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# Boxborough Town Meeting Study Committee

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## Boxborough Town Meeting May 2017

The Boxborough Town Meeting Study Committee is an ad hoc committee comprised of 5 members of the community and appointed by the Board of Selectmen on August 8, 2016. The committee's mission was to research, evaluate and recommend the best options for increasing attendance, awareness, and participation in town government and annual Town Meeting.

Members of the committee include: Susan Bak (Chair), John Fallon (Clerk), Jennifer Campbell, Jeanne Kangas and Abby Reip.

### First Steps

The committee started out by reviewing several documents including the TM survey conducted in 2005, the Report of the Boxborough Town Meeting Study Committee of 2006, population demographics from 2000 through the present and TM attendance history between 1990 and 2016. We were not surprised to learn that Boxborough's population is getting older and that attendance at TM was higher when there were controversial articles in the warrant.

### Survey

The committee undertook a new survey. The results essentially verified what we already knew:

- Survey respondents attended TM because of their:
  - Interest and commitment to the Town
  - Desire to voice their opinions
  - Need to understand what was going on in Town
- Reasons for not attending TM: lack of time or lack of interest
- Survey respondents favored a shorter Town Meeting
- 75% of respondents were opposed to moving TM to a Saturday or Sunday

### Survey respondents made several suggestions:

- Move the date of TM
- Stop the live broadcast
- Implement off-site/at home electronic voting
- Schedule two Town Meetings per year: ATM in the Spring and STM in the Fall
- Limit TM to one night
- Increase signage on southeast side of Boxborough
- Provide transportation
- Provide childcare
- Control long winded speakers

## Initiatives implemented

- Established a **Facebook page** to preview the warrant and provide additional information about TM
- **Short videos on Facebook** and the Town website featuring local residents explaining why they go to TM
- **Robo call** and **automated email** to remind voters about TM
- **Welcome letter** to new residents explaining TM
- **Notice to parents** via the
  - “Weekly Chatter” (electronic newsletter serving ABRHS and RJ Grey)
  - “Paw Print” (electronic newsletter service Blanchard)
- Town Administrator and Town Moderator taped a **“TM Preview” show for cable TV**
- **Relocated signage** to reach a broader group of residents
- **Lawn signs** strategically placed throughout the town reminding residents about Town Meeting
- **Other marketing initiatives** including:
  - Book marks distributed at the Library,
  - Notices in the Beacon and Action Unlimited

## Move the date of TM

In 1974, Town Meeting was moved from March to May because of the unpredictability of the weather, fluctuations in State Aid and the need to wait on Acton’s Town Meeting to vote the Regional School budget. Towns saw large fluctuations in State Aid making budgeting difficult. If State Aid were considerably less than budgeted, the Town would have to schedule a STM to vote a new budget. Over the years, State Aid has become more predictable with far smaller fluctuations.

Some survey respondents felt that we could increase attendance if TM were moved from May, which tends to be a busy month for end of the school year activities, graduations and weddings, to April.

***Action:** The committee and Board of Selectmen have placed a sense of the meeting article in this year’s warrant to get a perspective from a wider group of residents.*

## Stop the Live Broadcast

Some survey respondents believe that stopping the live broadcast will force residents to attend TM. However, residents who cannot attend, feel they are a part of TM when they can watch the process unfold live, from their homes.

***Recommendation:** The committee does not plan to recommend that the live broadcast be discontinued. We believe that the live broadcast allows those who are unable to attend, to feel as if they were a part of the process.*

## Off-site Electronic Voting

There is currently no legal mechanism for off-site/at home electronic voting. MGL Chapter 39 Section 10 requires that anyone who votes must be present and able to participate in the proceedings. Taking questions electronically from voters off-site/at home is currently being tested in a few towns across the Commonwealth.

## On-site Electronic Voting

Over the last 5 years many towns in Massachusetts have adopted on-site electronic voting to speed up the process of counting written ballots/standing votes. Given that Boxborough has had only one written ballot in the last decade and that standing votes go very quickly, this does not appear to have value for the Town.

***Recommendation:** The committee does not recommend exploring electronic voting.*

## Two Town Meetings every year

Some survey respondents suggested two Town Meetings every year; one in the Spring and one in the Fall. While a good idea, there are generally not enough issues that need to be addressed for a STM in the Fall. Moreover, a STM in the Fall would not necessarily increase attendance.

**Recommendation:** *The committee recommends that the Town holds STMs on an as needed basis.*

## One-Night Town Meeting

While a one night TM is certainly possible, it would be a dramatic change in the way Boxborough conducts town meetings. However, the committee has recommended the implementation of the following initiatives:

- Shorten announcements and introductions at the beginning of TM
- More articles on the consent agenda
- Continue to limit the number of Town Reports/Presentations
- Continue a time limit on Speakers
- Schedule debate and vote on controversial articles for a specific time
- Board of Selectmen/FinCom present on motions only if the recommendations of the Boards are different
- Improve quality of presentations

## Transportation

The Council on Aging currently provides transportation to and from TM. Information can be found in the Boxborough Buzz or by contacting Laura Arsenault, COA Coordinator at 978 264-1717 or [larsenault@boxborough-ma.gov](mailto:larsenault@boxborough-ma.gov).

## Childcare

Very few towns offer childcare services. To do so would require a great deal of coordination and effort to identify childcare service providers, ensuring that the individuals are trained in first aid and are CORI certified and setting up a process and system for providing the service. There is also the risk of liability to the town.

**Recommendation:** *The committee found that childcare services do not necessarily increase participation in Town Meeting. Under the circumstances, the committee has identified the A/B family network at the following link: [www.abfamily.org](http://www.abfamily.org) as a resource for childcare.*

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**Conclusion:** *With this report and the activities implemented leading up to this Town Meeting, the committee's work has come to an end and the committee is dissolved. We would like to thank the Town Administrator, Town Clerk, and Town Librarian for their support and cooperation.*

*There are always opportunities to improve the process, increase awareness and participation in town government and attendance at Town Meeting. If you have any other suggestions, please contact the Town Moderator, Town Administrator, or the Town Clerk. Thank you!*