't seem all that interesting. Oh sure, there's a nice picture of a new plow or sewage treatment plant on the front, and a list of those who haven't paid their property taxes this year, but most of the pages in the town report just don't sing. Who would blame us for dozing off after only a few minutes?

Before you doze, however, think about what this report means. A good town report can tell you a great deal about your town. While town expenditures and tax rates are important to all of us, the reports of town officers--from the select board to cemetery commissioners--help us understand what has been going on during the last year and what may be planned for the future.

The budget is up for a vote, but is it a fair and responsible budget? How does the highway budget proposed for this year compare with last year? How much did the zoning administrator take in fees and penalties, and how much did the grand list grow? The answers to these and other questions are in the report, but for many voters, the town report arrives in the mail, gets put somewhere where "I'll read it later", dropped behind some chair, and then if read at all is zipped through in less than a minute, often with a distasteful feeling because it reminds you of some other tax you have to pay.

Sit down with it, in good light, and give it a chance. It's the report of your town.

Opening the Cover

Find the index or table of contents. Some town reports have both, but others only a listing of the various items, often without any discernable order. Look either at the front or back of the booklet. Now scan the listings. Usually there are three or four parts to a town report.

First is the audit, done by professionals or our own auditors, listing how money of the town (and school, in some towns that don't separate the reports) was spent during the previous year. A year can be either the calendar year, or a fiscal year beginning July 1.

Second is the budget--what the selectboard proposes to spend on town needs during the coming year. Actually, if you're a town with a calendar fiscal year, you're already more than two months into that year already, but that's the way it's always been.

Third will come a series of reports from town officials, including the selectboard, the zoning board, the tax collector, followed some times by a listing of the salaries and payments made to town officials during the year.

Those are the big categories. Before diving into them, however, we have to locate one vital entry first before all the others. That's the warning for the meeting.

The better the town report, the more knowledgeable the community. Who could complain about that?

The Warning

The first item we want to look at is the warning. It's usually within the first five or six pages at the front or at the back of the booklet. Occasionally it is in the middle, at the staples. Don't go any further with the book until you find it. There is usually one for the town and one for the school district.

Look at the heading. Are you sure this isn't last year's minutes? They are important, but keep hunting for the warning.

Now let's see. Where and when the meeting is being held. Put it on the calendar right away. Reserve the day or evening and protect it from excuses or competing events. This is town meeting. Come on.

Okay, let's see what they are trying to put over on us this year. Find the budget article. Circle that amount. Write it on the back cover right now. Later we're going to want to know the answer to the most important question to be asked at town meeting this year. How much does the budget increase over last year? And why? That information is in a different part of the report, and we'll find it.

First, read through or skim each of the articles. Elections, setting the tax due date, discounts, installments, the rate of interest on delinquencies, and a whole long list of organizations who want some town money, each have their own questions. It ends with "Other Business," and we're out of here. See if there are any public questions in the list. Do you get to vote on a zoning amendment or a bond this year? Is there something political, like supporting some legislation or taking a stand on national or international policy? Some questions may be voted by Australian ballot. Make sure you distinguish them from those to be discussed on the floor of the meeting. Fold the page of the warning or mark it somehow so you can find it when you need it at the meeting.

Knowing enough about the rules of town meeting to handle basic motions is an important advantage at a floor meeting of the town. You might want to read "The Meeting Will Come to Order," another in this series of pamphlets. Call VIG.

PRE-TOWN MEETINGS. Many towns have pre-town meetings several days before the official town meeting. These are usually called by the selectboard and their purpose is to give voters a chance to raise questions and hear explanations without having the pressure of needing to vote on them that day. Often the discussion of issues at pre-town meetings is more thorough than at the regular town meeting. Voters should carry their town reports with them to pre-town and town meetings. A report is the essential guide book, the program, the menu. Without it, you'll be lost. With it, you can be more than a spectator.

The Budget

Okay, I want to know how much the budget went up and how. The answer is in this book.

First, find the budget. Look at expenditures first. This section is usually broken down into categories, beginning with "General Government," and running down, page by page, each of the departments and functions of town government, including roads, sewer, water, and the like. Each heading is followed by a series of columns, showing the actual and budgeted expenditures for the last three years. Running your finger or a straight edge along this line shows how the budget has changed over time. It also shows how well the selectboard has been in predicting how much the town needs for line items.

Go to the last page of the budget where it says "Grand Total" for all expenditures. This is the money proposed to be spent in the town this coming year. The grand total does not include money to be appropriated at town meeting for special expenditures, including social service requests.

The next section is revenues. This is a listing of where the money needed to run the town originates, hopefully. State funds, fees, penalties, and interest are listed there. So is the amount proposed to be raised in property taxes for the town. At the bottom of this section you see "Total Revenues."

Town meeting will consist of various skirmishes about individual lines in this budget. People will debate how much officers should be paid in salary, and why the salt budget is so high. Some will argue over math errors, or how things are presented in the budget. Beware of the distractions of minor issues. The budget is the key to everything a town does.

The Audit

What can we say about the audit? It usually takes up many pages in the town report and is the least read of the sections. Some say it is written by CPAs for CPAs. But take a little time with it. In it is the detail on how money is spent in the town, category by category.

Start with the letter from the accountant to see objections on how the books are kept. Review the balance sheet and statements of revenue and expenditures, and the others. Skip the Summary of Significant Accounting Policies unless you're preparing for the accountancy exam. Why care about all this? A lot of money is being spent here, and it belongs to you. Don't just leave it to others to run your government. You are one of the bosses.

The Reports

Tired of numbers? Here come the words. It can be just fascinating if you read them all at one sitting. People write like they speak, and we all have different voices, and here among the reports are a good number of your neighbors, telling you how it went this year.

Generally the reports are upbeat, except perhaps the selectboard's contribution. It will recite the washouts, the unexpected expenditures, and the hardships that the town encountered during the year.

There is a lot of interesting details in the reports. You can learn how many zoning permits were issued, how many fires were extinguished (hopefully all of them, eventually), and how many of the social services agencies work. Some of this won't interest you, but give everything a try. They're trying to report to you, after all.

Use of the Report at Town Meeting

The town report is obviously essential to a full appreciation of town meeting. You don't have to read the whole thing to recognize it doesn't answer all your questions. But it can certainly get you organized to form those questions and have them ready to go at town meeting time. Rolled up, it can serve as a great prop for railing against government spending. It's also handy for taking notes on things. There are sometimes blank pages at the back.

Having your report handy, you can follow along when the debate gets hot. Don't wait until town meeting to read your report, but having it with you during boring portions of the meeting may actually provide some entertainment.

Most importantly, the report gives you a reference tool for finding answers from town officials. Asking what something means, culling out a number that seems excessive or too conservative, you can cite authority if you have your report with you at town meeting.

How to Get a Copy of the Report

Getting a copy of the town report may take a little work. The law requires towns to make them available to every voter. Some mail them directly to each home. Others expect the voter to stop by the town office in order to get a copy or to call to get one by mail. But don't let town meeting come with you having to read the report at the meeting itself. It just won't be the same. You need to know what the warning says before you vote those articles. You need to know the financial background in order to understand what the officials are asking of you.

Remember, town meeting belongs to the voters who participate; the articles are really only proposals. Too often, voters feel compelled to accept the recommendations of local officials without question, confusing loyalty to the town with acquiescence to the wishes of local officials. The two aren't the same thing at all. Town meeting is the one place in the world where the voter decides directly how much money to pay out for government. It isn't the place to punish all government for its sins; that wouldn't be fair. But if voters don't turn out on the first Tuesday of March, insist on answers, and exercise their authority, we might as well give up on the idea of democracy altogether.

Why Organize a Town Meeting Campaign on Genetic Engineering?

By: Ben Grosscup, Institute for Social Ecology, March, 2002

This March, citizens in at least 31 Vermont towns are bringing resolutions to their town meetings against genetic engineering. Why would people focus on organizing in their town meetings instead of the state legislature, congress, or other state and federal institutions? They are upset that the federal government has not meaningfully addressed the pressing issues related to genetic engineering. As biotech corporate executives and FDA officials pass back and forth through Washington's "revolving door," and politicians are bought and paid for by the biotechnology industry, hope of reforming the government to better respond to these issues is becoming increasingly misplaced.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which is the federal agency charged with regulating genetic engineering in the food supply, has proclaimed that corporations marketing genetically engineered foods can "voluntarily" label their products. The FDA has refused to require that corporations label their new products, despite the fact that safety testing on genetic engineering has been based on faulty science. Not surprisingly, corporations have kept people uninformed about the potentially dangerous foods they are putting in the food supply. We work in our towns partly because other means of addressing pressing issues have been taken away from us by agencies we believe no longer protect the public interest.

In Vermont and other parts of New England, citizens have an unusual opportunity to exercise political power on a local level. Every year, in every town in Vermont except the larger cities, citizens gather to make decisions about their towns in an unusually open and democratic forum.

In the recent past, citizens in Vermont have entered this vestigial form of direct democracy by organizing multi-town campaigns to adopt resolutions at their town meetings. In the early 1980s, over 200 Vermont towns participated in the Nuclear Freeze Campaign, some declaring their towns' nuclear-free zones. More recently, many towns passed livable wage resolutions, helping pressure the Vermont legislature to take action in support of livable wages for working families. State law mandates that resolutions brought forward by 5 percent of a town's registered voters must be included in the town meeting agenda, known as the "warning."

Town meeting campaigns can empower communities to make decisions based on the greater good of society and the environment, instead of narrow directives from the powerful few. One of the many ways we can cultivate this process of community empowerment is to decide with our neighbors how to address dangers to our food safety, ecological integrity, and community autonomy posed by genetic engineering. When citizens gather together like this, we begin reclaiming the freedom to govern ourselves, which the biotechnology industry, the federal government, and international trade-regulators like the World Trade Organization are trying to make us forget ever existed.

These efforts reflect our very highest aspirations for the good society, where people would discuss issues with their communities and make ethical and rational decisions. This is an educational process that teaches us that we are fully capable of making important decisions about our communities and our world, and it expands our wisdom to make good decisions.

However, exercising our right to make decisions about our communities often creates a conflict with the powers that be. This conflict can potentially expose and even transform the underlying power relationships between the town and the state. It poses an ethical question about who should make what kinds of decisions: Should decisions about our food system be left up to the faceless commercial marketplace, which is already largely defined by the world's largest corporations and pliant and federal bureaucracies? Or, should citizens who are directly affected by these decisions make these decisions with their communities?

Our message is about ethics and democracy. We don't just want power to make *any* decisions. We want to be empowered to make good decisions. Good decisions help us meet human needs, expand opportunities for each person to explore her/his own potential, and protect and promote ecological integrity. The Town Meeting Campaign against genetic engineering is not only about genetic engineering. Implicitly, it's also about how our society should make decisions about all the issues that affect us.

Ben Grosscup (stokingthefires@riseup.net) is a student intern at the Institute For Social Ecology Biotechnology Project

* On March 4 and 5, 2002, citizens in 28 towns passed resolutions at their town meetings in opposition to genetic engineering (GE). The campaign has been organized by citizens in towns all over Vermont with the underlying message that citizens in their communities should have the freedom to make decisions about their food system.

Trouble in the Vermont Hills

By: Frank M. Bryan

Newsweek- March 5, 1984, reprinted with permission

What ever happened to the art of letting things be?

For three centuries now, New Englanders have preserved the commandments of democracy by assembling as free citizens in town meetings. In these open gatherings the public good is still fashioned to the tune of unrestricted debate, the air charged with face-to-face political conflict.

Decisions are made on the spot. Kindergartens are created (or denied). Roads are paved (or abandoned). Funds are appropriated to “observe” Memorial Day or fix a town truck. Revenue-sharing funds are distributed. The tax rate is fixed. The people go home. Pure democracy.

Touchstone: Now all that is changing. The town meeting is under attack and we are in danger of snuffing out our only living touchstone to the principles that have maintained the Republic since its birth. The problem is town meetings got noticed.

The hill country of Vermont, with its more than 200 small towns, is the natural habitat of town meeting. “There is no more Yankee than Polynesian in me,” said historian Bernard De Voto, “but when I got Vermont I feel like I’m traveling toward my own place.” Roots. Vermont exudes them like sap from a March sugar maple. Part of the sweetness is small-town democracy, “up close and personal.” Perhaps that is why town meeting drifted back into the consciousness of a nostalgic nation in the 1970s.

Trouble started when some towns voted to impeach Richard Nixon before anyone else did. Suddenly the glare of network-television lights was fixed on little places like Thetford, with its 1,422 residents and 945 registered voters. Nixon fell. Town meetings started to teeter.

The lesson was clear: “When town meetings talk, people listen.” Soon, special-interest groups began to pounce on them like wolves on a downed caribou, feeding their biases on the remains of pure democracy. Ordinances to ban abortions and to stop trucks carrying nuclear waste, proclamations calling for an end to federal budget deficits or aid to El Salvador cropped up on town meeting agendas (called “warnings”). Stop acid rain. End the nuclear arms race. No matter that when passed none had the force of law. The point was publicity, not policymaking. Slowly, an insidious proposition began to surface: town meetings are not governments; they are public hearings and public—opinion polls.

The national media led the way, referring to public gatherings anywhere as “town meetings”. Steelworkers met to lament the closing of a plant. It was called a town meeting. Farmers came together in the Midwest to protest agriculture policy. It was called a town meeting. The worst offender was Jimmy Carter, who staged “town meetings” all over the world, from Mississippi to Japan.

For Vermonters and their neighbors in Maine and New Hampshire, the attention was more than a little flattering. In 1982 more than 150 towns in Vermont alone passed nuclear-freeze votes and we were showered with praise. Our local institution has been sanctified, our homespun wisdom held high, our good sense exalted.

But there is another feeling afoot, like the one you get watching a small farm being auctioned off for a summer home. It may be only some primeval paranoia caused by the clash of cultures. The uneasiness grows, however, when a leader of the freeze movement says that town meeting is a “tremendous public relations gimmick” or when a member of the Vermont Public Interest Research Group says they “worked town meeting for all it was worth.”

New Englanders do not attend town meetings to huff and puff over the world’s great issues. They attend town meetings to get things done. To *close* on issues; to go home with the knowledge that, for better or worse, the town’s business was taken care of. And what a special privilege that is-- to build law yourself! Local matters are the lifeblood of town meeting. Yet even Vermont’s leaders are apt to get it wrong. Commenting on the use of town meetings for the nuclear debate, some of them said, “That’s what town meeting is all about.” No, that is not what it is all about. Town meeting is about citizens doing things for themselves. It is about leash laws and lunch programs, a new selectman, raising taxes. Town meeting is a hot meal with neighbors, squeaking chairs, shuffling feet. It is the pulse of political life within a town, for a town, by a town.

Town meetings have dealt with the “big” issues in the past. History shows that actions by the towns in New England forced Jefferson himself to jettison the Embargo Act. Later, several Vermont towns openly defied Congress and refused to obey the Fugitive Slave Act. But it is one thing for a strong and boisterous institution to speak crisply to a national audience. It is another to decry evil from a posture of weakness.

Thus the growing habit of using town meeting to promote national issues catches it at a bad time. In recent decades the towns have been losing power to the state. At this moment, for instance, the Vermont legislature is considering a bill to mandate kindergartens in the towns. If this happens, another issue that has caused lively debate in town meeting will bite the dust--one less item to make real decisions about. One less opportunity to govern oneself. The words of Edmund Burke are instructive: “The true danger is when liberty is nibbled away, for expedients and by parts.”

Video Madness: What kind of logic suggests that communities that must be told how to bury their garbage or educate their kids are capable of advising presidents of foreign policy? Some of us hold they can be trusted to do all three. So we distrust those who deny us the liberty to bury our garbage yet egg us on to advise on matters of diplomacy. We would like to govern ourselves locally, privately, away from the video madness of national communications systems and the manipulations of special-interest groups. Town meeting is not a hot commodity. It should not be exploited, but if the present trends continue, town meetings may become nothing more than springtime forums for those who champion whatever causes are current-- and a great national treasure will be lost.

Bryan is co-author of “Real Vermonters Don’t Milk Goats.”



Photograph by Toby Talbot

By KEVIN GODDARD

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FIRST OF ALL, let's take the capital letters out of Town Meeting. Let's forget all of that lofty stuff we've heard and read — and yes, perhaps, come to believe — about this ritual of early spring being the last bastion of grass roots democracy. That may or may not be true, but it's clear that Town Meeting — that is, town meeting — would exist in Vermont even if there were no boards of selectmen to elect, no burdensome school budgets to debate, no hapless road commissioners to badger, no town business to conduct.

Town meeting is an institution, but the formal work that occurs there is only one small part of the package. To understand the broader implications, you've got to put it in context. And the overriding context of Vermont town meeting is that it's winter.

Why else would the first Tuesday in March be embraced with such universal, almost child-like anticipation across the state? Because there are town spending plans to approve? Because there are local officials to elect? Hardly. It is that first glimpse of the light at the end of the long tunnel of winter that brings Vermonters from their homes — still booted against the cold earth and hard-handed from their stovewood — to congregate again in town halls and schoolhouses, to reacquire themselves with their friends and neighbors and celebrate the knowledge that spring, if not quite at hand, is at least part of the foreseeable future.

So town meeting has survived. It has both changed and stayed pretty much the same — providing Vermonters with an occasion to come together at the end of winter to talk about the weather, to talk about their families, to talk about their

TOWN MEETING DEBATE

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Is our most famous political institution bright and bouncy?
[👉 Or, 👈]
down for the count?

By FRANK BRYAN

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THINGS WERE GOING SMOOTHLY at the Starksboro Town Meeting. Too smoothly. One after another the usual list of out-of-town requests for small amounts of money to fund public services for the region were being approved. I was voting "aye" along with every one else when it struck me. If this keeps up, we'll be out of here by noon. Where was the debate, the skepticism Vermonters are known for?

What was needed was a little strategic cussedness.

"No," I guffed on the next item, a call for a few hundred dollars to help support a dental clinic. Several others must have sensed the danger of creeping benevolence along with me and voted no, too. The "yea" forces, lulled by success, had managed only a perfunctory murmur and the moderator called for a standing count.

Oh m'god.

Dilemma: should I retreat into cowardly silence and stare at the floor — or rise grandly and vote for tooth decay?

OH M'GOD!

"All those in favor, please stand," intoned the moderator. My wife Melissa's eyes twinkled her most delightful "now what are you going to do smarty?" as she rose (along with nearly everyone else in the hall) to cast her vote in the affirmative.

As the count went on, my mind raced ahead. There is safety in numbers. Wouldn't the moderator see that the ayes clearly had it? Why waste time with a count of "no's." I wanted to yell triumphantly, "Stop the count! Stop the count! The ayes have it!"

"All those opposed," said the moderator. Standing before my fellow townspeople for the cause of plaque, cavities, and root

other person was an older woman, her gray hair wrapped in a bun. She knitted quietly as she listened to the speakers that day, and I figured here, for sure, was a long-time Vermonter. And a certain no-vote for the nuclear freeze resolution.

I was wrong. As it turned out, young mother picked up her child and left after Brookfield's school budget passed that day. But old-time Vermont stayed on to the bitter end and helped put my central Vermont community on record in favor of an immediate halt in the production of new atomic weapons. Scores and scores of Vermont communities approved the "freeze" resolution that day, bringing national attention to the arms freeze movement. I had to figure there were some real Vermonters among the voters who sent that resounding message to the rest of the country.

Which brings us back to a central point. Town meeting *has* changed — it would be naive to argue otherwise. But what hasn't? The changes that have occurred have kept the tradition from becoming nothing more than an anachronism. They have provided the freshness and vitality town meeting needs to stay alive.

Town Meeting has changed because Vermont has changed, and Vermont has changed because Vermonters have changed. Like that elderly woman in Brookfield, some folks now believe that issues of global scope are as important to their lives in Vermont as the mechanics of their village governments.

There are others who wish it wasn't so. It is easy to be nostalgic about Vermont because much of the state appears rooted in a simpler time. Vermont is still a place of quiet evenings and quieting views, of misty hillsides, country roads and curling woodsmoke.

But the state is more than a postcard. And its people are not quite the simple-minded folk that they are frequently portrayed as being. Vermont may be — as is so often suggested — a special place, but it is neither insulated nor isolated from what occurs outside its folksy borders.

So it seems only natural that when the state's winter-weary people come together on that first Tuesday each March to talk about their homes, schools and communities, they also talk about their country and their world. It is these discussions that keep town meeting alive — without them, the institution would live on only in the history books and the museums.

Vermonters are lucky. Not only do they have a healthy concern about the future of their towns and their world, but they also have a forum to air these concerns and a vehicle to make their voices heard. It occurs early each March, about the time folks begin looking toward spring. It is distinctive, perhaps unique in Vermont. And it is called Town Meeting — with a capital T and a capital M.

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In 1958 John Guy La Plante entitled his article in the *Nation* "What Killed the Town Meeting?" and in his history of Vermont, published in 1981, Charles T. Morrissey states "Town Halls in the villages are symbols of local autonomy, but town meetings are more ritualistic than effective as instruments of government."

To us town meeting diehards, "them is fightin' words." But it does little good to bristle with indignation.

Though I am far from ready to count town meeting out, these accounts are more right than wrong, and if town meeting is to be saved, it must be done now, at the 11th hour.

Town meeting is in trouble because the town — heartland of our democracy in Vermont — is in trouble. Each season's passing has found the town with less power and the townspeople with less opportunity to decide the matters that affect their lives. It is often hard to make this point because town authority has already been lost to at least one generation's memory. So many of those who still tout the health of town meeting were simply not present when the institution was red-blooded. They have no *sense* of it. The loss of town powers is so clear that a listing is not needed. An example best illustrates the point.

About fifteen years ago a young man in Newbury wandered into town meeting during the debate over whether or not heifers (unbred replacement stock for dairy farms) should be taxed as property. He was a man of steely blue eyes, broad at the shoulders, narrow at the hips. His pickup truck was always equipped with beer, a 30-30 in the window and a bumper sticker that read: "If you outlaw guns, only outlaws will have guns." Call him Bill. He dropped out of school in the eighth grade and began to cut pulp for a living. He lived in a trailer because his parents had sold the home place to summer people

Bill worked on construction until deer season and raised heifers behind his trailer. He was a political outcast. Politics was for "them," not him.

I was the one who told Bill to sit down and listen to the debate on whether or not to tax heifers; this only to keep him quiet because he had stood next to me and was talking loudly. He listened. Then he voted. But first he went out to the parking lot and brought in three others to join him. It took awhile for the vote to be counted, but when it was, the motion not to tax heifers passed by two.

Meet Bill. Citizen. It didn't take a college professor to convince him it was important to participate in the political system. Bill saw it happen. No wait. No excuses. No promises. Just lawmaking, pure and simple. Thomas Jefferson had Bill in mind when he said that town meeting was "the wisest invention ever devised by the wit of man for the perfect exercise of self-government," primarily because it was a "school of citizenship."

A year later the towns lost their authority to decide whether or not to include heifers as property for tax purposes.

As the towns themselves have lost power, the town meeting has lost influence within the context of the town. Take the office of road commissioner, for instance. We used to elect our road commissioner on the spot. Then the state told us to vote on whether or not to have the road commissioner appointed by the selectmen. Then came the state directive that the selectmen would appoint *unless* we voted to elect. Result? Very few town meetings elect the road commissioner any more. The state simply wore them down. The office of road commissioner, a democratic institution, has been transformed into a foreman's position. The people who are judged capable by many to advise presidents on foreign policy are not deemed capable, it seems, of judging the quality of their own roads.

But there is more, much more. We have fragmented our



Photograph by Jon Gilbert Fox

Strafford Town Meeting.



communities so that town boundaries and social structure no longer mesh. We have separated our school meetings from our town meetings — to the delight of the educational establishment. We have regionalized services so that many items on town warnings are lost in a fog of misplaced accountability and responsibility. We have bundled our towns into legislative districts and then switched bundles again and again, further diminishing the notion of town as community — and thereby diminishing the wholeness of the town, socially, economically, politically.

We have instituted the Australian ballot which allows voting without participation. In some cases, it improves voting *totals*, but it always lowers town meeting attendance over time.

Despite all this, however, I still believe that town meeting can be saved. It will take a self-conscious effort by Vermont as a community to do so, however. Such an attempt must be hard-nosed and rational. But it must be based on faith.

Like it or not, Vermonters have been bequeathed a massive global responsibility. We have been left with town meeting, an institution which is, despite its critics and the cynics, the purest form of democracy on the planet. We may preserve it. Or we may let it go. The responsibility is magnified when we consider this: If we can't govern ourselves on a face-to-face, human level in Vermont, who can?

What to do? First of all we have got to reorder our public services so that community boundaries and political boundaries coincide again. Next, we have to accept the notion that democratic politics can be risky. The people may vote wrong! If we can't accept that *and live with it*, then let's hire ourselves a philosopher king and be done with it.

Then we have to give ourselves more to do at the local level. Voting on advisory items on national and state affairs is okay, if done in moderation. But we must bear in mind one key fact:

the reason people listen to Vermonters as they render their opinions on, say, nuclear disarmament, is because they think we have enough confidence in ourselves to entrust ourselves with the right to govern ourselves. That is the reason why the nation listens when Vermonters speak.

In short, we must resynchronize community and government, accept the concept of political risk, and decentralize power. Most of all, however, we must redefine the principle of progress from bigger, faster, and efficient-at-any-cost to smaller, slower, and human-at-any-cost. Progress must be measured in terms of civic *values*, not civic speed. This is no romantic hankering for yesteryear. For starters, a practical suggestion. Let us establish town meeting day as a state holiday. Combine it with Martin Luther King Day and call it Martin Luther King Democracy Day — a most appropriate act for the first state to outlaw slavery. This would help to eliminate the need for Australian ballots.

When Charles Kuralt, the media's most famous traveler of "On the Road" fame, was asked recently what his favorite town in all America was, he said he found it in Vermont on Town Meeting Day. Think about that. And think, too, about George Aiken looking out across the valley where the lights of his neighbor's houses "twinkle in friendliness, where freedom of thought and action is logical and inherent." Let us all promise not to give up on his hill farms or his town meetings too easily. And I personally shall promise never to vote "no" again unless I really mean it.



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Facts About Vermont Local Government

- There are 252 towns and cities in Vermont; 243 are towns and 9 are cities.
- Town Meeting Day often falls on the day Vermont entered the Union, March 4, 1791.
- Women were first permitted to vote at town meeting in 1918 (women were granted the right to vote in state and national elections in 1921.)
- Most towns hold an annual town meeting and a separate school district annual meeting. Some school districts hold their annual meeting in May or June instead of in March. Others hold the school meeting directly before or following the annual town meeting. The town meeting moderator who serves also as the school district moderator usually runs the school meeting. Members of the school board (the board that manages the affairs of the school district) are elected at the annual school meeting, and voters are asked to approve the school budget for the year.
- In Vermont the town government gets all of its authority -- a not-easily-summarized blend of executive, legislative, and judicial powers -- from the state government. State law tells a town what it can and cannot do. For example, towns can build roads, sidewalks and bicycle paths, towns can regulate dogs, prohibit dumping trash, and regulate the use of land in the town. Towns can create water and sewer systems, fire and police departments and public libraries.
- If a town wants to do something that is not permitted by state law it can ask the legislature to adopt or amend a **charter** for the city or town. The voters of the city or town must first adopt a proposed charter by majority vote, after which it is submitted to the legislature for approval. The charter sets out special rules or grants additional authority to that particular municipality.
- Towns are funded primarily through the **property tax**. As a citizen, the greater the value of the property you own, the more it is taxed. Businesses and corporations also pay property tax to the town, though property owned by the government, churches, and certain other kinds of not for profit organizations do not.
- In 2001 town and school meetings had to be canceled because of a terrible snowstorm. Roads were impassable and some areas of Vermont were without power. Because the law doesn't specify how a meeting can be canceled once it was warned there was widespread confusion across the state. Towns that canceled their meetings needed to re-warn the meeting for a new date.