

## TOWN MEETING FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

by Joe Larkin, Williamsburg Town Moderator

### What is Town Meeting?

Town Meeting is Williamsburg's Legislative body. It has many of the same powers the Massachusetts Legislature and Congress do, including the "power of the purse": Town Meeting must approve the town's budget each year before it can be acted upon. Town Meeting also sets elected officials' salaries, and votes on local laws, called the Town By-Laws. From time to time, we vote on other matters, too. (The Select Board and various Town departments make up our town government's executive branch.)

New England Town Meetings are renowned around the world as a rare instance of true self-government.

### Who are the members of this legislative body?

In Williamsburg, all registered voters in attendance are Town Meeting members. Paying property taxes in a town does not necessarily make one a Town Meeting member.

### Who runs Town Meeting?

The two officers of Town Meeting are the Moderator and the Town Clerk. The Moderator (elected in town elections) chairs the meeting, and the Clerk (also elected) records the minutes. As the chair, the Moderator is not focused on what the Town decides about any issue, but rather is most concerned about how it is decided.

### Who are the other people at the front of the Meeting?

Traditionally, the Select Board and Finance Committee sit at the front of the room, facing the other members. They are placed up front to honor their service to the Town and because they are often consulted about the topics discussed at Town Meeting. They have no more (and no less) authority than any other Town Meeting member.

### Who may speak at Town Meeting?

No one is required to speak at Town Meeting. Any member may address the Meeting (after being recognized by the Moderator). The regional school superintendent may also address the Meeting without special permission when we discuss school budgets. Anyone else who wishes to speak at Meeting must have the Meeting's permission. All remarks must be addressed to the Moderator, not anyone else. This helps us maintain the decorum appropriate to a legislature.

### What is discussed at Town Meeting?

Only the topics outlined on the Town Meeting Warrant can be voted upon. The Warrant (in some places called the "Warning") is developed and posted by the Select Board before the Meeting, so all voters are warned what will be voted upon. No business other than what is outlined on the Warrant can be conducted at the Meeting.

### What are the rules of Town Meeting?

Town Meeting is run according to procedural rules outlined in the manual Town Meeting Time. These rules are similar to Robert's Rules of Order, but there are some differences.

For each Article on the Warrant, one or more motions are made, may be discussed, and are voted upon. For every type of motion, the Moderator decides if the motion is within the spirit of the Warrant Article, and otherwise “in order” (follows the Town Meeting Time rules). The Moderator also uses the Town Meeting Time rules to decide which of several motions should be discussed first, and by what type of majority the motion must pass. Motions cannot be combined. Some of the more common motions are:

- Main Motion: This is the first motion made related to any Article.
- Motion to Amend: This is a motion to somehow change another motion. The Meeting only discusses amendments one at a time.
- Lay on the Table: This is a motion to delay discussion of any other motion. It is best to use “lay on the table” if you want to take up discussion later in the same Meeting.
- Postpone Indefinitely: This motion also delays discussion, but effectively “kills” another motion. Use this motion if you want never to discuss the other motion or vote on it.
- Take from the Table: This motion resumes discussion of a motion previously laid on the table.
- Call the Previous Question: This means someone wants to proceed to a vote on another motion without further discussion. When someone “calls the question”, calling the question itself must be voted upon before the other motion is voted up or down. Calling the previous question cannot be discussed.
- Question of Privilege: This motion is the rare one that may interrupt another speaker. Use this motion if you are too cold or too hot, or if you cannot hear another speaker. To make this motion, stand up and say, “I rise to a question of privilege.”
- Adjourn: This means to stop the meeting until another day or time.
- Dissolve or Adjourn Sine Die (“SIGN-EE DYE”, “without day”): This motion intends to end the meeting. Each Town Meeting is a separate entity. Once one Meeting dissolves, we would need a new Warrant to start another. On the other hand, it is usually out of order to dissolve a Meeting before every Article on the Warrant is addressed one way or another.

How do I make a motion?

Raise your hand or stand, wait to be recognized by the Moderator, and then state your motion. After you state your motion, the Moderator will usually allow you to speak first to your motion. Then others may speak about it. If you don’t know how to do what you intend, just ask the Moderator, either before the Meeting or when you stand up to speak. The Moderator’s main duty is to work with you to help you accomplish within the rules what you set out to do.

Sources: Town Meeting Time, Massachusetts Moderators Association, 2001  
Citizen’s Guide to Town Meeting, Massachusetts Secretary of the  
Commonwealth, 2008