

## **Andover's Open Town Meeting - A Failing Democracy**

The members of the Town Governance Study Committee deserve our thanks for their time and efforts over the past two-plus years. They have compiled, produced, and analyzed an impressive amount of information and included it in a report of more than 150 pages. But all this time and labor has resulted in a disappointing conclusion: Andover, they decided, should not change its basic form of government - the open town meeting.

A key indicator of a healthy democracy is voter participation. Andover now has about 26,000 registered voters, and its population has grown by about 10% during the last decade. Over the past 20 years, town meeting attendance has averaged about 500-550 voters, and that number has remained constant as the town has grown. (During the past three years, attendance has been about half that number, probably due largely to the impact of the COVID pandemic.) Thus, average voter participation at town meeting has been about two percent of Andover's voters, and that proportion is gradually declining as the town grows. So 98% of voters do not attend town meeting, and therefore they have no vote on the budget and other important town decisions. Many have perfectly valid reasons for not attending, such as child care responsibilities, work or other important obligations, or reluctance to go out at night for a three-hour meeting. These citizens are effectively disenfranchised, with no vote on local matters.

Many residents find time to vote in elections, where they can choose when and how to vote. If only two percent of the town's voters showed up to cast their ballots, however, we would say that is a failing democracy. Perhaps the 98% who don't attend town meeting would prefer to elect others to represent them as the members of the legislative body, as we do at the state and federal levels and as 94% of the cities and towns across the country do.

### **Lack of a Groundswell for Change**

In June of 2020, members of the study committee were polled for their preferences for Andover's form of government. Two members stated that if the town were starting from scratch, they would support a Council-Manager form, but they said (and other members agreed) that there was no evident groundswell of public opinion demanding change. They voted to stay with open town meeting. However, with hardly any

coverage in the local press, fewer in-person meetings, and much focus instead on the Covid-19 pandemic, the small number of citizens following the committee's work dwindled even further. Moreover, before and after that June meeting, there was little public debate about this critical decision the committee had apparently already made.

While there was no obvious groundswell, there was a survey of residents in 2019 that might have provided some direction for the committee. Conducted by UMass Lowell, this survey showed considerable support for changing open town meeting. The survey's 1004 respondents included a disproportionate number (34%) of voters who regularly attend town meeting. These voters might be expected to show solid support for that form of government, but instead, nearly one-third (32%) said they thought open town meeting should be abolished!

Among those wishing to retain but reform open town meeting, 35% supported remote attendance and voting. If such a change continues to be prohibited for open town meetings by state law, how many of these respondents would shift to the "abolish town meeting" viewpoint, especially if four viable alternatives were presented as options? And wouldn't this perspective be shared by many (or most) of the 98% of voters who rarely or never attend town meeting, but would be willing instead to vote for someone to represent them?

### **A Proposal - An Advisory Question at a Well-Attended Election Vote**

To adequately assess public opinion, the Select Board should craft and submit a proposal for a home rule petition to the legislature. This petition would allow a non-binding, advisory vote that would list all four forms of municipal government: Open Town Meeting, Representative Town Meeting, Council/Manager, and Council/Mayor. Voters would be asked to rank their choices in order of preference. To maximize voter participation, this advisory question would be included on the election ballot in November, 2024 – a Presidential election that would guarantee a high voter turnout.

Over the next two years, a concerted effort would be made to encourage a vigorous public debate, drawing in voters who have had experience living in communities with other forms of government. The results would provide clear guidance to town leaders on whether to set the wheels in motion to change Andover's form of government.

- Richard T. Howe