

Town of Natick - Town Governance Study Committee

Approved meeting minutes

June 1, 2023 7:00 PM

Via Zoom

Members present: Carol Gloff (Chair), Matt Brand (Vice-Chair), Josh Ostroff (Clerk), Hillary Truslow, Dan Sullivan, Michael Avitzur, Linda Wollschlager, Ex-Officio Member Sue Salamoff.
Also present: Bernie Lynch, Harriet Merkwowitz

The meeting was called to order by Chair Gloff at 7:05 PM with reference to the regulations applicable to virtual public meetings, followed by a roll call.

Public Speak

None.

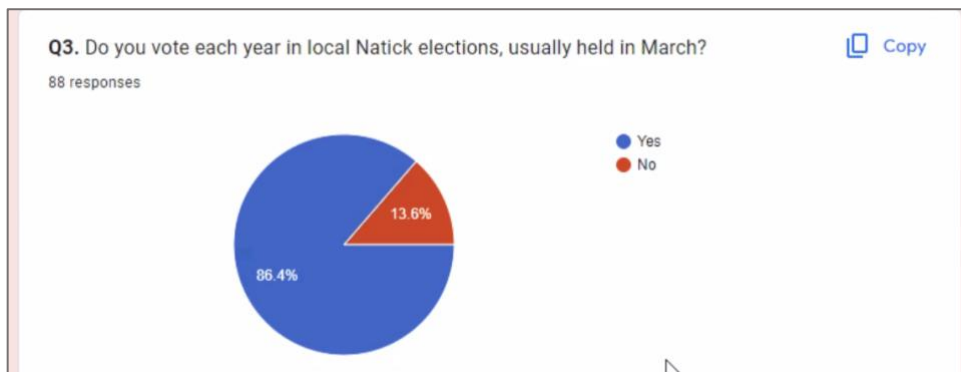
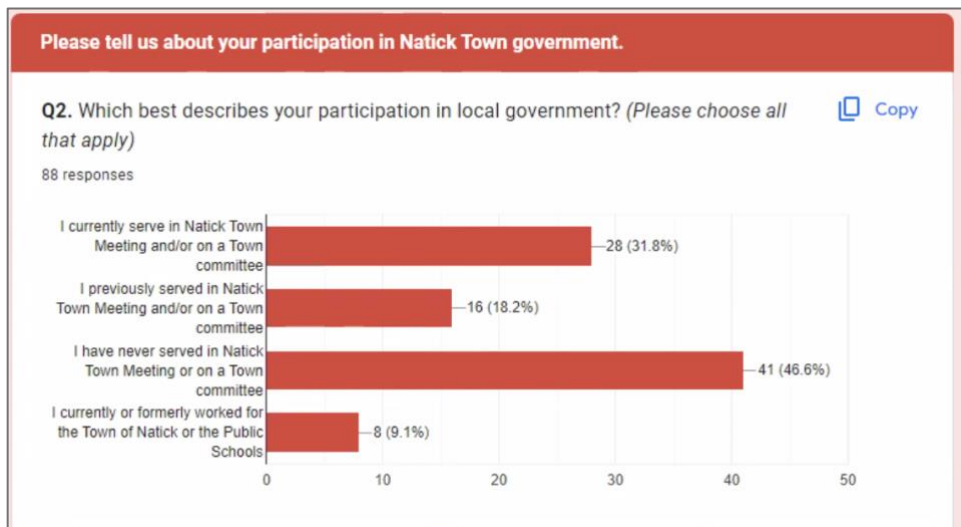
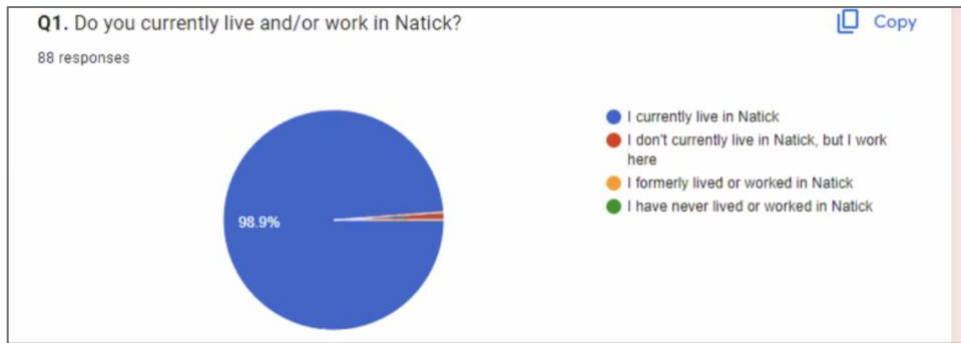
Public Survey

Michael gave an update; he and Hillary have provided some numbers. Michael shared these findings. While there were limited numbers and this was directional, many respondents were very forthcoming. Some respondents were critical of Town Meeting. Some were critical of spending and taxes. There was a mix of opinions. The numbers of people who offered specific responses were presented.

- **working well (Q6):**
 - Town Administrator/Administration (13)
 - Select Board (8)
 - Town Meeting (6)
 - legislative branch generally (3)
 - executive branch generally (9)
 - library (2)
 - DPW (2)
 - School Committee (2)
 - volunteers (2)
 - opportunities to be involved, voter participation (2)
 - [other department -- one response each (5)]
 - all or most aspects generally (4)
 - nothing or very little (9)
 - [no answer (36)]
- **not working well (Q7):**
 - Town Meeting (27)
 - legislative branch generally (4)
 - Select Board (9)
 - Town Administrator/Administration (8)
 - communications (6)
 - Planning Board (5)
 - School Committee (4)
 - [other department -- one response each (6)]
 - [no answer (21)]
- **needs to be fixed (Q10-12):**
 - power too concentrated (19)
 - inefficiency (18)
 - more participation (16)
 - better representation (9)
 - greater accountability (8)
 - more transparency (6)
 - less spending/taxation (6)
 - improved communications (5)
 - pay stipends/salaries (4)
 - inter-governmental collaboration (2)
 - Town Meeting
 - inefficient, dysfunctional (6)
 - rubber stamp (2)
 - replace (4)
 - keep (6)

Michael spoke to the survey responses and the structural and organizational things that were working well, or not working well.

Michael then shared graphics for other survey question responses.

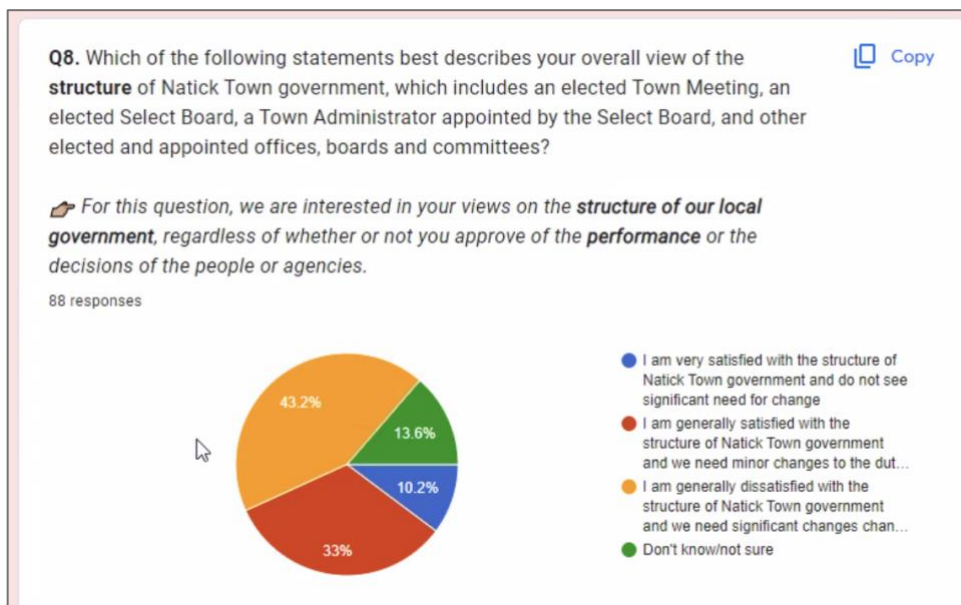
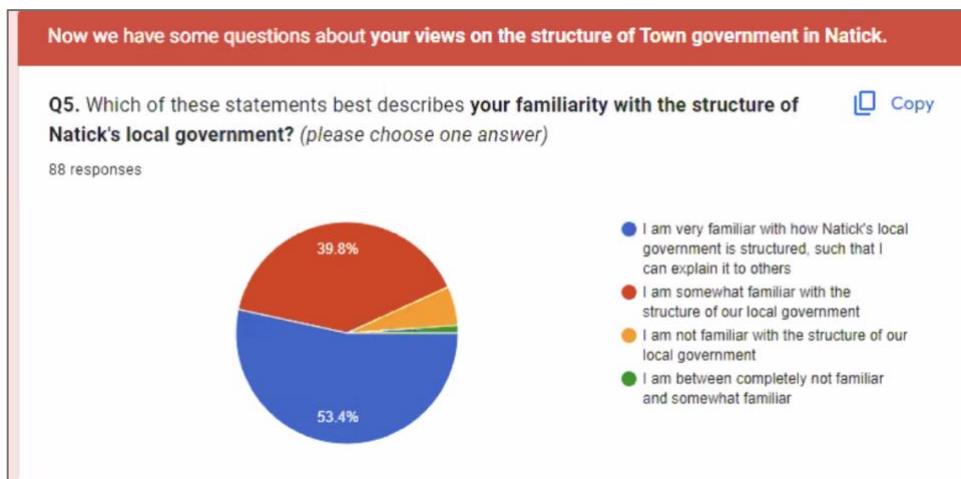
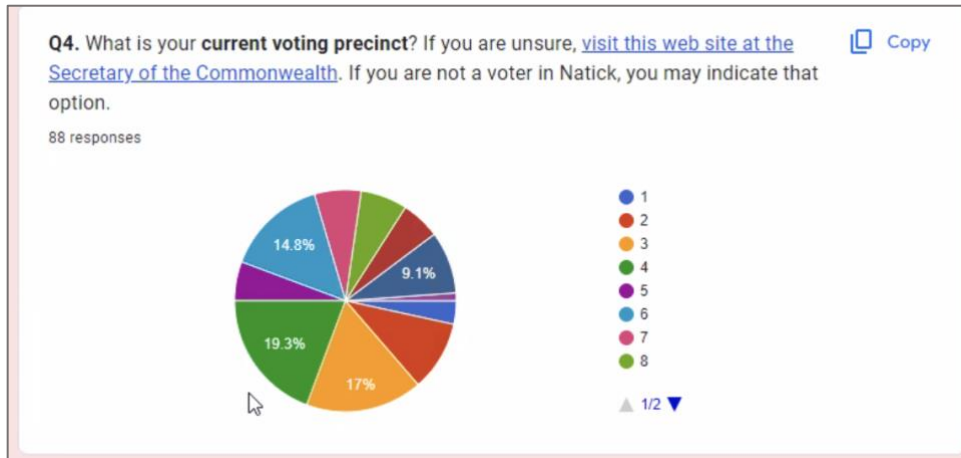


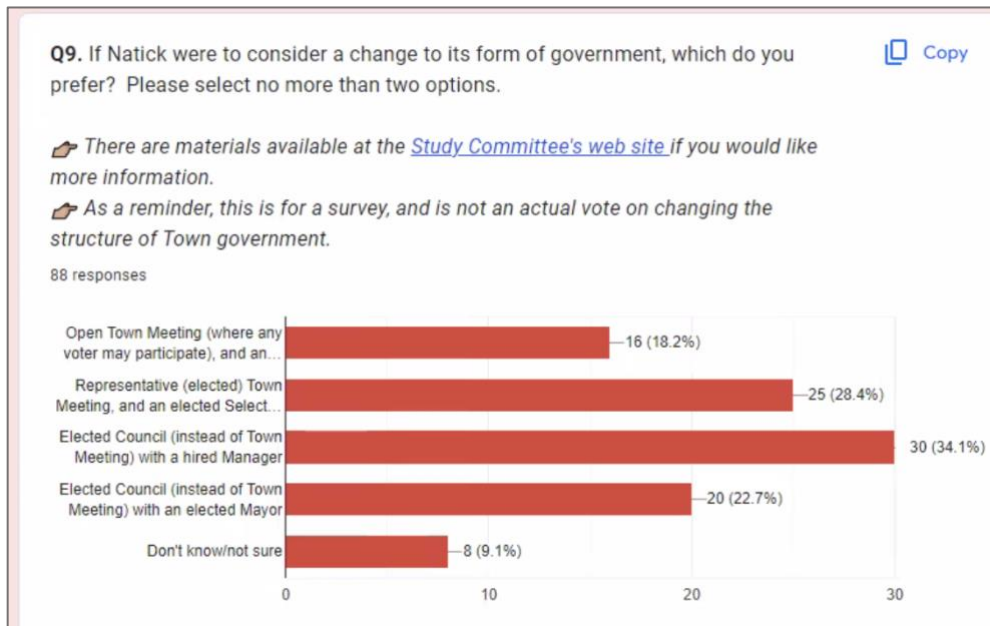
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In response to a comment from Josh noting that that this was a relatively small, self-selected sample, Michael observed that this survey was a reflection of the divergent views of Town government, but not a representative sample of public opinion. Hillary agreed.

Carol said she was struggling a bit to reconcile the responses. Most people wanted a change to a council, yet people felt that power was too concentrated. Hillary replied that we could collate some of the responses to explore this apparent contradiction.

Sue noted that there were more people that were not involved in government in this survey in comparison to the previous survey, which might explain this contradiction.

Josh offered a response to Linda's concern about concentration of power, noting that our form of government was not readily understandable to most people and from the outside, it might seem that there were decisions made out of public view. This was not something from the data, just his own observation. Michael offered the view that this might have to do just with what people perceive and not how things really were.

Bernie agreed that Town Meeting was a mystery to people who were not familiar with it. The Council form was more easily understood; people may not know who their TM reps were, but they could know who their council members were and how they voted. And some of the responses may relate to perception and not reality.

Josh asked if Michael and Hillary could prepare this for the report, and they were agreeable.

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Carol expanded on the request to ask for them to create a discrete report, excerpts of which would be in the committee's final report. They were agreeable.

Linda suggested that a similar format to other reports would make this more accessible. They were agreeable, although the questions were not all the same.

Matt joined the meeting at 7:45 PM.

Additional Issues for Discussion

Bernie noted that Natick had more appointed committees than most communities. He suggested that some kind of bylaw or policy that committees would be evaluated for their relevance and need. Building in a periodic review would help ensure accountability and necessity or if there was a need for revision.

Josh agreed with this structural review and referenced a situation with two committees with overlapping charges that needed to better work together. Linda agreed and referenced another committee that has not met for three years.

Josh suggested a motion that the Town adopt a policy or practice to require formal review of appointed, non-statutory committees to ensure that their charge and composition was still required in the view of the appointing authority. Linda suggested that this cover committees with overlapping jurisdiction. Josh will revise this and share with the committee for consideration at our next meeting.

Linda asked if we wanted to look at the Finance Committee, in part because it had been cited by respondents to the first survey. Josh thought that we were not likely to drill down to the level of specific committees but that the FinCom was a unique case because of its role with TM and the budget. Carol suggested that the size and appointing authority of the FinCom could be referenced in the report.

Matt had some concerns about this and worried about singling out this committee. After some discussion, Bernie shared that it was typical for Finance Committees to be appointed by the moderator. There were a few towns that elected the Finance Committee, or a committee by a different name but with equivalent role.

There was consensus to make recommendations in the context of the report's recommendations about Town Meeting.

Final Report

Josh went through the structure of the draft report, which reflected the input of Josh, Carol and Linda with a few suggestions from Bernie; members offered a few suggestions on areas to revise and expand, and offered to contribute specific sections

For process, we will share this draft after the meeting and ask people to individually send edits to Carol by Sunday night; she will consolidate and send it out Monday night. There was consensus for this approach

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Minutes

Minutes for May 17 with corrections were approved on a motion by Matt, seconded by Josh and unanimously voted by roll call.

On a motion by Matt, seconded by Michael, the meeting was adjourned at 8:40 pm by a unanimous roll call vote.

Respectfully Submitted,
Joshua Ostroff, Clerk