

Town of Natick Hybrid Town Meeting Committee
Approved Meeting Minutes
January 22, 2026, 7:00 PM
on Zoom

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

Also present: Jeff Alderson, Town Moderator; Andrew Ghobrial, Town Clerk; Diane Packer, Retired Town Clerk

Not present: Jaymin Patel

1. Call to order – roll call

The Chair called the meeting to order at 7:11 PM followed by a roll call of members.

2. Citizen's Concerns

None.

3. Meeting Minutes

On a motion by Grace, seconded by Saul the minutes for January 7 with a technical correction were approved by a unanimous vote. On a motion by Brinley seconded by Saul the minutes for January 15 with a technical correction were approved by a unanimous vote.

4. Interviews with Town Clerks

[Note that the questions are included as a guide, and that the responses and comments occasionally covered more than one question.]

Diane noted at the start that the Virtual TM was much more work, and she raised a number of logistical concerns. We would need substantially more staff. Pages, for example would likely not work as volunteers who change from night to night. There is a continuity of live TM that we lose with the hybrid format.

I. Introducing the Hybrid Concept: Big Picture

1. What additional things would you need to do your job at a hybrid town meeting?
2. What additional things would the clerk need at a hybrid town meeting?
 - a. Diane: another screen and/or staff, as the clerk's main job is to take minutes. It would be difficult to do anything but that. The body needs to feel as if it is a valid meeting and that there is order and that we are following rules. We need policies and procedures that are not discretionary.
 - b. Andrew: funding, as we have multiple voting systems for in-person and virtual. We may have additional sessions, so would have greater costs. The Clerk's current budget could not absorb this. It could be another \$24K. In addition, security is an issue so we need a process to vet members.

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- c. Diane: Money and a comprehensive technology solution, whether in-house or outsourced
- d. Andrew: staffing so we capture minutes accurately, among other things. Someone who knows all the TM members to let them in. We could have more participation but we have to do this right and avoid risk.
- e. Grace asked about the knowledge that the Clerk would need to have to prepare. Diane said that we needed to have a sense of who was going to be where (live or remote). We need to be able to merge two systems together. Andrew referenced the various systems we would deploy and that we would need to assign one or another to people depending on how they participate.
- f. Jeff noted that there could be circumstances where people would not know in advance how they participate or plans may change. There was disagreement about the necessity of deciding in advance how a member participates. Andrew noted that Plymouth had the experience that was messy when people changed from live to remote so they gave people a deadline to decide.
- g. Frank referenced the requirement that department heads attend, and the opportunity for the public to participate. How do these concerns relate to these participants? Andrew suggests that it should apply across the board. Diane suggested that Department Heads could have more flexibility since there are fewer of them, and in any case these concerns related more to voting than speaking. Frank asked about how it worked with people doing phone participation. There was discussion about the statute allowing phone participation, and the clerks agreed it could be problematic.
- h. Frank had additional questions about how we certify votes and what the concerns would be for attesting that the votes were of TM members.
- i. Jeff asked about what kind of reporting was necessary to the AG, referencing the virtual TM from 2020. Diane noted that the requirements may be different but the same level of accuracy would likely be required.

II. Legal Authority, Risk, and Compliance

- 4. From a Clerk's standpoint, what legal risks would Natick need to mitigate if it allowed remote participation (e.g., vote validity, quorum challenges, legal compliance)?
- 5. What are your biggest concerns about going hybrid and what can we do to be sure they're met, before reporting back to the town?

III. Voter Eligibility, Identity, and Credentialing

- 6. How does the Town Clerk currently verify that a person attending Town Meeting is a registered Natick voter?

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- a. We do not currently verify beyond asking people to identify themselves. For non-residents, it is up to the body to vote approval if there is an objection.
 - b. Grace asked about the logistics of verifying that TM members are residents when they pull papers, which was addressed by the clerks.
7. What would be the Clerk's concerns about verifying voter identity and eligibility in a remote or hybrid setting?
8. Are there existing municipal or state systems that could theoretically support secure remote voter credentialing?
- a. Diane noted the state has trouble with voting software, let alone TM voting, so this was very unlikely.
9. What level of certainty or attestation would the Clerk need in order to certify that a remotely cast vote was valid?

IV. Quorum, Voting Mechanics, and Certification

10. How is quorum currently established and maintained during an in-person Town Meeting?
11. What challenges do you foresee in tracking quorum if some members are participating remotely?
12. How would hybrid participation complicate the Clerk's ability to certify vote totals and final results?
13. Would a hybrid format change the way vote recounts or challenges would be handled?
14. Which types of votes at Town Meeting (voice, standing, counted, secret ballot) would be hardest to translate into a hybrid environment?
15. From the Clerk's perspective, what standards must any remote voting technology meet to be acceptable?
- a. Grace asked about the tech needs and how the Clerks saw this challenge. Was there an interest in providing equivalent tech to everyone? Andrew thinks that the systems are generally cross-platform. Diane described a Hopkinton meeting with device voting, and where the use of a phone was problematic. This was not for hybrid or remote but in-person. Andrew will share more information.
16. How would you assess the auditability of votes in a hybrid system compared to in-person voting?

V. Records, Documentation, and Retention

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17. How would hybrid participation affect the Clerk's responsibility for maintaining the official Town Meeting record?
 - a. Andrew does not see a change with the caveat that he does not expect that we would need to report remote and in-person votes separately. Diane elaborated on how we need to ensure that votes are properly recorded when someone says their vote was not recorded. In addition, these vote totals by person are not permanent records. Only the minutes are permanent records, not vote tallies by person.
18. Would remote participation create additional requirements for recordings, roll calls, or vote documentation?
19. How long would hybrid meeting records need to be retained, and in what form?
20. When Town Meeting ends, what happens?
 - a. Clerk seeks to re-organize all papers and start on the minutes. Many minutes are based on the Pegasus recording. Zoning and bylaw articles go to the AG for approval, not financial articles. But financial articles usually require vote certification, a separate process. Then there is a spreadsheet to balance out the appropriations and check against the comptroller's numbers; this may go to the auditors too.
 - b. Frank continued to ask about how this work conflicts with other Clerk duties at the same time. Andrew noted that in the Spring it was not usually a problem, but for the Fall it would be, especially where we have November elections every other year. Diane added that we have greater concerns now with early voting.
 - c. Josh asked if the above would change with Hybrid, and it would not.
 - d. Grace asked about a transcript and Andrew agreed that a hybrid TM could have that benefit.

VI. Technology, Vendors, and Interdepartmental Coordination

21. As a Town Clerk, what are your reporting needs from a Tech company?
22. What communication and cooperation with Tech Vendor/Town Moderator do you need around staffing needs to go Hybrid?
 - a. Frank asked for an estimate for additional staff needs. Randy said Pegasus usually has 3 people and would anticipate a couple of more people with different skills sets. We might need a trained sound operator, e.g.

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- b. Andrew would anticipate several more people earning OT. The check-in people also usually leave at 8, so they would normally need to stay late and having them in the next day would be a challenge. Diane added that staff don't have to accept an OT request. This is a case where we need to know the tech needs first. Diane also observed that having a tech team from another department, e.g. the schools, could be a solution and this was done in 2020 for the virtual TM. There was further discussion about departmental budgeting.
23. What do you anticipate needing (tech, gear, staff, budget) and what questions do you have that we should be sure to ask vendors and our Moderator about these needs to run an efficient and effective hybrid Town Meeting? (What needs to be in the RFS from a Clerk perspective?)

VII. Security and Equity Considerations

24. What do you see as the biggest Security concerns and how should these be addressed?
- a. Andrew: verification that the TM member is the actual person voting. Diane added that on equity, how can we ensure fairness and ensure a quorum, and ensure that we do not deprive anyone access. Currently, we all have an equal opportunity. For in-person, child care is an issue that thwarts participation.
25. What do you see as the biggest Equity concerns, and how should these be addressed?
26. Based on your experience, which groups of residents face the greatest barriers to attending in-person Town Meeting?
- a. Diane: HTM provides more access but for some older residents it is a challenge.
27. Do you believe a hybrid format would increase participation, and what administrative challenges would come with that increase?
- a. We should always aim for increased participation.
28. How should the Clerk's office balance accessibility with the need for secure and orderly proceedings?
- a. That comes from a conversation with a tech company.
 - b. Josh asked about how we might achieve closed captioning. Randy spoke to a pending law about this, and Grace spoke to how some barriers could be removed through remote participation, while Josh noted that some barriers can also be addressed for in-person participants, e.g. closed captioning. Brinley asked if there

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were some potential changes we might see for closed captioning. Randy described some of the tech solutions that others have used, e.g. Spark Kindness and ASL, and how it may be that CC would be something that people might need to be in the front of the room to use.

VIII. Staffing, Training, and Cost Implications

29. What additional staffing or training would be required for the Clerk's office to support a hybrid Town Meeting?
30. What costs would most concern you—technology, staffing, legal review, or post-meeting verification?

IX. Timeline, Feasibility and Closing

31. Timeline - do you think a hybrid Town Meeting format is potentially doable, all tech needs in place, starting Spring of '27? Or do you think budget concerns are so big that it will be fall of '27, due to needing to go through another spring budget '27 in order to make it work?
 - a. Andrew suggested that additional funding would be needed; Diane added that this could be done in Fall 2026 through the budget article to fund Spring 2027. There was discussion about the mechanisms needed aside from funding, such as bylaws, and that would be part of our report to TM.
32. What should we ask - that we haven't?

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1. Follow-up & Discussion of new information regarding Committee charter and scope of work
 - a. Prepare for 1/28/26 guest speakers from Brookline, and 2/04/26 guest speakers from Plymouth (S. Triffletti, Moderator and K. McElreath, Town Clerk).

Brinley suggested, and Grace agreed that we would develop a list of questions for our upcoming guests from HTM communities. We will aim to get questions to Grace by Sunday.

- b. P. Griesmer correspondence

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Consensus to talk to him after we have spoken to other communities. Josh noted that Paul's letter will be incorporated into the minutes of this meeting for reference. Grace suggested that all read the correspondence for pain points we need to solve, and use that as a guide for what questions we want to ask other towns.

2. [Plymouth meeting invite](#)

- a. Members should let Frank know if you are going on 2/26 at 11 AM on Zoom.

3. [Town Report Committee Submittal](#)

- a. Josh and Frank will submit

4. [SATM Article](#)

- a. Let Frank know if you have any questions or comments, and we will vote on this before it needs to be submitted for the warrant.

5. Leadership Report – no action

6. Scheduling

- a. Future meetings
- b. Speakers – topic specialists, administration, elected officials, etc. TBD:
 - 1. January 28th – TBD Brookline Moderator(s)
 - 2. February 4th – Plymouth Moderator and Clerk
 - 3. February 11th – TBD Lexington Moderator and/or Clerk
 - 4. February 18th - TBD Option Technology
 - 5. February 25th - TBD Moderna (Technology)
 - 6. March 4th - TBD Legal Counsel (Karis North)

7. Adjournment

On a motion by Grace, seconded by Saul, the meeting was adjourned at 9:28 pm by a unanimous vote.

Respectfully submitted,

Josh Ostroff, Clerk

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Appendix: communication from Paul Griesmer

COMMENTS TO HYBRID TOWN MEETING STUDY COMMITTEE

Introduction

Thank you for your time serving on the Committee. Having a hybrid town meeting is an exciting and promising prospect to broaden participation in town government and facilitate town meeting attendance by persons not be able to attend in person for whatever reason. However, a hybrid town meeting presents a number of practical, logistical, procedural and even civil rights issues particularly with regard to first amendment rights. These comments are intended to bring matters to your attention and present ideas in support of effective and efficient hybrid town meetings.

The following points are submitted for consideration by the Hybrid Town Meeting Study Committee. I hope you will consider them as part of your process. The committee might have already identified some of these points. These comments presume a town meeting in which some attendees are in person and other attendees are on line. Unless otherwise specified, “attendees” is meant to include representative town meeting members, representatives of town agencies, town employees, and residents and taxpayers as defined in Article 2 Section 2-10 of the Town Charter. All references to Town Meeting Time mean “Town Meeting Time, A Handbook of Parliamentary Law, 4th Edition.

1. Questioning the Quorum (Point of No Quorum)

Although a Point of No Quorum is covered in Town Meeting Time in Chapter 8 Privileged Motions, page 210 of Chapter 8 Section 4 makes clear that a point of no quorum is not a motion but a question. Because it is not a motion or a vote, any attendee can raise a point of no quorum. Because it is a question, it is a matter of speech for which attendees have a right. The ability of questioning the quorum exists to protect the Representative Town Meeting (RTM) and to protect the town. Having a quorum is a necessary prerequisite in order to start considering business. Maintaining a quorum is similarly important as is the right of any attendee to question whether a quorum continues to exist.

Our charter provides that i) representatives of town agencies “have the same right to speak as a town meeting member, but shall have no right to make motions, or to vote”; ii) town employees “shall be entitled to speak, but shall have no right to make motions, or to vote”; and iii) residents and taxpayers “shall have a right to speak, but shall have no right to make motions or to vote”.

When a meeting is entirely in person, anyone can observe the quorum and raise a point of order or more technically a point of no quorum. When attendance by representative town meeting members (RTMs) at the meeting is split between in person and online venues, no one online can monitor the quorum. The size of the “Hollywood Squares” of RTMs on Zoom, prevents an online attendee from seeing all of the online attendees and from seeing all of

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the in-person attendees let alone seeing all the online and in person attendees at the same time. Although it is theoretically possible for the screen in the in-person venue to display all of the Hollywood Squares of RTMs at the front of the room if a special zoom is use only for RTMs and not other attendees, two problems result. First, when the screen is used to display motions or presentations, any such Hollywood Squares view would be lost. Second, allowing the in person attendees to monitor the RTM's on line and in the room provides the in person attendees with an advantage when everyone should have the same right to speak. Effectively, no one individual can monitor the quorum in a hybrid meeting. (The fact that no one person was able to monitor the quorum during the virtual RTM in the Covid era, does not make this inability a good practice. The Covid era was an emergency; not a recurring normal situation.

Unable to monitor the quorum, attendees are effectively precluded from the information and therefore could be argued to be precluded from the ability to exercise the free speech right of questioning the quorum. (On this or any free speech consideration, please check with town counsel. The goal in this memo is to avoid problems.)

Without some form of monitoring the quorum and reporting numbers to attendees, the ability to question the quorum is neutralized or rendered moot. Where the line exists between inability to get necessary information and violating a free speech right to question the quorum is a legal matter probably decided by a judge after someone complains. We should try to avoid this.

We could distinguish between appropriately questioning the quorum when a quorum is clearly or likely not present from questioning the quorum in a frivolous manner or worse as a precautionary matter whenever vote totals start shrinking. If for example the vote totals drop from 110 to 100 to 95, people might start preemptively questioning the quorum after seeing 95 out of concern that a quorum might not exist for the next vote. A time consuming count would have to held. If the next vote totaled 93, the quorum could be questioned again, and again and again. A quorum being fundamental to the meeting and questioning it being a matter of free speech, there is no practical way to impose a limit on questioning the quorum.

Some form of monitoring and reporting is needed both as a matter of principle to preserve the right to question the quorum and as a practical matter to avoid repeated questioning of the quorum whenever the total number of Yes votes, No votes and Abstentions gets close to the quorum and people start to guess whether a quorum still exists. One can envision the quorum being questioned multiple times in the latter part of every session of RTM. Every time the quorum is questioned , the process to check is time consuming. The questioning of the quorum does not require a second, is not debatable, is not amendable, does not require a vote and may not be reconsidered. The only thing a question of the quorum requires is a time consuming count – made more time consuming in a split or hybrid venue.

The quorum could always be questioned after a vote when the total of Yes votes, No votes and Abstentions is below the quorum requirement. However, this does nothing for the motion that was just voted and might not have been voted if someone had been able to observe the number of all RTMs in attendance. Stated differently, such a vote in an in person meeting where anyone could observe the quorum might have been prevented if someone questioned the quorum. In

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person, it is possible to know and therefore question in advance of any vote. In a hybrid meeting, this is not possible.

One solution is to have assistants counting RTMs who are on line and regularly reporting that number on a screen to the in person attendees and other assistants regularly RTMs who are in person and reporting both number to attendees on line. This would require a great deal of monitoring and is likely to break down in practice.

Another solution would be to change practice and allow the quorum to be questioned after the totals of Yes and No votes and Abstentions is shown and have it apply to the motion just voted – provided that the question is raised on a timely basis for example before the next motion is made and seconded. Otherwise, the opportunity to question regarding the previous vote is lost. This way the meeting could keep going when everyone wants to finish.

If a vote total was insufficient, that would indicate that a quorum is presumably not present. A questioning of the quorum would require a count which could demonstrate either a sufficient or insufficient number. A sufficient count would validate the vote. (Some member might not have voted or abstained but is still present.) An insufficient count would invalidate the vote.

This would require a change in the bylaws. Town Meeting Time provides that questioning the quorum does not apply to a vote already held. But then again, Town Meeting Time does not address the fundamental issue of ability to monitor a quorum in a split or hybrid meeting. A bylaw could provide that for a point of no quorum to apply to a motion just voted, the point must be raised before a new motion is introduced. Otherwise the point would apply only to pending business and the continuation of that session.

We should remember that a point of no quorum unlike a point of order or a question of privilege may not interrupt a speaker. An attendee needs to be recognized to raise a point of no quorum. Anyone questioning the quorum by interrupting a speaker under the guise of a point of order is actually out of order. (See Rank of Motions in Town Meeting Time.) This presents an issue for the Moderator who would decide that such an interruption is out of order and that the quorum has not technically been questioned. We would need to change the bylaws to allow either the quorum to be questioned by interruption or to allow the quorum to be questioned by point of order. (This might not be a bad idea regardless of a hybrid town meeting but might be more important in a hybrid meeting where it could be more difficult to seek the floor than just jumping to your feet.)

The dilemma regarding the quorum is between three choices: 1) allow votes to stand when no one had the ability or the right to question the quorum appropriately; 2) provide some form of up to date monitoring and reporting of numbers of RTM's in attendance; 3) provide some ability to question a quorum on a timely basis right after a vote is reported. The first option almost guarantees a vote occurring that would not have been taken. The second option is likely very cumbersome and likely to break down. Who is tallying, gathering and totaling information every five minutes? The third option is a change in practice that provides attendees with a substitute for not having the information to have questioned the quorum in advance of a particular vote.

2. Points of Order, Privilege and No Quorum; Other Rights to Speak

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Because points of order, privilege and no quorum are questions and not motions, these points can be raised by any attendee. With an in person only session of RTM, anyone can get the Moderator's attention to raise one of these points. In a split or hybrid meeting, the Moderator cannot reasonably observe on line and in person audiences. The Moderator will need assistants who can monitor other venues. Online attendees will need a way to get the Moderator's attention in a real time basis for these points. Assistants could be used. A point of order or privilege can interrupt a speaker. Online attendees will need a real time way to exercise this right.

Other than these points, online attendees have other rights to speak on the substance of matters including debate. The experience of the Covid online RTM provides examples of technology glitches that need to be overcome for online attendees. For example, one could request to speak but people were often cleared from this queue without being recognized. Also, in the Covid RTM situation, only online presence needed monitoring. In a hybrid meeting, both online and in person will need to be monitored. Some method of keeping the Moderator informed about each venue and those seeking the floor must be developed.

3. Security and Participation Mode for RTMs

Security seems to be important to provide that all RTMs have only one method of voting at a time. No member should be able to attend in person while someone else at home logs in under their name. If the technology for the in person and online voting systems are combined such that only one vote gets recorded for each Town Meeting member, this concern is lessened. However, if the technology only combines total from in person and online, this concern is elevated.

Establishing and maintaining the necessary security could be accomplished in several possible ways probably depending on the technology. A system of disabling the Zoom of any member who checks in in person would be an efficient way. Technology would have to exist whereby the in person check in process blocks Zoom access for that member for that session of RTM.

Other possibilities could include requiring advance selection of mode and having to stick with that mode for the entire Town Meeting. Another possibility could require the indication of the mode of participation to the Moderator 48 hours in advance of any session. Zoom accounts would be available only for those selecting the on line method.

Changes might be requested for example if someone sprains an ankle and wants to attend virtually or has car trouble or has a cold and wants to stay home. However, policing these venue switches would require effort and also a policy on which "excuses" or "reasons" are acceptable and how to document them. (This issue proved to be insolvable for all the various proposals to remove RTMs for non attendance. Every idea to provide for exceptions or excuses for non attendance ran into a free speech civil rights problem. Those concerns would apply here.)

Generating a list of members who checked in in person and comparing it to those on line before the session begins would prove difficult. People arrive late and don't always check in after the quorum has been achieved. We could provide that anyone coming in person would have to be

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handed their electronic device and their names updated on a live Google doc with the staff monitoring the Zoom kicking out anyone who is on line and in person. This would require that the electronic devices be attended for the entire session. People who want to leave and finish the session at home would be out of luck unless we have staff collecting the electronic devices and updating the Google doc when people leave.

Another possibility is to review the votes after every session and before dissolving to see if anyone voted twice. Such circumstances could automatically be grounds for reconsideration if the double votes affected the outcome. However this would require a bylaw change.

The issue of security seems to have both staffing and software implications.

4. Cameras Should Be Always On For RTMs Online and Any Other Online Speaker

With an in person only session of RTM, every attendee and every guest is observable at all times when they are in the meeting. (If they leave the hall, people can see that.) One also

knows which RTMs are there (see quorum issue). On line attendees should not be allowed to have their cameras off. After a warning, any member with a dark screen (camera off) should be kicked off the Zoom for several reasons. First, they should appear at all times just like anyone sitting in the hall. If they get up from their computer for whatever reason, the camera stays on and some staff can observe the empty screen. Second, a dark camera raises the issue of who is actually sitting at a given computer which is also used for voting. Only a duly elected or appointed representative Town Meeting member should be able to vote. There is no provision for proxy voting. Cameras need to be on and names indicated as part of the identification process. Third, a dark screen would have to be resumed as evidence of absence. (See quorum issue.) Fourth, speech is both verbal and non verbal. Allowing on line RTM's or other attendees to "hide" is something not possible for in person attendees this setting up two different categories of speech. No members might reasonably want their camera off unless they seek the floor. (RTM can be observed privately at home on Pegasus by non members.) However, any speaker must identify themselves to the public by name and precinct or address. Viewing on camera is part of the identification process. Requiring cameras to be on could be a rule or a bylaw.

5. Appearance of Attendees on In Person and Online Screens

I would ask you to consider the display of speakers. One side of this is how the in person speakers appear on Zoom and in the hall. The other side is how big the online speakers appear in the hall and on Zoom.

With an in person only meeting, everyone appears in the natural physical size. In a hybrid meeting, how large or small will an in person speaker appear on Zoom? How large or small will an online speaker appear in the hall? How large or small will an online speaker appear on Zoom? Consideration should be given to keeping the size of the appearances as reasonably close to one another as possible. Extremes such as putting a giant image of an online speaker on the entire screen in the hall (like a giant billboard in Times Square) could be viewed as dominating the room and creating a speaking advantage. Presenting in person speakers as tiny objects on the Zoom could be viewed the other way.

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An associated issue is the volume of speakers. No great or lesser degree of amplification of voices and microphones should exist.

6. Presentations on the Screen

The in person sessions of RTM have routinely displayed motions and presentations on the screen. We should try to make sure that 100% of what is on the screen in the hall can be viewed on line and vice versa. If screen displays are different, people won't be viewing the same stuff (i.e. something extra or omitted) at the same time. This is likely to lead to delays and questions if the in person vs. online viewing gets out of sync.

7. Handouts of Revised Motions

RTM has had the experience of revised motions, i.e. those not in the FinCom book, being distributed the night of town meeting session notwithstanding the general preference but not universal practice for getting revisions in advance and distributing them electronically to RTMs 48 hours in advance and also having hard copy at RTM. Generally, it has been the administration motions or wording changes to appropriations that seem exempt from the 48 hour rule. Sometimes the revisions are only available at the meeting in hard copy.

Revised motions create challenges for a hybrid town meeting. Everyone needs to have the same advance opportunity whether that advance opportunity is 48 hours or 4.8 minutes. When and if any revision is allowed within any advance time window, all members and members of the public should have the same ability to get copies (electronic or physical) at pretty much the same time. If everyone gets an advance electronic copy and convenience hard copies are available in the room, great. The issue arises when only either hard copy or electronic copy is made available. When revisions are provided only in electronic form, some on site printer capacity should be available for those in person attendees who don't use email or the website. When revisions are in hard copy only, some form of on site scanner with email capability and upload capability to the website should be used.

Some form of website access to motions and revisions should be made available to the public. We should not limit access to only those persons who signed up for email distributions. All revisions should have a date stamp on each page. If two revisions exist with the same date, the versions should be indicated on each page. We have had revised motions that do not have identifying marks or dates. The absence of these makes it impossible to know that everyone has the same text of motion.

8. Text of Amendments in Writing to the Moderator at Town Meeting

A similar issue exists for amendments made in writing to the Moderator. All amendments are motions and only RTMs can make them. However, any requirement that amendments be in writing should apply equally to in person and online RTMs. Also, in this context, amendment is meant to include brand new or substitute motions not provided in the FinCom book.

A decision needs to be made between the text of an amendment and the illustration of the amendment in redline or otherwise on the screen. We do not and should not vote the screen. It disappears and any vote needs to be preserved as part of the record of the meeting. When

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amendments are brief and tightly focused, illustrating them on the screen can work (provided everyone sees the same screen in totality). When amendments get more involved, people need to see text. Consideration should be given to a copier in the room or nearby to generate hard copies and a scanner to upload and email electronic copies.

The practice of requiring amendments 48 hours in advance or not requiring amendment 48 hours in advance has varied widely and without consistency. A strong preference for amendments 48 hours in advance does not preclude proposing an amendment after the 48 hour deadline. A Moderator decision not to allow a vote until taking time – perhaps 48 hours – to confer with legal counsel or to consider the scope of the article and the scope of the amendment also does not preclude an amendment from being proposed after the 48 hour deadline. However, allowing some amendments to be made after the 48 hour deadline and precluding others is bad practice because it creates differential rights of free speech where some have greater rights and others less. Anything less is depriving or denying or abridging a civil right.

Whatever the 48 hour advance practice is, it should apply universally. Correcting typos or other scribes errors that don't need a formal amendment but get unanimous consent are an exception. It should also apply to substitute motions for those printed in the Fin Com book or for situations where the Fin Com book has no recommendation. When the FinCom book contains a recommended positive motion, the general practice has been for the FinCom motion to be made and seconded first which makes any other motion an amendment. The more than occasional past practice of preventing the FinCom positive motion to be made so that a substitute motion can be made first should be abolished. Whoever is favored by getting this ability has a differential and greater right to speak than someone who must work by actual amendment. Sometimes the makers of substitute motions have had the ability to put something forward the same day it was prepared – 48 hours notwithstanding. The 48 hours is either a rule that applies to everyone, a strong preference the violation of which could result in the Moderator not allowing consideration of the substitute (or amendment) until a review period has occurred or is just a simple request that can be ignored. We need to treat all people the same. Otherwise, sooner or later someone will file a free speech lawsuit. Although this point applies to an in person town meeting, the hybrid meeting compounds the issue because of the different document delivery methods (hard vs. electronic).

If amendments or substitute motions are complex, intricate or involved and arrive after 48 hours, they should be subject to points of order that RTMs have not had time to consider them resulting in either i) a recess in the meeting to allow consideration or ii) a ruling that consideration that evening is out of order. Remembering that we cannot dissolve unless all articles are disposed of, a recess might be a useful tool when RTM is ready to finish. After the recess, motions can be made and voted.

9. Previous Virtual RTM Experience (Covid Era)

I urge you to review the experience of the Covid era Virtual RTM. As I recall, there were frequent interruptions with members who could not get their technology to work, had to call in votes, had to call in or text requests to speak, who were dropped from speaking queues, etc. We also

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had many members questioning whether their vote went through. This delayed progress in the session. Perhaps technology can provide a way to message each online member “You voted” so that the only people who call in are those whose message differed from their vote. I think we also had a Help Line for Technology issues. I also recall that the Moderator’s cell phone was kept on for certain issues.

The Moderator was also assisted by a number of staff and volunteers in monitoring each session. I think they were all in the same room at the high school. In any case, the Moderator will need such assistants at the in person forum. Having them on the stage or somewhere nearby to facilitate communication to/ from the Moderator and coordination with the Moderator is likely. The physical logistics and capacity for setting this up in proximity should be addressed.

I recall two types of screens that RTMs had. One was a screen for voting which provided Yes, No and Abstain. The other was Make a Motion, Request to Speak, Point of Order. I think these are good fundamental choice. A Question of Privilege and Question of No Quorum are technically different from Points of Order, I do not recommend adding buttons for these. Anyone inadvertently hitting Question of No Quorum will automatically force a time consuming count. Further, under Town Meeting Time, a Point of No Quorum cannot interrupt a speaker which implies that one must be recognized to speak in order to question the quorum. (Question of No Quorum does not require a second, is not debatable, cannot be reconsidered , etc.) I recommend that the Point of Order button be appropriate for Point of Order and Question of Privilege but not for Question of No Quorum. This might require a bylaw clarification or alternatively just an explanation at beginning of each session.

The Zoom feature of Raise Hands was not used. This might be something to consider using for certain types of votes that are hand counts. (See All Votes Electronic? Below.)

Zoom chat was either disabled or ignored. Chat should be disabled because 1) it is ‘speaking’ and interrupts a recognized speaker and 2) it can only be viewed by people in Zoom; not those in person. Having chat available creates differential right of speaking and would be an out of order interruption of a speaker. Sending someone a private text message outside of Zoom is a different matter.

10. Scrolling and Counting the Vote – Two systems Added

Town Meeting has a practice of periodically scrolling the vote to make sure everyone’s vote is recorded as they intended. Unless the results of the in person voting can be combined with the results of the online voting, RTM will need to scroll through two lists. While this does not appear to be a major issue, care should be taken to announce which list is being scrolled. Otherwise the meeting could bog down with members who voted on line not seeing their vote on the in person list calling out points of order and vice versa.

Similarly, some method needs to be established for totaling votes from the in person electronic system and the online system. Hopefully, the systems can work such that they combine by town meeting member such that only one vote can be recorded per member.

11. All Votes Electronic – No More Hand Counting, Etc?

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Our bylaws provide the methods of voting at RTM. Article 3 Section 4 states:

“Section 4 Voting

Voting by Town Meeting Members shall, at the discretion of the Moderator:

- a. utilize electronic voting technology, when available;*
- b. be by a show of hands; or*
- c. be by other means as authorized by the Moderator and approved by vote of two-thirds (2/3) of the Town Meeting members present and voting, or*
- d. be as hereinafter provided.*

On matters requiring a two-thirds vote by statute, as authorized under Section 15 of Chapter 39 of the General Laws, a count need not be taken. If the result of a vote by show of hands or any other means is in doubt, or if the result is questioned by seven (7) Town Meeting Members, the Moderator shall appoint tellers who shall count the vote by a show of hands. Upon motion affirmatively voted by two-thirds (2/3) of the Town Meeting Members present and voting, a vote shall be taken by secret ballot.”

We often use show of hands for courtesy motions (allowing a non resident to speak, waive the reading , etc.) The provisions on voting by show of hands or using tellers could be difficult in a hybrid town meeting. If “show of hands” is to be maintained, I recommend not using the “Raise Hand” feature in Zoom but instead having online members physically raise their hand in front of the camera. It is too easy for someone to leave “Raise Hand” in the “on” position and too easy for someone to not find it in time. Either way, the Moderator would need to be able to see the in person room and all the online Hollywood Squares in any situation where tellers aren’t used.

12. Consent Agendas

Consent agendas are a great tool. However, the practice has been for the Moderator to announce individually each article on the consent agenda and provide an opportunity on each article for RTMs to rise and stand to request a Hold. A Hold removes the article from the consent agenda if enough, typically 7, RTMs stand.

In a hybrid meeting, the online RTMs can’t effectively stand because standing would cause them to disappear. Some form of physical hand raising in front of the camera would seem to be an idea worth considering. An alternative would be a Hold button with an automatically count in real time and reset with the announcement of the next article could be an alternative. We might also consider allowing any in person member who physically cannot stand or who has difficulty standing to raise their hand.

13. Separate Zooms for Online RTM’s and Other Online Attendees

To facilitate monitoring of online RTMs for show of hands, cameras being on, quorum counting or other purposes, it might be a good odea to have a Zoom reserved for RTMs who will participate online and have a different Zoom for other attendees. If all attendees online are in the same Zoom meeting, the Moderator, assistants and other RTM’s might find it difficult to impossible to distinguish members from non members. Any hand count or quorum count of

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online RTMs would be difficult if they are intermingled with other attendees. The use of separate Zooms would require everything to be on the screen of each Zoom. However, separate Zoom for RTMs is conceptually no different from having only RTMs sit in specified sections of an auditorium.

Having a second Zoom for the non members who are attending online would create a further Zoom to monitor. However, representatives of town agencies, town employees, residents and taxpayers who want to attend online should be given the opportunity. The Covid era practice of requiring them to phone in should be part of a hybrid town meeting. Having to call in gives a different right to speak.

Under the charter, representatives of town agencies have the same right to speak as town meeting members. Under the charter, town employees, residents and tax payers have only the right to speak. The charter does not require their right to be the same as town meeting members. However, it can often be difficult to distinguish between a ‘representative of a town agency’ and a town employee. The charter defines Town agency as “*any board, commission, committee or other multiple member body, department, division, or office of*

the town of Natick.” The town has multiple departments and several of those departments have multiple divisions. (See DPW for example.) Further, every appointed or elected town office – even those that are for only one person such as the Building Commissioner, Deputy Town Administrator, Tree Warden, etc. are “offices”. The difficulty in distinguishing who is a representative vs. mere employee on any given night suggests that the same right should be given to all.

14. Number and Scheduling of Assistants; Infrastructure

Based on the experience of the virtual town meetings in the Covid era, a hybrid town meeting is likely to require a number of assistants who must be scheduled and trained. Infrastructure (software, screens, computers, phones, internet capacity, physical proximity, etc.) needs are likely to be similar to or greater than the virtual town meetings. The committee undoubtedly will bear from and consult with those who ran the virtual town meetings. However, I recommend detailed logistically planning and test runs before scheduling a hybrid town meeting.

15. Select Board Calling of Town Meeting

Please keep an eye on the calendar for the date by which the Select Board must call the next town meeting and the language in that notice regarding the venue i.e. Kennedy auditorium, Zoom or both. The committee and its recommendations might not be ready by the time the 2026 Spring Annual town Meeting is called. If not, you might investigate the ability of the Select Board to expand the venue with a subsequent notice. Importantly, please do not have them call a hybrid town meeting unless you are certain of the ability to pull one off. We want the first hybrid meeting to be a success.

16. Conclusion

Thank you for you time and attention. Hopefully, you can make sufficient progress on all hybrid town meeting issues that require a warrant article either for a report and/or extension to RTM

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this spring or changes to Article 3 Procedure at Town Meetings of the ByLaws or an appropriation request to fund holding of a hybrid town meeting.

Good luck and success in your efforts. I look forward to watching and learning more about the committee's work.

Sincerely,

Paul Griesmer

Town Meeting Member Precinct 7