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New Hampshire Town And City

15 Ideas for a Better Town Meeting

New Hampshire Town and City, November/December, 2018

By Stephen C. Buckley

The author of this article has attended more than 60 town meetings as town counsel from 1984 to 2018.

Many of those meetings were traditional town meetings, but, starting in 1996, most of those meetings were Senate Bill 2 (SB2) deliberative sessions. In addition, the author has lived in Bow since 1991 and has attended both the school district and town meeting each year since then. New Hampshire State Representative and Hollis Town Moderator Jim Belanger, Bow Town Moderator Peter Imse, Bow School District Moderator Jim Hatem, and Town of Richmond Select Board Chair Sandra Gillis have also generously contributed their experiences and suggestions to the content of this article.

1. What day of the week to hold the deliberative session? For those towns that have adopted RSA 39:2-a, and therefore employ the official ballot to elect officers and vote on other specified matters to be addressed by official ballot, the select board must choose another day for the second or deliberative session of the town meeting. In those towns using the SB2 method, the select board must also designate a date for the deliberative session. Holding a deliberative session on a week day after people have come home from work may cause meetings to be more contentious and less productive. Too many times when the evening deliberative session runs late a second recessed meeting must be scheduled and held. Also, many people may not arrive in time to be checked-in as voters, delaying the start of the meeting and further exacerbating the "time crunch," which is

compounded by people feeling less-than-relaxed and distracted because they must get up for work the next morning. Saturday deliberative sessions are often more relaxed and less likely to be recessed for another day, except where inclement weather ensued.

2. Pre-review of warrant by DRA and counsel. When the warrant has been prepared by the select board, but before posting, obtain review of each warrant article by town counsel and by the Department of Revenue Administration (DRA). The DRA auditor assigned to the town will review and send email comments and suggestions for correction to any proposed warrant articles. The Municipal Tax Rate Setting Portal (MTRSP) used by DRA has a feature that will allow municipalities to use the system to draft warrant articles.

3. Meeting to prepare for town meeting. Prior to town meeting, set up a time for the moderator to meet with the select board. Discuss each warrant article and write down how much time the select board expects to take on each warrant article. Write down who will make the motion to bring that article to the floor, who will second that motion, and who will explain it. Prepare a detailed script using this information and provide copies to town counsel and the town clerk so that keeping minutes is much easier.

4. Include the Budget Committee (if there is one) in the pre-meeting planning process. Find out who will bring the budget article to the floor, who will second it, and how much time is needed to present the budget. If possible, have the person presenting the budget from the budget committee make a short (under five minutes) presentation on the work undertaken by the budget committee to review and present the budget. If the budget committee members are divided on the budget, offer a majority statement and a minority statement to explain the differing opinions.

5. Consult with authors of petitioned warrant articles. Have the moderator contact anyone who submitted a petitioned warrant article and determine who will present the petitioned articles. Discuss also if presenters want to employ any overheads or PowerPoint presentations and how much time they will need to present their article.

6. Meeting space organization. Organization of the meeting space matters! Ideally, assign the moderator a separate podium with a microphone. Public officials will sit at the front of the meeting room with the select board and other town officials on one side, and the budget committee on the other side. Microphones should be available on the tables where the public officials, select board, and budget committee are sitting so that these individuals can speak and be heard easily. Depending on the size of the room and number of people likely to attend, there must be at least one standing microphone positioned in the center aisle towards the front of the meeting space, along with more standing microphones towards the rear of the meeting space as necessary.

7. Appoint persons to assist the moderator. Appoint one or more persons to assist the moderator with counting votes, monitoring presence of registered voters, and answering questions and assisting voters. Have all assistants wear brightly color vests, and have the moderator introduce the assistants at the start of the meeting.

8. Publish and distribute rules of meeting procedure. A guide for meeting procedures should be prepared and distributed to voters either in the town report or as a handout at the town meeting. Such rules should cover how to be recognized, making motions, rules of debate and decorum, the manner of presenting each warrant article, limitations on the duration of presentations, etc.

9. Identify voters and use of voting cards. At voter check-in, provide a way to identify all voters, such as using a wrist band to each voter. This will allow the moderator and assistants to ensure only registered voters are participating in the meeting. At the same time, issue to the voter a brightly-

colored card that can be used when hand voting is undertaken. Also issue a set of multi-colored “yes/no” slips of paper for ballot votes, and as each ballot vote is announced, the voters can be told which color ballot should be used for each question.

10. Use of overhead projection and PowerPoint. Preload the entire warrant as a PowerPoint presentation. Have a knowledgeable person operate a laptop to show each PowerPoint slide, and make sure that person can make changes/ amendments to each presented warrant article as necessary. Make sure the video display can be seen and read by the entire audience by staging a “dry-run” viewing of the PowerPoint presentation in the town meeting space prior to the official town meeting

11. Introduction of public officials. Have the moderator introduce all the people at the head tables: select board members, budget committee members, town clerk, town counsel, and any department heads present. Also introduce and welcome any State Senators or Representatives in the audience.

12. Introduce and have the meeting understand the rules of procedure. At the commencement of the meeting, have the moderator review the rules of procedure using a brief PowerPoint presentation. Some moderators have the town meeting adopt the rules of procedure at the commencement of the meeting to reinforce that the town meeting assembled has agreed to be bound by and follow the rules of procedure.

13. Remind the voters at the start of the meeting of the ability to restrict reconsideration. RSA40:10 is a powerful tool the meeting can use to prevent late night motions to reconsider. Ordinarily, the town meeting can vote to reconsider any article previously passed while the meeting is still in progress. RSA 40:10 permits the meeting to restrict reconsideration of any prior vote and require that any motion to reconsider an article that has been restricted shall result in the actual reconsideration taking place at an adjourned session of the meeting held seven (7) days later.

14. Allowing non-residents to speak. Some towns permit officials who are non-residents to speak, such as the town attorney, without formal vote of the meeting. Others require a vote of the meeting to allow non-residents to speak. If a vote of the meeting is required to permit certain non-residents to speak, that should be handled at the start of the meeting.

15. How to handle limiting debate. Motions to call the question or move the question require a consistent approach that balances the right to debate against prolonging the meeting. Some moderators permit all persons already standing and waiting in line to speak; others cut off debate regardless of the number of people standing and waiting to speak, provided the motion to cut off debate is adopted. Whatever approach your moderator chooses, be consistent.

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