

Town of Natick Hybrid Town Meeting Committee
Approved Meeting Minutes
February 18, 2026, 7:00 PM
On Zoom

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

Also present: Jeff Alderson, Town Moderator; Mark Fite (Option Technologies)

Call to order – roll call

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

Citizen's Concerns

- Frank advised that Paul Connolly had passed away and that visiting hours and a Mass were upcoming on Saturday.

Meeting Minutes

- deferred to next meeting

Follow-up & Discussion Committee charter and scope of work

- a. Guest Speakers – Option Technologies, Mark Fite

Mark Fite spoke as President of Option Technologies. They have been in business for 41 years and have a team of 17, and handle voting for conferences, associations and meetings often with thousands of people. 65%+ of what they do is electronic voting. They are the pioneer company doing Open and Representative TMs, starting with Framingham in 2010. They have a history in Natick. They work with 25 towns, including Plymouth, the first hybrid TM. After the pandemic Plymouth wanted to do Virtual.

They have 3 platforms: Natick uses Option Power, an add-in for MS PowerPoint; it has a SQL DB under the hood and is mature and robust. The Council Voting Module shows the grid of who voted how; the data is stored in a database. The data is stored in VVoter, which allows people to participate both in-person and remotely. Clickers for people in person and browser for remote.

VIP Remote is the third platform, used by larger meetings with web voting. Works for synchronous and asynchronous voting where a ballot is open for a period of time. Proxy voting is possible with that platform. One constraint is that all voting has to be with a device, not a clicker.

They have a warehouse in Natick and hope to keep working with Natick.

Questions for Option Technology

I. Experience & Product Maturity

1. How many towns do you currently provide hybrid solutions for Representative Town Meeting? **about 25**
2. Is the current version of OTI voting software similar to the VVoter software used during the Pandemic period, which had speaker queue and delayed response issues? **They have made many improvements**
3. Have any towns discontinued hybrid after implementation? If so, why? **no**

4. Can you provide references from towns similar in size and format to Natick? Yes, **Winchester eg**
5. Can you give us a brief overview before we start of how the system works? **Answered in depth – there is a lot of technical coordination to ensure the members, moderator, cable TV and all other participants are up to speed.**

We had discussion about the implementation and preparation process.

II. Overall Cost Structure & Major Drivers

5. What does a full hybrid-ready OTI setup (per night) typically cost for a town the size of Natick? **Natick has a sense of the pricing model. Hybrid model includes 2 people to ensure we have remote help. Likely 35% more than what we pay now.**
 6. Which components drive the majority of the upfront cost (hardware, software, integration, consulting, etc.)? **More of everything – likely more hardware and staff. There was discussion about the need for the support for remote users.**
 7. What is the single biggest cost driver that towns underestimate? **Adding remote participants in hybrid adds a lot of staff for the town (and the vendor). There was discussion about the setup time and labor required considering how we use a school building on a weeknight with constraints on scheduling.**
 8. What are the most common hidden or underestimated startup costs municipalities encounter? **Mapping out our technical requirements is key. With Kennedy Middle School, we may be able to embed some of the technology to save time. Randy noted that if we needed another location that could be an expense, and we may want to add some hardware to a pending NHS investment.**
 9. What are the most common causes of cost overruns in hybrid implementations? **Remote drives the cost, not the number of remote participants. It does not scale with # users.**
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III. Ongoing Costs & Scaling

10. What is the typical annual cost for licensing, support, and maintenance? **Ballpark +30-40% from current costs. If we buy tablets, that is another cost. Do a multi-year agreement, e.g. a 3 year RFP subject to annual appropriation.**
 11. How do costs scale with the number of participants and number of meeting nights?
 12. What staffing or support hours does OTI assume in its annual cost model?
 13. If Natick wanted a predictable, fixed annual cost, what would that package look like?
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IV. Cost Comparisons

14. Can you provide a cost comparison between:
 - Our current handheld voting devices and the current OTI voting software?
 - The Pandemic-period voting software and the current OTI version?
 15. What is the cost difference between full on-site support, remote support, and a mixed model?
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V. Staffing, Setup & Operational Impact

16. With the OTI hybrid setup, are there additional staff requirements compared to current in-person Town Meetings?
 17. What level of on-site staffing does OTI recommend? **It varies, but OTI and the Town will need more people.**
 18. Does hybrid setup require additional time compared to current in-person meetings? **Yes.**
 19. What training is required for Natick staff to reduce reliance on vendor personnel? **We should have a live training a week or so before TM for the benefit of staff, members, etc. and have this recorded. More training is better.**
 20. Do you have standard Video and written training modules already, or do you help us create them specifically for our users? **Yes.**
 21. What is the typical implementation timeline from contract signing to first hybrid meeting?
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VI. Hardware & Infrastructure Requirements

21. What additional hardware would Natick need to support hybrid participation? **Consider buying tablets (as Lexington and other towns have done). Purchase usually makes more sense than lease. A 5 year cycle is realistic.**
 22. How many cameras, microphones, and operator stations are typically required?
 23. What bandwidth and network reliability standards do you recommend?
 24. How long is the expected lifecycle of the hardware before replacement?
 25. How do you display votes by individual members? **That's embedded.**
 26. How do you integrate in person and remote voting tallies? **Part of the functionality.**
 27. What does the mobile phone platform look like vs the laptop or computer platform?
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VII. Security, Authentication & Audit Integrity

25. How does OTI authenticate remote voters securely? **Multi Factor Authentication is more secure but it adds a level of complexity that may be hard for some users to master. The more secure the model the more complex for users.**
 26. How do you prevent duplicate or unauthorized votes? **Through authentication.**
 27. Does the system generate a complete audit log of votes and access attempts, and can that data be exported for independent review?
 28. How does participant sign up work? And what determines how far in advance of TM to require sign up for remote or in person participation? Do you have to decide for the entire run of town meeting, or can you do nightly, with advance notice? **This is a work flow that we have to determine. Credentialling takes time as well as provisioning the hardware (i.e. stickers on clickers)**
 29. Can someone start remote and then come in person and vice versa? Start in person and then leave and stay remote? What decides this? **Yes, but there are practical issues. If everyone is on a web-based platform that helps with some logistical issues.**
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VIII. Reliability, Performance & Contingency Planning

28. What are the most common failure points during hybrid meetings? **Redundancy. They have a primary backup computers, lines etc. for all points of failure. That should be part of the RFP.**

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29. What redundancies do you recommend (backup networks, spare devices, secondary voting channels)? **Everything.**

30. What is your historical uptime during live meetings, and do you provide a Service Level Agreement (SLA)? **There was discussion about assuring uptime and redundancy given all the participants; this can be in the RFP.**

In closing, Mark commented on the citizen involvement, passion and dedication at Town Meeting and the quality of government is better here because of that. He is glad to be part of it.

Plymouth meeting invite

Scheduled for 11 AM – we will be observing this meeting. It will be posted as an HTMC meeting, but the only agenda is to observe.

Survey Discussion

Josh provided an overview of the proposal.

Grace asked about the consistency for reasons to not attend (they may not be the same for every question). Josh noted that that will be standardized across surveys.

Frank asked to make sure that the public question did not have a question about authenticating voting (i.e. the public survey asks “what are the concerns about remote participation”) – Jeff suggested we can remove “your” from “accurately registering your vote” to make it more applicable to public concerns. Frank also noted that some staff were required to be at TM.

Grace suggested that for the public survey in the question about whether people supported hybrid TM, add the option “don’t know enough to say.”

For the TM survey question about what features are important – add “other”

In the Public survey – last question can we add “don’t know enough to say”

Patricia asked about how we would get emails for surveys, which Brinley addressed and described how we would work with Jay, the Communications Director on outreach. Patricia also had concerns about people submitting multiple surveys, to which Josh noted that that had not been a concern in previous Town surveys but was also difficult to prevent. There was further discussion about outreach to the public.

Grace continued with two other suggestions – should we keep the questions about 1) who would benefit from Hybrid TM and about whether TM members experience with full remote during Covid influenced their perspective on Hybrid TM. Do these questions help us tell a story?

Brinley suggested that these were questions that help us get to “why?” to complement the work we were doing as a committee to answer the questions about “what?” – i.e. how would this be

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implemented. These questions help address concerns about equity and equitable access to participate in Town Meeting. There was further discussion about how we would use the data.

Larry asked questions about the discrete surveys and observed that we don't yet have a lot of information about cost, etc. and whether we should be fielding these surveys now before we have that information. Josh noted that this was more of an opinion survey than one that asks people to respond to facts. There was further discussion about the survey timing relative to the report being finalized, as well as the magnitude of additional cost in the broader context of town expenditures. Town Meeting members would have both the factual data in our report, and the opinion data that would indicate the likelihood of greater participation.

There was discussion about the benefits of asking about price sensitivity, and who should be asked (e.g. just ask TM members about costs) since the general public does not typically understand the details of the budget for TM and other costs, and the impracticality of having a full report and testing reaction to data such as cost. but then provide TM with a report that looks at all the data – costs and benefits. The concerns about cost will need to be addressed as part of our report.

Josh summarized the concerns and will ask for feedback later this week, and refine these for the next meeting.

Leadership Report

- Nothing to report. We will meet to map out the report timeline.

Scheduling

- Speakers – topic specialists, administration, elected officials, etc.
 1. February 25th – we don't have anyone yet. We can refine the survey. We can also begin to structure a report.
 2. March 4th - Karis North
 3. March 11th – likely Belmont
 4. March 18th – may be Burlington

Adjournment

- On a motion by Larry, seconded by Brinley the meeting was adjourned by a unanimous vote at 9:24 pm

Respectfully submitted

Josh Ostroff, Clerk