

Town of Natick Hybrid Town Meeting Committee
Approved Meeting Minutes
January 15, 2026, 7 PM
on Zoom

Members present: Frank Foss, Grace Keeney, Patricia DeMeo, Saul Beaumont, Brinley Vickers, Larry Drolet

Also present: Jeff Alderson, Town Moderator

Absent: Josh Ostroff, Jaymin Patel, Randy Brewer

1. Call to order – roll call

The Chair called the meeting to order at 7:03 PM followed by a roll call of members.

2. Citizen’s Concerns

- No members of the public were present and seeking to be recognized.

3. Follow-up & Discussion of new information regarding Committee charter and scope of work

a. Guest Speakers – Frank Foss, former Moderator & Jeff Alderson, Moderator continuation from 1/07/26

[The following is a copy of the questions asked and responses provided by primarily Frank, however if others spoke, their names were credited]

Interview Questions for Current/Past Town Moderators

6. Decorum, Deliberation & Equity

- What are the biggest challenges to maintaining decorum in a remote Town Meeting?
 - Frank began by sharing that decorum should not change regardless as to whether attendance is in person or virtual; we also have a set of rules that establish that decorum
 - In the virtual setting, there was a noticeable change in formality including people talking over each other
 - As this body considers a hybrid solution, there would need to be clarity around expectations of formality
 - Jeff added that as long as Members are reminded around which rules are still in effect (whether that be in a handbook or verbally read), that helps; The way we want Members to interact, engage is the same; That said, people relax their own personal expectations of themselves when home and in their own environment. Members will need to be reminded to act as if they are in the room and all that would entail.
 - Jeff added that interruptions are amplified by as many people in their own house; if there are distractions in someone’s home, that adds to it; Jeff shared that there should be an expectation of minimizing distractions and enforcing good hybrid meeting hygiene (i.e. professional background, quiet private space, secure internet connection, etc.); Members need to ensure they are in control of their own environment

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- Jeff added that a moderator has the ability to mute individuals in the room or have them ejected from the room; In a hybrid setting, that functionality also exists. Members need to be informed that if you behave inappropriately in person, they would equally be held accountable via remote (i.e. Moderator can remove and mute individuals from the remote setting)
- Saul added that as he studied this topic, this would be a great topic for us to learn best from towns that are addressing these types of situation in their hybrid settings. This should indeed be included in our draft book of rules.
- Frank agreed that watching videos is instructive however doing it is also a different experience and urge the Committee to hear directly from Moderators, Clerks and Technical resources we meet with
- Brinley referenced that this piece comes into the equity lens we will need to consider. For example, if someone goes to a coffee shop because their internet is not stable at home, we need to ensure that they are treated fairly (however other options include providing internet), so we should elaborate as we view equity
- What are the biggest challenges to equitable deliberation between in-person and remote participants?
 - Frank shared that its important for all members of the public to be able to participate and we need to consider that those who will have the opportunity to deliberate have equal opportunity to deliberate. Frank shared this was a challenge during the Covid pandemic sessions. The Moderator and Town Clerk will need to consider how to ensure all members of the public can participate
 - Frank also shared that there are Members who are well seasoned and those who are newer or not as articulate. In those instances, the Moderator needs to give some deference too so they can be on an equal standing as others. It will be important that we continue that as our Charter requires us to allow all types of individuals to participate. We should not be the ones who define who can participate but ensure people can deliberate equally and fairly
 - In a virtual world, is it equitable to give some people more help in technology especially when there are differences in types of broadband/internet or private networks with more reliability. During Frank's experiences, the team acknowledged what they had the ability to control or make changes in terms of minimum requirements.
 - Jeff added that if he was on a Zoom call with several individuals, and see someone with a choppy connection. I may unconsciously undercut their message because I am frustrated or projecting something on to their lack of access to better technology. If one person has a poor internet connection, people build a bias which impacts their ability to be effective. We should aim to have minimum connections, tell people that we don't think their connection would be good. Jeff also thinks that the Moderator should address upfront that people's opinions, debates and points of order are equal no matter if they are in person or on zoom. Just because someone is remote, lets give them the benefit of the doubt and ask all Members to be tolerant and patient with technical difficulties. He added that there is a responsibility for the moderator to ensure that is not taken away from the content of the debate
- Did remote participants have equal opportunity to be recognized and heard?

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- Frank shared no. Under the set up by the State, if someone walked into the meeting and didn't notify the Clerk 48 hours in advance, they were not authorized to participate in the meeting. For example, if someone who had interests but didn't live in the town, and had not talked to the Clerk or Moderator in advance they were not permitted to speak or debate in Town Meeting. When they did reach out, they had to state what specifically they wanted to speak to. They were not allowed to simply be able to speak to anything.
- For those that were hearing impaired or had sight challenges, technology could be a problem. For those in person had challenges with sight or hearing.
- The ideal setting is to allow anyone to walk in and be able to participate as if we were in an in person Town Meeting.
- Brinley shared she has been thinking about this as there will need to be an assistant moderator who monitors the visual experience/members. If there is someone who wants to be added to the speaking list, there needs to be a way to get that to the Moderators attention
- Jeff said that what Brinley describes, the technology platform does provide today. Most technology options have queues for both the public, and for those who request to speak and are remote. That way he can see who wants to speak. He expects to be able to monitor multiple queues of those wanting to speak from his spot on the stage, regardless of where they are attending.
- Did the hybrid format create an advantage or disadvantage certain speakers or viewpoints?
 - Frank believes there was a disadvantage. An example he shared was there were some who could get his attention via VVoter but those who were sitting in the room with me who he was not focusing on. Frank monitored the one system vs looking for those in the room, unless he was previously made aware of someone who wanted to speak. Frank believes those in person take advantage and would be called on more than those on line. During Covid, Frank did the opposite as he focused on the queues in VVoter, however mentioned that he has not seen the new types of queues available for hybrid.
 - Jeff shared that the technology has to know that if you have a point of order, that jumps the queue. He shared a lot of this can be automated. His concern is ensuring there is not a perception that those in the room have a higher advantage.
 - Larry agreed that there are people who help facilitate that.
- Are there specific requirements you are aware of in terms of a specific amount of quorum needing to be in person?
 - Frank said that our Town Meeting requires participating members and Frank interprets that as those on line and those present so if 85 members were online and 6 voting town meeting members in person, then we had a quorum. So it is a combination of both. There may be towns that had minimum standards for in person however Frank does not believe our Charter does not require it
 - Jeff said that the Charter cares about the number. If you are present and logged in as present (whether in person or zoom), then the quorum is met.
 - Brinley added that a member of the public sent in some questions that we should discuss at a future meeting
 - Jeff responded that we need to define how legally we define 'present'.

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- Frank suggested that the best process to get to an end result is the simplest. In short, keep it simple. In terms of the answer to quorum, there should not be a ratio of people in hybrid or in person. Our Charter simply states an amount of participants and we should keep it that simple.
- Frank confirmed that Paul's document will be added to next week's agenda and share with Paul that he is invited to attend.
- Saul said Lexington changed their bylaw to talk about quorum. They have 18 members, quorum is 100, but added that 90 have to be present at the physical location. When we discuss with them, we should understand why they think they need that.
- Jeff said a minimum core in person would be interesting however it is only helpful if we don't want everyone to rush to zoom.
- Frank underscored that a minimum quorum is a bad idea for two reasons - if you call a special town meeting and there is only one agenda item, you don't want to thwart that from happening. In addition, what happens if quorum is under minimum in person because everyone already voted for what they wanted and don't want to come in person anymore (i.e. people start walking out) but added it would be good to find out indeed why Lexington did that
- Brinley shared that when she spoke with Randy that the costs are very different for hybrid as opposed to just one experience. He gave the example that when we showed up for just 2 articles, it is important for us to consider cost
- Grace added that if we put a minimum in person requirement and were ever in a safety situation (i.e. blizzard outside and most did not want to travel/drive), we would be hindered by requiring some to be in person
- How were motions submitted? As we consider Hybrid, would you recommend there be a digital submission method similar to an in person written method for submitting motions and amendments; should this method be distinct for online or uniform for online and in person submissions?
 - Frank said he is all for digital submissions of motions however there is also the ability for any member to stand up and make a motion. During covid, we tried to enforce a 48 hour rule
 - Frank thinks requiring to submit in person in writing but also a digital copy is appropriate
 - That said we do need to consider how we equally get the attention of the Moderator. Frank said Carol Gloff did an excellent job monitoring the Moderator email account for motions and fed those to Frank; in a virtual world, that worked well
 - Jeff said he would want to modernize a bit - like a submission form where he could collect motions in a standard format. He was thinking about doing it in an in person meeting regardless so it could be up on the screen in seconds. He said if we do that in person and offer to remote as well, it would be equitable
 - Jeff added that the big issue of getting things in writing is to ensure everyone can see the same thing and it is visible to all members. If the technology itself had a persistent panel where everything could be seen by all members, then that would be a great equalizer. The moderator would then have to ensure what was displayed. That way we all see the same motion text vs how it was received by the moderator - those would be two separate matters (how members view submitted motions and how a member submits a motion)

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- Frank asked if Jeff has seen anything that converts speech to text in the new technology. Jeff said no. Today we don't transcribe the verbal motion as to what is on the screen. It would be better to put it back on the member and there is a button that says 'submit your motion'. What takes the most on the motion form is who you are and your precinct. A form could pre-fill that in and save time.
- Jeff said these are things we should explore whether we do hybrid or not as they would be good efficiencies
- Brinley asked that before we move on, she has been pondering true equitable access for everything vs maintaining fiscal responsibility. At some point as a group, we will need to find a way to offer a hybrid experience that is fiscally responsible without sacrificing an equitable experience.
- Frank added we all need to have an understanding of true equitable experience and fiscally responsible, and how that can mean different things to different people.
- Larry shared that he had a 90 year old neighbor who needed assistance and we need to be realistic
- Grace shared that she thinks we will be charged with presenting options that vary depending on what we are comfortable spending. For example, we could provide the best experience in the world which would come at a high cost vs a more reasonable solution at a more affordable option
- Jeff added that hybrid is a choice for the members - if a participant is not comfortable with technology, they should be empowered to come in person. If someone has a health challenge, you are welcomed to join remotely.

7. Moderator Capacity & Sustainability

- How did the remote format affect your workload, focus, and fatigue as Moderator?
 - Frank said it magnified everything. For workload, we were doing something never done before. Focus wise, he had to collect what everyone was doing and stay aligned. Fatigue is expected. As Moderator, you have to be aware of everything and constantly paying attention. The dynamics in hybrid will require more help and support as opposed to in remote it was one experience. The moving parts are the same.
 - Jeff reminded the team that Frank had assistants and if approved, Jeff could have deputy moderators who would help spot those looking to speak, those monitoring for motions, etc. He would have an assistant watching the room, another watching the queue and then Jeff just needs to pay attention to who is seeking the most attention.
 - Patricia asked about assistants and whether they are paid
 - Jeff said no, these would be assistant moderators (unpaid). Once our Special Act is approved in front of the State Legislature (voted by Town Meeting in the past), Jeff will have the ability to leverage assistants even without hybrid.
- Is moderating a remote Town Meeting sustainable over multiple sessions or years?
 - Frank said over multiple sessions, definitely sustainable and no cause to think of something to avoid hindrance to sustain from night 1 to the end
 - Jeff said that what makes it sustainable over several years is cost. If you buy technology and amortize it over years, you wouldn't reap the benefits for 1 year. But if you buy the technology and leverage for 10 years, then you have a better return on the cost.

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- Jeff also added that there has to be economies of scale for example, vendors are delivering solutions that scale to many towns. We would never want to do a custom solution. We would want to participate in what works for other towns, where the vendor understands our laws and rules.
- For sustainability, Jeff added we should think about staffing. Staff would get no money unless Town Meeting votes staff to be paid. Jeff said his biggest concern is staff for the Town Clerk's office. To do this successfully, we don't want to rely on volunteers. If we budget the amount and make it a requirement of the job in the Clerks office, then you can ensure the staff are trained and provide a consistent experience. Sustainability should think about is the staff available when you need it and that will support risk management.
- Larry added that he agreed and the requirement of staff is important
- Frank said some towns tried to do it themselves but in Natick we lean on Option Technology
- What additional support would be necessary for moderators to succeed long-term?
 - Frank commented that Jeff highlighted the additional support (i.e. staff) and that we may need some different focuses; one item that Frank said is if there are detractors, that will dampen progress; there will need to be support that Town Meeting understands this is a transition and learning experience. Change can be good but all need patience
 - Jeff said that would work well (and this Committees role) is to ensure this is a mandate for Town Meeting itself. Votes in favor of this report would show support for a successful hybrid town meeting. Even if the vote is split, you can see how people will be willing to present. He said this is manifest destiny and we need to ensure we are thorough in our review and only implement when we are good, ready and have thought through everything. We need to ensure members continue to understand if it is a fit for them or want to be trained, and those that choose not to do remote, those are still equipped and trained that those who are remote will not detract from in person.
 - Grace pondered whether our team should consider adding Norms or Guidelines that we offer town meeting (separate from policies/procedures) in terms of 'no matter how you participate, your voice will be heard, your vote will be counted'. Something for the team to consider.

8. Public Trust & Transparency

Brinley added that the public trust and transparency would be aided by some Norms/Guidelines we establish (see above note)

- How did public confidence and trust compare between in-person and remote meetings?
 - Frank said in person had a high level of trust; remote had a little less and that was due to some people not trusting the technology and/or having problems with technology that created that mistrust.
 - Larry shared that Frank did a phenomenal job facilitating remote despite any bumps
 - Frank reminded that we can't solve all problems but we can try to build as much trust and transparency as possible. If our recommendation is hybrid, we need to set the right expectations to build the trust and future transparency.
 - Jeff said this goes back to the sustainability question - we need user guides for all roles (Moderator included). If he had a guide or playbook for every assistant,

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- or Clerk staff, then each person should have a manual to ensure sustainable success. This is a strong recommendation we should include.
- Brinley said she loved the manual idea and thought we should not limit to the staff. We should consider a manual for the Town Meeting Members as well that outlines basic guidelines.
- Did livestreaming or recording change participant behavior or debate quality?
 - The team previously touched on the behavior; on debate quality, it did not feel like there was no change
 - Patricia asked about the past remote meetings and the amount of articles under consideration. Frank said the first time we did this it was a one day Saturday meeting however future sessions were over multiple nights. Consent agendas were used but not as much as was used at the first session.
- What actions most improved trust in the remote process?
 - Frank said experience. Once users got experience and were comfortable with decorum and forum, that improved trust.
 - Frank said our last zoom meeting was extremely comfortable and we will see that with hybrid where with more experience it goes better. There will likely be subtle changes as Jeff moderates a long and we did that when facilitating remotely.
 - What most improved the trust was being flexible when people were having issues and dealing with challenges in the backroom. The help desk was modified greatly from the first meetings to the later meetings as they understood the member's experiences.

9. Natick-Specific Questions (Closing)

- If Natick could only get three things right when designing a Hybrid Town Meeting, what should they be?
 - Larry and Frank said we could not answer this yet
 - Jeff said the summary in the priority and the priorities. There are so many variables and things we have to ensure we get right.
- Based on your experience, is there anything else we should consider as we recommend how Natick may adopt a hybrid Town Meeting model?
 - Frank went into the virtual experience with Diane and Karis and left no stone unturned. They kept their eyes open to changes and did not want to box themselves in.
 - Jeff shared that you will know you get a hybrid town meeting right is if all members feel that the town's business was done to their satisfaction and they felt they were as much able to participate, if not more so, than before hybrid was implemented. Number one priority is ensuring the business of the town is done.
 - Ultimately we are here to hear the articles on the warrant and move through them as efficiently as possible while following laws. If we can do that in a hybrid format, that is the bare minimum.
 - Brinley echoed Jeff's comments - user experience with trusted outcome, solid participation and equitably and fiscally responsible. Those we need to get right.

That concluded our formal list of questions. Grace asked if anyone had other questions we wanted to ensure we asked Frank and Jeff from their experience. Brinley said this proved its important for us to consolidate our questions before we interview others and having this conversation helped inspire where we need to go so we are efficient with the questions we ask.

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Frank suggested that we sit back and collect our thoughts from these questions. We should ask ourselves: 1. Do I understand what was presented and 2. Anything not asked that should have been?

Brinley asked for clarification. Frank said that in reading through the minutes, he noticed things that Jeff or Frank could have answered better. So we should think if are there other things we need to clarify but then also want to prepare for guest speakers coming in.

Saul wanted to comment that the same questions will likely come up with other representatives so we should leave it the way it is and move on.

Brinley said she didn't get a chance to submit as many questions as she wanted but for example when we do the Tech section, there will be a lot of questions she will have. She felt like adding those questions to Frank/Jeff would have been irrelevant. Saul agreed.

Frank said to send in all the questions you have - whether they are for a tech vendor vs a clerk. He reminded all to please send questions to Grace, regardless of the question.

b. Prepare for 1/21/26 guest speakers

- Frank asked the team how we want to prepare
- Should we take the questions today and modify them so that they apply to the Town Clerk? Frank shared we should get the questions in advance so they are prepared.
- Brinley asked for his fears, insecurities and needs as Town Clerk.
- Grace suggested all send questions to her no later than Sunday. Grace will consolidate and send to Diane and Andrew on Sunday so they can be prepared for Wednesday's meeting

4. SATM Article

- Frank wanted to understand what we wanted to authorize Town Meeting, for example if we want to ask the Town to change our charge or give us more money, those are the types of things we would ask. As a reminder, this has to be in by Feb. 27th.
- Grace said she does not think we need more money or to change our charge.
- Frank agreed and said the only thing we may want is the option to extend the committee's service and whether we think we will need more time.
- Larry said the biggest issue is cost and can we do that in time
- Saul asked that we recommend an extension. We could finish early but if we have an extension we have it
- Frank said this is a placeholder for us and extension would make sense.
- Frank will start on this and share at our next meeting

5. Leadership Report

a. Timeline – Below is a copy of the timeline; placeholders were added with ideal presenters for the next month

Draft Schedule and Speakers

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- **January 7th** – Interview Jeff and Frank
- **January 14th** – Review Draft Committee Report, follow up from interview/discussion, bring up draft questions for interviews and review upcoming speakers/what we want to ask them
- **January 21st** – Interview **Diane Packer/Andrew G from Natick**
- **January 28th** – Placeholder for **Brookline Moderator(s)**
- **Around February 4th** – Placeholder for **Plymouth Moderator and Clerk**
- **February 11th** – Placeholder for **Lexington Moderator and/or Clerk**
- **February 18th** - Placeholder to have **Option Technology**
- **February 25th** - Placeholder for **Meridia (Technology)**
- **TBD: March 4th** - Placeholder for **Legal Counsel (Karis)**

- **Mid February** – Finish fact finding/interviews
- **Mid February to Mid March** – Draft Report
- **February 27** – Warrant Closes
- **Mid March** – Public Meeting for input
- **Early April** – Select Board and Fin Com presentation of update?
- **April 15** – Final Report and Recommendation of additional needs (bylaw changes, policy document, or request for more time, etc.)
- **April 28** - Town Meeting Starts

6. Scheduling

- a. Future meetings
 - Brinley mentioned there are some upcoming Select Board meetings on Wednesdays and may miss future meetings if we stick to Wednesdays.
 - Frank mentioned that Fin Com will be starting up on Tuesdays and Thursdays soon
 - School Committee meets every other Monday
 - Brinley said we don't need to switch every Wednesday but Feb. 4th for sure
 - Brinley will let Frank know the least best dates so we can be flexible
- b. Speakers – topic specialists, administration, elected officials, etc.
 - January 21, 2026 - Diane Packer, former Town Clerk & Andrew Ghobrial Town Clerk
 - Frank shared that we set aside other weeks for other speakers
 - Grace will ask Brookline's Town Moderator and Former Town Moderator to join us on Wed. Jan. 28th
 - Frank suggests our next presenter be Plymouth. Diane said she knows the Town Clerk of Plymouth to see if she would be willing to come. The Town Clerk said she would love to. Frank suggests asking the Town Moderator and Town Clerk to join us at the same time.
 - Frank said after that we will want to start seeing technology vendors like Option Technology
 - Saul asked if we are limiting to those two towns or open to others. Saul said he knows of 4 other towns and asked if he should go to them individually if we don't go as a group.
 - Frank asked the team if there were other towns we want to have like Lexington as they have done their own type of thing

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- Brinley would indeed like us to meet with Lexington as a group and we should have them in before the Tech vendors
- The team agreed to have Lexington before the tech vendors
- Frank said we should be aware that Moderators/Town Clerks will soon be facing their own town meetings soon. Frank asked if there were any others that we want to talk to us or if this is enough.
- Brinley said she thinks that is good to come to the group but does not want to limit data collection. For example if Saul reaches out to others with questions, and will bring it back to the group, no problem with that however we should share information with everyone.
- Saul thinks this is the right approach as we are now setting up 3 towns and by the third we will hear everything we need to hear.
- Frank said the individuals we chose (Brookline, Plymouth and Lexington) were the early adopters and most prepared. We will get a lot of information from them.
- Frank said he will reach out to Option Technology for a February 18th meeting
- Frank asked if we wanted 2 tech vendors in one night. The team felt we would have a lot of questions and it be best to have one vendor per night.
- Saul clarified if all of our meetings would be remote or any in person. Frank said all of these can be through zoom, including the Technology meeting with Option Technology.
- Jeff said that the tech vendors can send sample technology for us to try out and Frank said he would try it out.
- Brinley suggested that when we have Karis join we ensure Josh is able to join as he is aligned with the Legal review piece.

c. RTM Representatives, Technical Representatives & Legal visitations

Brinley shared the name of a Town Clerk for Plymouth that she spoke with and wanted to ensure Diane was aware

7. Adjournment

On a motion by Saul, seconded by Patricia, the meeting was adjourned at 9:29 by a unanimous vote.

Respectfully submitted,
Grace Keeney, Vice Chair, subbing in for Clerk