

TOWARD A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF TOWN MEETING

Town Meeting participation demands a commitment of time, energy, effort, imagination, a sense of humor, intelligence, a dose of common sense, fair play, and a deep appreciation of self government – rare commodities, perhaps, but if they can't be found at Town Meeting, where are we to look?

WHY TOWN MEETING?

Town Meeting is the legislative and policy making body of the Town. It convenes, at least annually, at the time and place designated by the Selectmen. It considers and adopts an operating budget, and considers other matters which require Town Meeting action such as zoning changes, street acceptances, by-law additions and amendments, or any other matter which affects the Town.

TOWN MEETING PROCEDURES

Articles: All articles presented for consideration must be moved and seconded. A voter may be recognized by standing and saying “Mr. Moderator” or by raising their hand. It is also possible to notify the Moderator before the meeting that you wish to speak on a particular matter.

Budget: Questions on the budget are encouraged. A voter may address the Moderator on any item in the finance committee report. Amendments can be offered and will be voted on individually.

Amendments & Motions: Amendments should be presented to the Moderator in writing. After discussion on the amendment the Moderator calls for a vote on the amendment only. If passed the original motion as amended is voted upon. Motions to postpone consideration of an item to a later and specified point in the meeting are in order. Motions to table are used rarely.

Majority Vote: Unless otherwise provided all motions require a majority vote to carry. Some motions that require more than a majority to pass include acceptance of zoning by-law amendments (2/3 of those voting) and a transfer from the stabilization fund (2/3 of those voting).

Declaring a Vote: The Moderator may decide the sense of the meeting by a voice vote. If in doubt, or, if the decision is questioned, a standing vote may be called for. A voter may request a standing vote or a vote by secret ballot. Either the Moderator will agree to call a standing vote or a vote by secret ballot or else the Town Meeting will vote to do so.

Privileged Motions: A speaker may be interrupted only for a point of order, a question of the legality of a motion, a question to clarify information, or to question the presence of a quorum.

Previous Question, Reconsideration, and Display: Moving the previous question is a formal motion which, if passed, cuts off debate. The motion is not debatable. It is allowed by the Moderator when in his judgment the matter has been adequately discussed. Reconsideration is rarely used and only to correct an oversight or an illegality. Voters who wish to show slides or present other visual materials should make arrangements before the meeting.

Adjourn/dissolve: A meeting may adjourn to a later time and a different place, but when a meeting is dissolved it is finished. A meeting may not be dissolved until every article in the warrant has been acted upon.

The business of the meeting is contained in the warrant (warning) and includes all matters on which the Town must act. Articles are inserted in the warrant by the Board of Selectmen and by Citizen Petition. The order is determined by the Selectmen.

THE PLAYERS

The **Voters** include anyone registered to vote in the Town of Halifax. Non-residents and those residents who are not registered to vote should sit in the designated section located by the side entrance to the Multi-Purpose Room.

The **Town Moderator** presides over and conducts the meeting. The Moderator is an elected official.

The **Town Clerk** is the chief election official, custodian of the Town's records, and recording secretary of the meeting. The Town Clerk is an elected official.

The **Board of Selectmen** is an elected policy making body comprised of three (3) members. The Board of Selectmen hires the Town Administrator and compiles the warrant.

The **Finance Committee** is appointed by the Board of Selectmen, the Town Moderator, and current members of the Finance Committee. It is a seven-person committee. It reviews the budget, makes recommendations of all financial matters, prepares and distributes to all Town Meeting attendees a printed report of its recommendations and other relevant information, to assist Town Meeting in making final decisions.

The **Town Accountant** is the Town's chief financial officer and is appointed by the Board of Selectmen. The Town Accountant works with the Finance Committee and the Board of Selectmen in the preparation of the budget.

The **School Committee** is an elected five-person committee and is responsible for the operation of the educational system, the preparation of the school budget, and defines educational philosophy and policy.

The **Superintendent of Schools** is the chief executive officer for implementing school committee policy and directives.

Town Counsel is the Town's chief legal officer and is the legal advisor to the Town Meeting.

The **Planning Board** is a five-person elected board which is responsible for all subdivision and zoning by-laws. The Planning Board is required to hold a public hearing on any proposed amendment to the Town's zoning by-laws and then make a recommendation, for or against the change, to the Town Meeting.

FINANCIAL TERMS:

Abatement: A complete or partial cancellation of a levy imposed by a governmental unit; applicable to tax levies and special assessments.

Appropriation: An authorization granted by a legislative body to make expenditures and to incur obligations for specific purposes. An appropriation is usually limited in amount and time when it may be expended. Only a vote of town meeting or the school committee can authorize money appropriated for one purpose to be used for another. Any amount which is appropriated may be encumbered. Any part of the general appropriation not spent or encumbered by June 30 automatically reverts to surplus. A specific or particular appropriation is carried forward from year to year until spent for the designated purpose or transferred by town meeting vote to another account.

Assessed Valuation: The value placed upon a particular property by the local Board of Assessors for the purpose of apportioning the town's tax levy among individual property owners equitably and in accordance with the legal requirements that property be assessed at "full and fair cash value," certified periodically by the Commonwealth's Commissioner of Revenue (no less frequently than once every three years).

Budget: A plan of financial operation embodying an estimate of proposed expenditures for a given period and the proposed means of financing them. A budget may be preliminary (the financial plan presented to the town meeting) or final (the plan approved by that body).

Cherry Sheet: An annual statement received from the Massachusetts Department of Revenue detailing estimated receipts for the next fiscal year from various state aid accounts and estimated state and county government charges payable by the assessors in setting the tax rate. The actual receipts and charges may vary from the estimates. The "Cherry Sheets" are named for the cherry-colored paper on which they were originally printed.

Encumbrance: Obligations as purchase orders, contracts or salary commitments which are chargeable to an appropriation and for which a part of the appropriation is reserved.

Equalized Valuation: The value of all property as determined by the Commissioner of Revenue biennially, using a standard of "full and fair value."

Fiscal Year: A 12-month period, commencing July 1 and ending June 30, to which the annual budget applies and at the end of which a governmental unit determined its financial position and the results of its operations. The number of the fiscal year is that of the calendar year in which it ends: FY2012 is the fiscal year which ends June 30, 2012.

Free Cash: Certified each July 1 by the State, this is the portion of Fund Balance available for appropriation. It is not cash but rather is approximately the total of cash and receivables less current liabilities and earmarked reserves, reduced also by reserves for uncollected taxes. It is also known as the "undesignated fund balance."

General Fund: The fund into which the general (non-earmarked) revenues of the town are deposited and from which money is appropriated to pay expenses.

Overlay: The amount raised from property tax levies in excess of appropriations and other charges. It cannot exceed 5 percent of the levy and is used to cover abatements and exemptions granted locally or on appeal.

Overlay Surplus: The unused portion of previous year's overlays; part of this is normally allocated to finance the following year's reserve fund appropriation.

Property Tax Levy: The amount produced by multiplying the assessed valuation of property by the tax rate. The tax rate is expressed per thousand dollars of assessed valuation, for example:

House Value:	\$100,000
Tax Rate:	\$25 (which means \$25 per thousand of house value)
Levy:	\$25 multiplied by \$100,000 and divided by 1,000
Result:	\$2,500

Reserve Fund: A fund appropriated each year which may be used only by vote of the Finance Committee for "extraordinary or unforeseen expenditures."

Revolving Fund: Those funds which may be used without appropriation and which are established for special uses. For example, fees for recreation programs may be paid into a revolving fund. Revolving funds are established by state law or town by-law.

Stabilization Fund: A fund appropriated to cover a portion of future capital expenditures; the town meeting must vote authority to spend money from the fund.

*This brochure was developed from a brochure given out at the Town Meeting in Stoughton.
Charlie Seelig, 5/8/2000; slightly revised 11/2/2011*