

Town Meeting

Hamilton is governed by a unique New England institution, the Town Meeting. It is still considered one of the purest examples of democratic government. All voters present at the Annual Town Meeting act as the legislative body.

Town Meeting decides three major things:

- i It sets the salaries for the elected officials.
- i It votes to appropriate money to run the town.
- i It votes on the town's local statutes, which are called by-laws.

The Town Meeting also authorizes the borrowing of money and the issuing of notes or bonds. Hamilton's Annual Town Meeting is held the second Saturday in May. A Fall Special Town Meeting is scheduled for the third Saturday in October and additional Special Town Meetings may occur throughout the year as called by the Selectmen or by petition of 200 or 20 percent of the registered voters, whichever number is less.

A Town Meeting is both an event and an entity. As an event, it is a gathering of a town's eligible voters, and is referred to as "the Town Meeting." As an entity, it is the Legislative body for towns in Massachusetts, and is referred to simply as "Town Meeting." So you may say, "I went to the Town Meeting. Town Meeting approved the budget."

The Warrant

The Warrant for the Town Meeting is drawn up by the Selectmen and must be publicly posted in designated places at least seven days prior to the Annual Town Meeting, and fourteen days prior to a Special Town Meeting. This document announces the date, time, and place of the meeting, and lists the articles to be discussed and voted upon. The Warrant must name the date, hours, and polling place for the town elections, which follow the Annual Town Meeting. Warrant articles comprise those subjects designated by inclusion by:

- i the Board of Selectmen, whether initiated by the Selectmen or other town boards, departments or officials; or
- i petition of 10 voters for Warrant articles to be presented at Annual Meetings or petition of 10 percent or 100 registered voters, whichever number is less, for Special Town Meetings. Both require the completion of a Citizens Petition Form.

What are Articles?

Articles are items on the warrant which serve as the foundation for any Town Meeting motion. An example of an article would be a financial appropriation for a function or department or a

proposed bylaw allowing for a change in zoning. No vote may be taken at Town Meeting unless it is based on a motion that is within the scope of a warrant article.

Town Meeting Procedures

Town Meeting proceedings are governed by the rules contained in Town Meeting Time: A Handbook of Parliamentary Law except as modified by law, Town bylaws, or vote of Town Meeting.

What is the quorum for a Town Meeting?

As citizens enter the meeting place, their names and voting eligibility are verified by the Town Clerk's staff. Those not eligible to vote are seated in a separate section. Quorum for a Hamilton Town Meeting is the attendance of 75 Registered Voters.

Who's Who at Town Meeting?

Certain individuals play a prominent role at Town Meeting. The Town Moderator and the Town Clerk are on the stage of the auditorium. The Selectmen and the Finance and Advisory Committee generally sit at tables facing the audience. Town Counsel is at one of the head tables as well. The Town Constable stands near the door and works with the Town Clerk's staff who check voters in.

i The Town Moderator

The Town Moderator is elected annually. According to state law, the Moderator presides over and regulates the proceedings at Town Meetings. He decides all questions of order and questions of the propriety of motions, and makes public declaration of all "votes". Another very important task assigned the Moderator is the appointment of the members of the Town Finance and Advisory Committee, some of whom are nominated by the Selectmen.

i Town Clerk

The Town Clerk is the chief election official, custodian of the Town's records and recording secretary of the meeting. She is elected every three (3) years. During Town Meeting she records the vote on each article and consults on points of order. She also makes the arrangements for Town Meeting. Anyone who wishes to show slides or make power point presentations must consult with the Town Clerk before the meeting.

i Finance and Advisory Committee

The Hamilton Town Bylaws define in detail, the role of the five-member Finance and Advisory Committee. Generally, the Town Manager consults with the Finance Committee in the budget process. The Finance Committee makes a general report to Town Meeting and then speaks to

each warrant article explaining why they recommend or do not recommend action on a motion pursuant to the article.

i Board of Selectmen

The Board of Selectmen acts as the Executive Branch of the Town. Voters elect the Board of Selectmen, which has five members. Selectmen are authorized to call a Town Meeting provided that they have posted a warrant. They also make a general report to Town Meeting. They may or may not speak to each article, depending on the issues involved but their recommendation on each article will either be indicated on the published Warrant or a recommendation will be made at Town Meeting.

i Town Manager

Under the direction of the Board of Selectmen, the Town Manager serves as the chief fiscal and administrative staff person and is responsible for on-going project management and implementation of Selectmen policy decisions. The Town Manager prepares detailed operating and capital budgets and presents them to Town Meeting. The Town Manager supervises and directs the administration of all departments, boards, and offices and is accountable for all Town functions under the jurisdiction of the Board of Selectmen. The Town Manager also provides administrative direction and control over department heads and staff as authorized by the Selectmen.

i Town Counsel

In Hamilton, the Town Counsel is a private lawyer who is not an employee of the Town. Town Counsel oversees the preparation of the Warrant (the Town Meeting's agenda). During the Town Meeting, the Town Counsel answers legal questions that come up. She is appointed by the Town Manager as confirmed by the Selectmen.

How to Participate in Town Meeting

To address the meeting a voter should approach a microphone set up on either side of the auditorium. Once it is his or her turn, the voter should ask to be recognized by the Moderator, and state his or her name and address. The voter may discuss the question, make or amend a motion, pose a question of order, or ask for information. A voter may address the Moderator on any Warrant article. Questions are encouraged. Amendments can be offered and will be voted on individually.

The Town Moderator may require that any amendments to a motion be presented to him in writing. If you are considering making an amendment, the Moderator recommends that you speak with him in advance of Town Meeting to make sure that the proposed amendment is properly worded and falls within the scope of the Warrant article in question. After discussion on the amendment, the Moderator calls for a vote on the amendment only. If passed, the original motion as amended is voted upon. Motions or amendments which differ materially and are beyond the scope of those printed in the Warrant will be ruled out of order.

Voting

Unless otherwise provided, all motions require a majority vote to carry. All amendments to the zoning by-law require a 2/3 vote in the affirmative to carry. In Declaring the Vote the Moderator decides the sense of the meeting by a voice vote. If he is in doubt, or, if the decision is questioned, a standing vote may be called for. If seven voters question a vote, a standing vote must be taken.