

Waitsfield Town Meeting Research Group  
How to Improve Town Meeting Day Participation

December 2014

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# Introduction

## **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 6:00 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

## Committee Work

### Brief Reflection - Participation Today

For all towns wrestling with lower Town Meeting Day participation, possible solutions often alternate between making changes to the Town Meeting Day itself and moving to Australian ballot. The research the Town Meeting Research Group has conducted thus far shows mixed and non-lasting results for towns that have moved to Australian ballot.

For example, Peacham, Vermont achieved 40% Australian ballot voter participation when they first moved to Australian ballot; however, this participation rate dropped over time and fell roughly in line with previous Town Meeting participation rates. Research shows that when a town moves the budget to Australian ballot, participation at Town Meeting erodes over time.

In a scan of Waitsfield participation from 2008 to 2014, the highest Town Meeting attendance was 14% of registered voters when the town voted for a new water system. The lowest Waitsfield Town Meeting attendance rate was 6%. Waitsfield's Town Meeting attendance rates are in line with the typical range of 6-14% in Vermont.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Minutes- # Estimated at TM</u>	<u>Minutes- #counted via Floor Votes</u>	<u>% of Voter Checklist at TM</u>	<u># Australia n Ballot Voters</u>	<u>% of Voter Checklist that Voted</u>	<u># Absentee Voters</u>	<u># on Voter Checklist</u>
<u>2014</u>	<u>85</u>	<u>159</u>	<u>11%</u>	<u>527</u>	<u>36.9%</u>	<u>40</u>	<u>1429</u>
<u>2013</u>	<u>70</u>	<u>161</u>	<u>11%</u>	<u>588</u>	<u>40.6%</u>	<u>68</u>	<u>1488</u>
<u>2012</u>	<u>125</u>	<u>NA</u>	<u>9%</u>	<u>493</u>	<u>34.5%</u>		<u>1415</u>
<u>2011</u>	<u>200</u>	<u>194</u>	<u>14%</u>	<u>394</u>	<u>38.0%</u>	<u>21</u>	<u>1399</u>
<u>2010</u>	<u>75</u>	<u>123</u>	<u>9%</u>	<u>512</u>	<u>36.2%</u>	<u>16</u>	<u>1413</u>
<u>2009</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>88</u>	<u>6%</u>	<u>511</u>	<u>36.1%</u>	<u>33</u>	<u>1416</u>
<u>2008</u>	<u>120</u>	<u>NA</u>	<u>9%</u>	<u>865</u>	<u>64.7%</u>	<u>97</u>	<u>1337</u>

The Town Meeting Research Group concludes from its research in this matter that while it has been asked by the Waitsfield Select Board to propose ideas specifically to increase opportunity and participation in Town Meeting in order to preserve it, it is of primary importance to focus on increasing opportunity and participation in decision-making regardless of whether that is with

Australian ballot or Town Meeting. Therefore, the Town Meeting Research Group will propose ideas for both.

### **What Am I Voting For?**

The Town Meeting Research Group has concluded that regardless of whether a town uses Australian ballot or Town Meeting, increasing opportunity and participation in decision-making can be achieved by ensuring Waitsfield residents:

- Are informed about the issues the town is deliberating
- Understand what are the sources of the budget
- Can easily see what are the uses of the budget

### **Approach**

The Town Meeting Research Group strongly recommends a tinkering approach. It intends to offer a variety of ideas and options and recommends that the town embrace a trial and error approach to trying different ideas over time. This approach emulates what other towns have done. It encourages an experimental and flexible mindset, which the Town Meeting Research Group believes is the best approach to adopt.

## **Framework of Inquiry**

### **All Options On The Table**

The Town Meeting Research Group is evaluating both the Australian ballot and the traditional Town Meeting concepts. Both approaches have support and interest amongst the Town Meeting Research Group members. The Town Meeting Research Group believes it is important to consider both approaches to reflect the different positions on this issue within the Waitsfield community. This will foster open and healthy discussion and help get community support for those ideas that the Waitsfield Select Board does choose to try.

### **Australian ballot**

Australian ballot conceptually permits more participation without attendance by permitting flexible voting times and absentee ballot voting. Town Meeting day requires attendance during a work day, which prevents attendance by residents who for one reason or another can't attend.

One idea is to consider Australian ballot on town meeting day but with one or a series of Select Board meetings (possibly starting in January) well in advance of town meeting day where the referendum items are discussed and where residents can ask questions, voice their concerns and petition for changes to the referendums.

Under this approach, these “pre-meetings” would be well organized. There could be several of them. And there would be enough advance notice that the Valley Reporter could help with informing the residents. There would also be other methods available to the Waitsfield Select Board that is discussed in detail in the “Information Sharing Strategy” section below.

The Town Meeting Research Group acknowledges this approach will both help include residents who currently can’t attend town meeting day and exclude other residents who can’t attend 2-3 weeks of Select Board meetings in advance of the town meeting day. The Town Meeting Research Group has no idea whether the final outcome will improve participation or not.

## **Town Meeting**

### **A Series of Small Ideas**

Another idea is to move the school meeting and school budget vote to another time and then move the start time of the Town Meeting to either 4pm, 5pm or 6pm with the town shared meal occurring on site (to save time) at 7:30pm. Middlesex adopted these changes and saw their attendance increase by about 50 voters. This might help residents leave work early - (or not have to leave work early at all) – and still be able to attend Town Meeting Day. Rides could be offered to anyone interested. Additionally, Middlesex always holds the budget vote at the same time each year -- the moderator manages the agenda so that the budget is taken up at a predictable time.

Executing the “Information Sharing Strategy” ideas [see below] could potentially help expedite the meeting by front-loading information sharing about the issues and budget.

### **A Bigger Idea**

Waitsfield Select Board could test out using technologies available today [and in use to varying degrees by other Vermont towns] to have Town Meeting reach out to residents. This idea would need to be pursued carefully but Robert’s Rules do now permit the use of technologies to extend Town Meeting out to non-present residents.

#### Middlesex, VT using Skype

Middlesex is the only town in Vermont that we are aware of that supports remote participation of voters. Middlesex uses Skype for visual and telephones for audio to support remote two-way participation. At most, up to four non-present residents have joined from remote locations. A volunteer proxy present at Town Meeting supports each non-present resident. This volunteer functions as the go-between for the non-present resident. It appears this works reasonably well.

When the remote participant wants to speak, the proxy raises a sign with the remote participant’s name on it and, when called on, turns the computer monitor around for the remote

participant to address the moderator. If the remote participant wants to talk, she/he raises their hand as would any other present voter.

Middlesex was concerned that they would have more remote participants than they would have volunteers. They proceeded nonetheless and at the moment they only have four or less non-present residents attending Town Meeting in this manner. Middlesex has not dealt with a paper ballot using remote voting, but it would possibly be possible through email.

#### Other Technology Initiatives

There is an organization, [www.democracyOS.org](http://www.democracyOS.org), that is working on a user-friendly, open-source, vote and debate tool, crafted for parliaments, parties and decision-making institutions that will allow citizens to get informed, join the conversation and vote on topics, just how they want their representatives to vote.

While this effort appears to be in the early stages of a kickstarter campaign, it seems logical to keep an eye on efforts such as this. Waitsfield may at some point in the future be able to adopt a pre-built out platform that can extend town meeting out to non-present residents securely and satisfactorily.

#### Ideas Discussed by the TMRG

The Town Meeting Research Group has begun discussions around what a Skype or Google Hangout hardware configuration might look like for Waitsfield's Town Meeting. The discussions focus on how to get the Moderator two-way communication and how to permit the Moderator to manage amendment requests from both the present and non-present members.

In the matter of two-way communication management the Town Meeting Research Group is looking at the Middlesex, Vermont model as one solution and is also looking at large monitor displays that can host multiple skype or google hangout sessions with some communication control mechanism for the Moderator. In the matter of amendment management, the Town Meeting Research Group does not have a solution to test out.

If and when the Waitsfield Select Board approves any testing of using these technologies to extend Town Meeting out to non-present residents, the Town Meeting Research Group recommends that baby steps first are the way to proceed. For example, the Waitsfield Select Board and town residents might support a test of one or two residents purposefully remaining at home during a future Town Meeting.

### **Information Sharing Strategy - Front-Load The Conversation**

The Town Meeting Research Group currently proposes three ways to give our town residents the information they need to make their own informed decision regardless of whether it is at Town Meeting or by Australian ballot

- **Consider additional ways to promote the budget committee meetings (Front Porch, Email, other).**
- Front-Load Information Sharing Strategy
- Email/Text/Phone Response System

The Town Meeting Research Group envisions these solutions in place year-round – not just leading up to Town Meeting Day. These solutions – and others focused on pushing out information to our town residents – will serve to increase opportunity for involvement in town matters. Increasing opportunity is one of the two outcomes the Town Meeting Research Group has embedded in its mission.

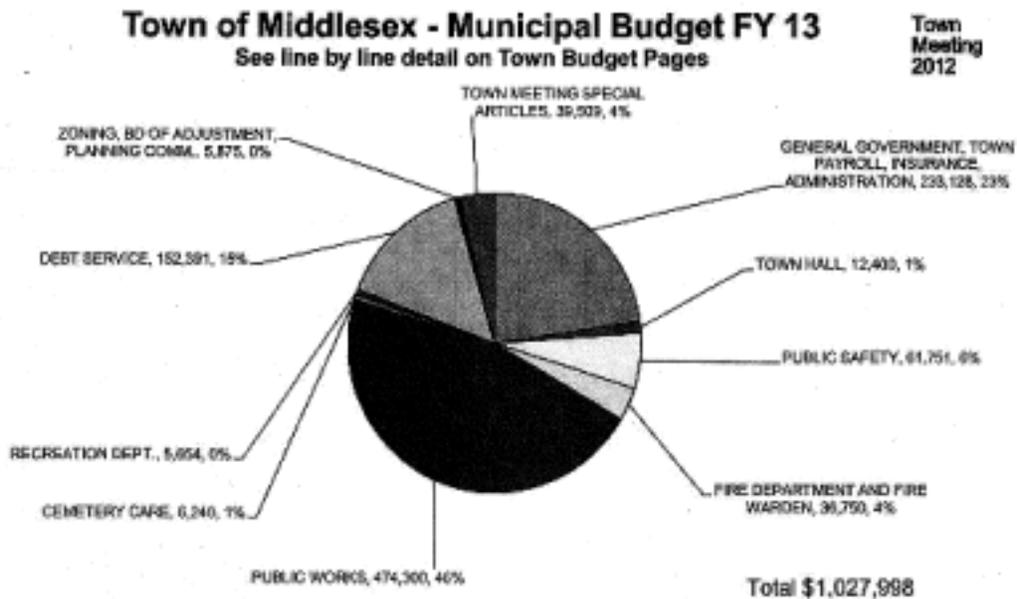
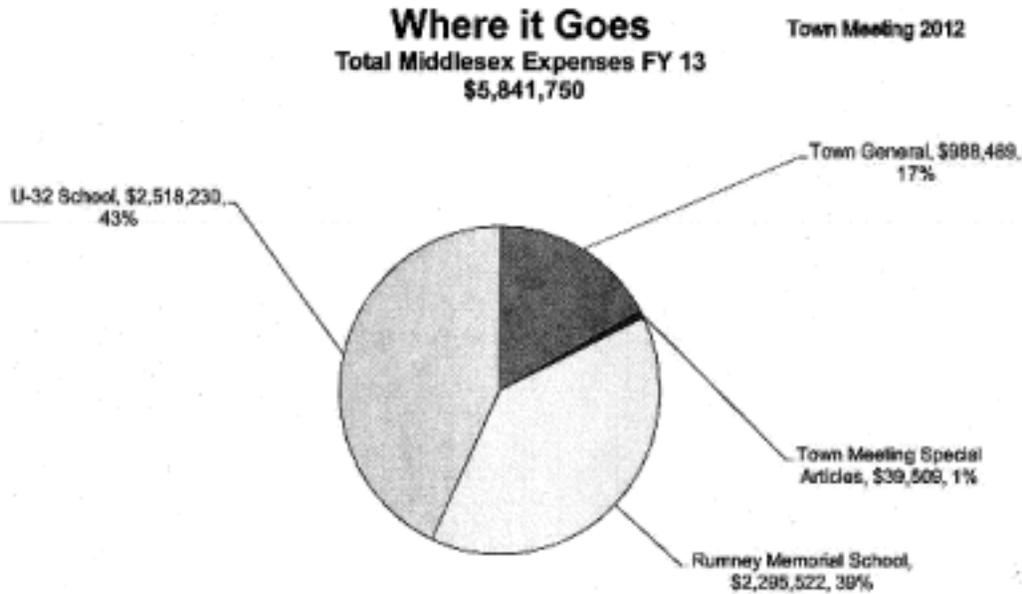
### **Front-Load Information Sharing Strategy**

Middlesex, VT shares pertinent information well in advance of Town Meeting Day and has print outs of the same information for Town Meeting Day. Examples from the Town of Middlesex, VT are below. **As a compliment to the existing Town Report** the Town Meeting Research Group recommends Waitsfield adopt these same practices and again points out that adopting a front-loading information sharing strategy increases the probability of an increase in participation in town matters. Increasing participation is the second of the two outcomes the Town Meeting Research Group has embedded in its mission.

[A New Report: What Each Item Means For You For Your Taxes](#)

Town of Middlesex - What each item means for your taxes					Town Meeting 2012
Appraised Value of Property		\$100,000	\$150,000	\$200,000	
Grand List (2011)		\$193,798,721	\$193,798,721	\$193,798,721	
Proposed Town Budget		\$834,519	\$834,519	\$834,519	Incl Special Articles and Discount
Proposed Town Tax		\$0.4306	\$0.4306	\$0.4306	
Your taxes		\$431	\$646	\$861	
Town of Middlesex - What each item means for your taxes					
	Total Proposed Tax Effort	Tax for Property Appraised at \$100,000	Tax for Property Appraised at \$150,000	Tax for Property Appraised at \$200,000	Explanation
Town Government					
Article 9	\$764,521	\$394.49	\$591.74	\$788.98	General Government and Highway - net of receipts
Other Articles					
Article 5	\$28,000	\$14.45	\$21.67	\$28.90	Early Payment Discount
Article 10	\$3,000	\$1.55	\$2.32	\$3.10	Community Connections
Article 11	\$1,000	\$0.52	\$0.77	\$1.03	North Branch Nature Center
Article 12	\$750	\$0.39	\$0.58	\$0.77	RSVP
Article 13	\$3,000	\$1.55	\$2.32	\$3.10	CV Home Health and Hospice
Article 14	\$25,543	\$13.18	\$19.77	\$26.36	Kellogg Hubbard Library
Article 15	\$5,000	\$2.58	\$3.87	\$5.16	Middlesex Conservation Fund
Article 16	\$500	\$0.26	\$0.39	\$0.52	Central Vt Econ Development
Article 17	\$3,205	\$1.65	\$2.48	\$3.31	Various Organizations
Totals					
for each \$1,000	\$1,000	\$0.52	\$0.77	\$1.03	

A New Report: How The Budget is spent



A New Report: Town Meeting Explanation

The town of Middlesex, Vermont prepares an explanation page that is distributed at the start of Town Meeting Day along with the other reports shown above. This is an artifact that could be distributed both electronically, in advance of Town Meeting, to all residents – whether they can attend or not. It would also be useful with Australian ballot.

# Welcome to the Middlesex Town Meeting!

## Explanation of Some Common Phrases You Will Hear

Welcome! This flyer is provided simply as background to help all voters participate fully. The Moderator is trained to make sure all voters are heard and their questions answered. If you have any questions, just raise your hand and ask.

### The Warning

The "warning" is the agenda for the meeting. Only articles on the warning ("warned articles") can be considered at Town Meeting. The warning for this year's meeting appears in the Middlesex Annual Report.

### Australian Ballot

Some items that appear on the warning are not discussed and voted on at the traditional face-to-face Town Meeting, but are voted on in the voting booths on pre-printed, paper "Australian ballots." In Middlesex, you will vote on town officers and school issues via Australian ballot, and sometimes other articles as well. Items that are voted on by Australian ballot may not be discussed at Town Meeting while the polls are open.

### Robert's Rules of Order

According to state law, Town Meetings in Vermont are governed by a set of parliamentary rules called "Robert's Rules of Order." The Town Moderator is

trained in using Robert's Rules, and will refer to them when necessary. A few of the more commonly used elements are included here.

### The Main Motion

Example: "I move to accept Article 6 as written." Each article on the warning must be "moved" and seconded; it is then ready to be discussed by the group. In discussion, citizens raise their hands and are called on by the Moderator. When you are called on, stand up, state your name, then speak your mind.

### The Amendment

"Amending" a motion proposes a change to the main motion. Example: An article is moved and seconded; then, during discussion, someone says, "I move to amend Article 17 by reducing the dollar amount from \$10,000 to \$5,000." After someone seconds this, debate shifts to discussing this amendment. Once people have discussed the amendment, the Moderator puts the amendment to a vote. If the voters reject the amendment, the group now returns to discussing the original main motion. If the voters approve the amendment, the discussion focuses on the main motion as amended.

(More → →)

Remember,  
if you have a  
question, just  
raise your hand  
and ask.

## Town Meeting Evaluation Form: Your Ideas Wanted!

→ The most effective / useful elements of our Town Meeting were:

→ What I would change about our Town Meeting:

→ Additional comments or suggestions (more room on other side):

Please return this form in the drop-box by the door, or mail to the Middlesex Town Meeting Solutions Committee, c/o Town Hall, 5 Church St., Middlesex VT 05602. The results will be given to the Selectboard and used to improve our Town Meeting. Thank you!

### The Vote

Once the Moderator feels all points of view have been heard, s/he will call for a vote. If you are in favor of the motion, you will say "Aye." If opposed, say "No" or "Nay." Other forms of voting that you may expect to see at Town Meeting:

-A show of hands or a standing vote: May be asked for if a voter disagrees with the Moderator after the results of a voice vote is announced.

-Paper ballot: Any voter may move that a vote be taken via paper ballot; if seven voters support this motion, pieces of paper will be distributed and you will write your vote and pass it in. It will be counted immediately.

### Point of Order

If you don't understand a ruling of the Moderator, speak up, saying "Point of order, Mr./Ms. Moderator."

After you are recognized by the Moderator, ask your question.

### Call the Question

If debate has gone on long enough—voters have made up their minds but some people are still repeating the same basic arguments—a voter can move to cut off debate or "call the question." If you agree that all voices have been heard and you

are ready to vote on the issue at hand, you should vote in favor of calling the question. However, if you want to continue discussion, you should vote against calling the question. Two-thirds of the group must vote yes on calling the question in order to cease debate; otherwise, discussion continues.

In most cases, "calling the question" is not necessary. The Moderator will call for a vote when s/he feels that all points of view have been heard, and this avoids having to vote on calling the question.

### Pass Over

Sometimes it becomes clear to the voters that they aren't ready to make a vote yes or no, and the preference is to not vote on the article at all. At this point, someone may move to "pass over" an article. (An article may also be passed over because it will be handled by Australian ballot.)

➤ If you'd like to speak, just raise your hand.

When recognized by the Moderator, stand up, say your name, and speak up so all can hear you.

*Compiled by the Middlesex Town Meeting Solutions Committee, based on information from the Vermont Institute for Government.*

➤ More information on Town Meeting, as well as the many committees and organizations that help keep Middlesex vibrant, can be found in the **Middlesex Operator's Manual**, available at Town Hall or the Rumney School. This information and more can also be found at Middlesex's website: [www.middlesex-vt.org](http://www.middlesex-vt.org).

Town Meeting Evaluation Form—more room for your comments.

### **Email/Text/Phone Response System**

The Town Meeting Research Group has discussed the idea of creating a quasi-real-time feedback mechanism for the Waitsfield Select Board, Waitsfield Planning Commission, Waitsfield Development Review Board and all other public entities of the town. The group would research and test simple and inexpensive and/or free constructs that would enable the Waitsfield Select Board to ask town residents what their position was on an issue.

The communication would go out via email or text or telephone and the responses would be collected, collated and presented back to the Waitsfield Select Board. While at first this would be a non-scientific and non-secure method of communication with the town residents, it is estimated that well over 80% of town residents have access to and use daily email or text. For voters not using email or text, communication could be through the Valley Reporter.

The town boards could increase opportunity to participate by proactively seeking out feedback using these technologies that can deliver back to the decision makers at a participation rate much higher than even Town Meeting Day itself. All results could be made public on the town website – and these updates could themselves be emailed out to all residents who ask for it – further increasing opportunity to be informed and to participate in town matters.

This mechanism has the opportunity to enable the Waitsfield Select Board [and all boards] to understand how residents feel about any given issue.

# Appendix

## Contributing Members:

1. Sally Kendall – approves final report
2. Gary Kingsbury – approves final report
3. Ted Laskaris – approves final report
4. Deri Meier – approves final report
5. Suzanne Peterson – approves final report
6. Nancy Turner – approves final report
7. Sheila Ware – approves final report
8. Rob Williams – approves final report

## Resources:

1. [www.ncdd.org](http://www.ncdd.org)
2. <http://democracyos.org/>
3. TED TALK:
  - a. [http://www.ted.com/talks/pia\\_mancini\\_how\\_to\\_upgrade\\_democracy\\_for\\_the\\_internet\\_era?utm\\_source=newsletter\\_daily&utm\\_campaign=daily&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_content=image\\_2014-10-08#t-628665](http://www.ted.com/talks/pia_mancini_how_to_upgrade_democracy_for_the_internet_era?utm_source=newsletter_daily&utm_campaign=daily&utm_medium=email&utm_content=image_2014-10-08#t-628665)