

TOWN MEETING RESEARCH GROUP 2014 Report

Purpose / Inquiry

Town Meeting attendance and voter participation have been in a decline for a very long time. The reasons for this are various and generally understood and agreed upon. The Waitsfield, Vermont Select Board has asked a group of residents to volunteer to propose to the Select Board how the town might increase active participation in decisions that impact the future of the town?

Mission Statement / Scope

Opportunity & Participation: The Town Meeting Research Group will offer to the Waitsfield Select Board ideas to increase the opportunity and encourage greater participation at Town Meeting and/or in town Decisions.

Recommendations

Near Term - approach:

➤ Tinker! The Town Meeting Research Group enthusiastically encourages the Waitsfield Select Board to take a 3-5 year approach to trying some new ideas and seeing if participation at Town Meeting increases. And then trying other ideas after that and seeing what changes occur.

Near Term - structure changes:

1) To reduce disruption of the town meeting the Town Meeting Research Group recommends separating the Town Meeting from the School Board Meeting and moving the School Board Meeting to a different date or time; consider holding the school meeting the night before or on some other date.

2) Move Town Meeting to a late afternoon start: 4pm or later with a hard stop at 9pm. (Meeting could overflow into the next night if required).

3) Pre-announce that the vote for the town budget will occur at a specific time, such as 6:00pm or 6:30pm (depending on when Town Meeting starts).

4) Create a volunteer pick-up / return home rides service for those interested.

Near Term - information sharing strategy changes:

- 1) As a compliment to the existing Town Report, create the following printed materials
 - a. Executive summary of budget, issues for discussion
 - b. Budget and Tax impact of major / warned items (see examples in appendix from Middlesex, VT town).
 - c. Pie chart of sources [in one pie chart] and uses [in one pie chart] of town budget (see examples in appendix from Middlesex, Vermont).
 - d. Find a way to highlight large and/or potentially controversial items in the printed reports.
- 2) Distribute these materials in mailed town reports.
- 3) Have copies of these materials on chairs at town meeting.
- 4) Place information on town website.
- 5) Encourage media coverage of same materials in advance of the Town Meeting day.

Longer Term:

- 1) Investigate and test various technologies such as email / text / phone response system to engage voters year round regardless of whether Town Meeting or Australian ballot is used.
- 2) Floor amendments on financial / budget items only considered at earlier scheduled (Jan/Feb) budget meetings.
- 3) Floor amendments on non-financial but policy matters reflecting sense of community are non-binding but must be reviewed and reported on no later than next annual Town Meeting.
- 4) Consider capping the amounts permitted in floor amendments by either a percent or by an absolute value of the original article.
- 5) Run a survey (yet to be developed) to all residents to quantify residents who can't attend Town Meeting because of infirmity, military service, work, children, other. Measure quantity and type of reasons for non-attendance. Run this survey in three different channels:
 - a. Before town meeting day via snail mail and/or email.
 - b. During voting hours of town meeting day.

- c. At Town Meeting itself.
- 6) Run a survey (yet to be developed) to all residents asking whether they would support a special Town Meeting day – to be held during summer months – for the purpose of determining if the majority of the residents would prefer Australian ballot over Town Meeting Day. Run this survey in three different channels:
- a. Before town meeting day via snail mail and/or email.
 - b. During voting hours of town meeting day.
 - c. At Town Meeting itself.

The full report is available at the Town Office and on the Waitsfield Web site in the Documents section at www.waitsfieldvt.us/docs/Waitsfield_Town_Meeting_Research_Group_Final_Report_2014-12-08.pdf.

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