

Town of Natick Hybrid Town Meeting Committee
Approved Meeting Minutes
January 28, 2026, 7:00 PM
on Zoom

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

Also present: Neil Wishinsky, Brookline Town Moderator; Jeff Alderson, Town Moderator

Not present: Jaymin Patel, Randy Brewer

1. Call to order – roll call

The Chair called the meeting to order at 7:04 PM followed by a roll call of members.

2. Citizen's Concerns

Jeff Alderson noted that he had been cold-emailed by a company that does voting software. He will do some research and share notes. He also connected with Dennis Roche, the schools IT director, and will follow up with him.

3. Meeting Minutes

Tabled until the next meeting.

4. Interview with Niel Wishinsky

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

**Hybrid Town Meeting Interview Questions
Brookline Town Moderator – January 28, 2026**

Neil noted that this work started in 2020 and was initiated by the former Moderator, so he was not the best suited to talk about the history. They are working through the Town's enterprise Zoom license that allows for a meeting of 500 people. They use Zoom polling for voting, which has upsides and significant downsides. For example, there is just one login so they don't support multiple packages. Another benefit is that people are familiar with Zoom, so there is less training needed, and the vendor did not need to help with training. Another benefit is that with BU as their largest taxpayer, BU provided access to their help desk and training. The Town is now self-supporting.

They have advance speaker signups and all motions are in advance, so he can structure and flow the meeting; management is much easier. It can be interesting during the Q&A session where people come to the mic. There is a Chat Monitor that helps identify the people who want to speak remotely. In a multi-day TM, people are more likely to be remote as the sessions continue. In-person usually starts at 75% in person, declines from there. The most people they have in the meeting room is 80.

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1. Purpose, Research & Legal Framework

- a. What motivated Brookline to adopt a hybrid Town Meeting?
- b. What goals were you trying to achieve through this change?
- c. How did pre-implementation research—such as surveys of Town Meeting members, residents, staff, or town leadership—influence your decisions?
- d. Can you share the warrant article or legal changes that authorized the transition?
 1. They use the state statute. Previously, they used the authority of the Health Director, but that is no longer needed. Frank asked if they followed Town Meeting Time, which they mostly do, with a few changes in the TM handbook linked here:
<https://www.brooklinema.gov/DocumentCenter/View/53109/TMM-Handbook-Nov-2024-Final?bidId=>

2. Governance, Rules & Equity Safeguards

- a. What formal rules or guidelines govern hybrid Town Meeting operations, including decorum, deliberation, recognition protocols, and moderator and clerk responsibilities?
 1. All rules are in the TM handbook with 62 pages of rules and suggestions.
- b. Were these rules created specifically for hybrid meetings or incorporated into existing rules?
 1. These predated HTM and covid, some have been adapted. Saul asked about training, and Neil described the training and orientation; his PowerPoint is here:
<https://www.brooklinema.gov/DocumentCenter/View/57651/2025-TMM-Orientation> After training they can be remote, but he urges them to start in person.
- c. How do these rules ensure equity of participation, procedural neutrality across formats, accessibility, and transparency in practice?
 1. In-person attendees all get a Google tablet, which is the biggest IT staff challenge to get that all set up. They turn it in at the end of the meeting. People at home need to advise by the day before (they can exercise some latitude), and the Clerk sends a personalized login to remote members. IT staff and Clerk's office know who is attending remotely, and that helps determine who is online, whether they have a quorum, etc.
 2. The public cannot be on zoom. They generally can't speak on zoom unless they are sponsors on an article, or have given some advance notice. The public can watch the livestream or cable.

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3. People generally don't have their cameras on unless they are voting. There were questions about validation, and that is not practical for remote participants.
4. Brinley asked about whether it was contentious to use, or not use cameras. Neil said that TM members want to know that their colleagues are paying attention. However, the Clerk has not raised this as an issue.
5. Frank asked about vote recording. The Zoom poll does not associate people with how they voted. Members don't know right away how the system recorded their vote, and members don't know how other members voted. The system does record who voted how, and the Clerk posts a spreadsheet the next morning which can be corrected until TM dissolves. The Clerk will only accept a change for a technical issue, i.e. one can't just say "I changed my mind."
6. There was discussion about the lack of visibility with Zoom. Neil wanted to look at another vendor. Staff says that it works well, and to not fix something that is not broken.
7. The google tablets were introduced when they went to hybrid. In-person participants get the tablet, remote participants use their own devices with Zoom.

3. Training, Preparation & Member Readiness

- a. What training and preparation are provided to Town Meeting members and staff for hybrid meetings, including onboarding, technology checks, and procedural guidance?
- b. Did technology vendors assist in creating training materials such as manuals or videos?
- c. How has your training approach evolved over time as you learned more about member needs and technology limitations?

4. Attendance, Quorum & Participation Transparency

- a. How do you track attendance and quorum in a hybrid setting?
- b. What visibility do members have into who is present, active, or voting?
- c. How can members question quorum, and what information is available to support that challenge?
- d. What rules govern remote versus in-person participation, including advance notice, camera requirements, or switching formats?
- e. How do these participation rules affect equity, transparency, and member engagement?
 1. Remote participants tend to speak less than people in the room.

5. Moderation, Procedure & Equitable Deliberation

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- a. How is moderation structured in a hybrid meeting, including the use of deputy moderators?
 - 1. Remote participants go through the Chat Monitor, and it is, in effect, just another mic. He seeks to take questions in the order that they approach the mic.
- b. How do you manage procedures that traditionally rely on physical cues, such as maintaining decorum or placing holds on consent agendas?
 - 1. All substantive motions must be submitted in writing 48 hours in advance. If there is a fiscal impact, that requires 8 days' notice so the FinCom can consider it. For a particular zoning article that fell apart, he allowed a motion to refer to the planning board without requiring 48 hours notice.
 - 2. Motions are all on the TM web site, and are generally not on the screen as members can find them.
 - 3. The Chat Monitor is like the host, there is not meeting-wide chat.
- c. What has worked well in ensuring equitable deliberation across in-person and remote participants?
 - 1. There was commentary about how the in-person experience is better.
 - 2. There was discussion about the myriad reasons people choose to participate remotely.
- d. Where have you needed to make adjustments or improvements?

6. Technology, Security & Reliability

- a. What technology platform supports remote participation and voting?
- b. How are members authenticated, and how is duplicate voting prevented?
- c. How is sign-in and voting security maintained throughout the meeting?
- d. What reliability, security, or equity concerns have emerged over time, and how were they addressed?
- e. What backup or redundancy systems are essential to prevent disruptions?
 - 1. They won't meet without internet, but that has not happened. They have had other issues with technology, e.g. audio quality.
 - 2. Has there been a time when people needed to be remote, e.g. snowstorm? This has not happened because they don't meet in winter, but it could happen.

7. Staffing, Procurement, Costs & Sustainability

- a. How did staffing needs change with the move to hybrid Town Meetings?
 - 1. They have 3 or 4 people checking folks in and issuing tablets. There have been issues where they lose internet briefly; IT staff upgraded the wifi in the auditorium.
 - 2. The Brookline presentation about HRTM is incorporated into these minutes for reference.
 - 3. They typically go 4-5 nights; sometimes just 2, and once 8 nights.

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4. There was discussion about whether these were full-time people. It is a mix; generally, not IT people but under their auspices. Frequently loaned from other departments.
- b. What coordination was required among the clerk, moderator, staff, and technology vendor?
- c. What did you include in your technology RFP/RFQ/RFS, and what would you change based on what you've learned?
- d. What were the startup costs and ongoing annual costs, and how is funding structured?
 1. Startup costs were \$70K, mostly tablets. May have been ARPA funds, but that is a guess.
- e. What are the primary cost drivers?
 1. Staff and hardware, not software.
- f. If costs needed to be reduced, what elements could be scaled back without undermining the integrity of the meeting?
 1. Staff could be scaled back, but there would be a penalty. Slower check in, less support on site.

8. Outcomes & Looking Ahead

- a. Prior to hybrid Town Meetings, how consistent was in-person attendance, and how representative was Town Meeting membership of the broader community?
 1. TM skews older than the Town as a whole. The population is younger, more transient as many are students, and less engaged.
 - b. Since implementing hybrid meetings, have you seen changes in participation, equity, or diversity of representation?
 - c. Do you think a hybrid format has made your Town Meeting more productive, less productive, or no significant change?
 1. Not a big change, but it has slowed things down as all votes are 45 seconds, and remote speakers need more time. They don't have consent agendas, and given their culture, there would be more time spent debating about the consent agenda than they would ever hope to save.
 2. With reference to the TM that went 8 nights, there was speculation among HRTM members about why.
 3. Neil referenced some of the differences with Lexington, which uses proprietary software.
 - d. Do you expect further changes in access, engagement, or representation over time?
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9. [Plymouth meeting invite](#)

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

10. Leadership Report – no action

11. Scheduling

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

12. 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

APPENDIX: Brookline/Neil Wishinsky Presentation to Massachusetts Moderators Association

Brookline Hybrid RTM

Massachusetts Moderators Association

Neil Wishinsky

Nov 15, 2025

Setting the Stage

- 263 Town Meeting Members
- Typically 50-75 other Active Participants
- Spring Annual TM and Fall Special TM
 - Typically lasting 2-6 nights
- Broadcast and Streamed

Technical Requirements

- Affordable and Reliable
- Security
- Needs to Support Speaker Control, Presentations, Voting
- Support requests to speak
- Ability to feed broadcast and stream
- Supportable by Town Staff

Technical Solution

- Zoom Meeting Platform
- Preconfigured Android Tablets for in person attendees
 - Mobile Device Management
 - Mass Charging Solution
- Upgrade available WIFI bandwidth in Auditorium
- Upgrade Auditorium projection

How it works

Remote Attendees

- Request Remote attendance in advance to Town Clerk
- Unique login link sent to each remote participant
- After Login sent to waiting Room
 - If on list of authorized attendees, allowed into meeting
- All attendees muted until recognized to speak
- Remote attendees communicate with Chat Monitor who is in contact with Moderator

How it works

In Person Attendees

- When checking in, receive preconfigured Android Tablet
- Log in to same meeting as remote attendees
 - Same process to enter on line meeting as remote attendees
- Tablet can be used for:
 - Voting
 - Viewing Town Meeting reports
 - Viewing presentations and remote speakers

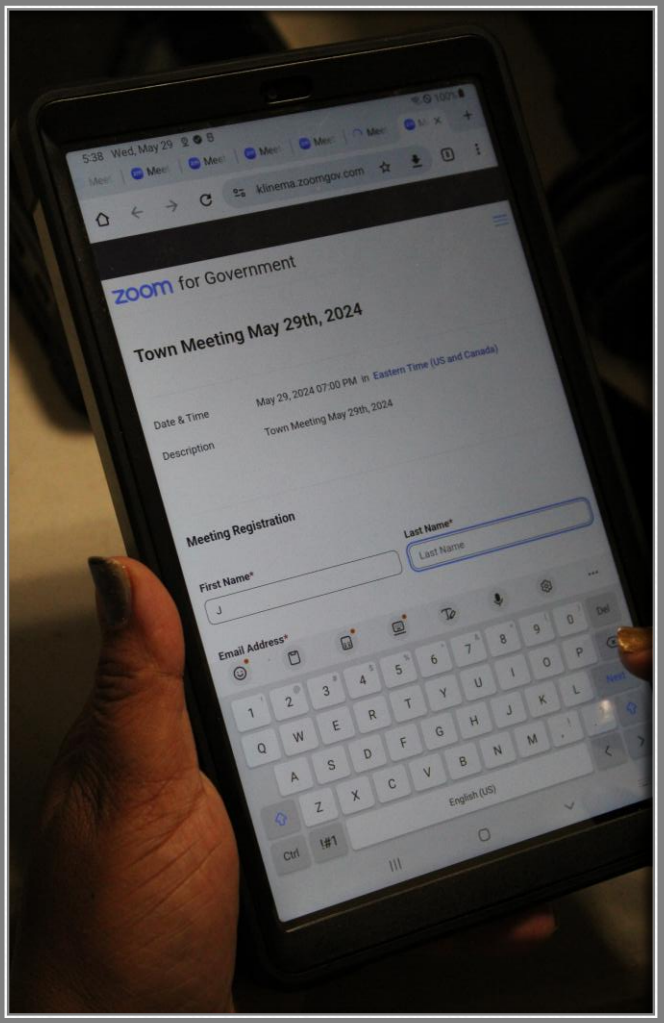
Staff Required

- 2 IT Staff on stage
 - Zoom Meeting Host, Vote Operator
- 1 Chat Monitor
- 3 IT Roving Help in Auditorium and remote attendee support
- 4 IT staff for Zoom Waiting Room Checkin
- 8 Town Clerk supplied staff
 - Distributes Tablets, Name Badges, written material
 - Needed whether or not remote attendees

In Person Check in



Tablet Login Screen



Zoom Gallery View in Auditorium



Zoom Gallery View in Auditorium (During Vote)



Lessons Learned

- Needs to be a municipal priority
 - Including broadcast and streaming partners
- Needs to be adequately staffed before and during meeting
 - Tech Support for attendees during meeting is essential
- Technical rehearsals are mandatory
 - Test and rehearse until you are confident of success
 - Broadcast and streaming partners need to be involved in rehearsal
 - Moderator involvement in rehearsals is essential

Observations

It works but....

- Remote Participants experience meeting like a Zoom Meeting
 - Lots of little squares on a screen
- Most participants have camera off except when speaking
- Moderator cannot “read” remote zoom
- Remote speaker gets no audience feedback

Observations

It works but....

- Remote speakers have no sense of what is happening away from speaker
 - Active Cable program camera is 1 square in zoom meeting
- Remote attendees seem to speak less than in person attendees
- No feedback during Voting period
 - Voting Results only
 - Cannot change vote after voting
 - Spreadsheet with individual votes available next day

Statement in all my TM Communications

“I strongly encourage all Town Meeting Members to plan on attending in person, if at all possible. Attending in person, where you can meet and interact with your fellow Town Meeting Members, is a different experience than attending via Zoom where you see the proceedings as boxes on a screen (and you are seen as a box on a screen in the auditorium.)”