

## Town Meeting Procedure Information from Charlton Town Moderator Peter Cooper Jr.

**Thank you** for taking an interest in Charlton's Town Meeting. Town Meeting is part of a great tradition of democracy which has been happening in Charlton ever since its townspeople came together to decide to found the town in 1755. Town Meeting is the legislative body of the town, acting much like our legislative counterparts at the state and federal level to fund a budget and establish bylaws. One important difference from those legislatures is that in Charlton's Open Town Meeting form of government, every registered voter in town is a legislator and has the opportunity to participate in and vote on every issue.

### **Procedures**

Charlton's Town Meeting is governed by state law, the town's by-laws, tradition, and the book *Town Meeting Time: A Handbook of Parliamentary Law*. But voters don't need to read those documents or be parliamentarians in order to participate in the meeting, as the moderator will handle the details. But if you're not clear on what is being voted on or what is being discussed, please feel free to ask.

### **People on stage (from left to right)**

- **Selectmen:** the main executive body of the town
- **Town Administrator:** chief administrative officer
- **Town Counsel:** the town's attorney
- **Moderator:** presides over Town Meeting
- **Town Clerk:** records the official meeting minutes
- **Town Accountant:** reports status of town accounts
- **Finance Committee:** makes spending recommendations

### **Warrant**

The Selectmen post the warrant before Town Meeting. The warrant lists the agenda for what topics will be discussed and voted upon at the meeting. Each item on the agenda is called an article. An article may be specific or broad, and its purpose is to inform the voters of what topics may come up at the meeting. The booklet distributed at the meeting includes both the text of the warrant that was posted as well as the specific motions expected to be presented.

### **Motions**

While a warrant article describes generally what subjects will come up, a motion is a statement of a specific action that is proposed to be taken. For example, a motion to appropriate money would specify the dollar amount, source of funds, and for what purpose. The motions that are expected to be presented are printed in this booklet, but the actual motion presented may differ. It's important to realize the difference between the warrant article and the motion: The warrant article is the agenda item describing what subject matter may come up, and the motion describes the specific proposed action which will be voted upon.

### **Amendments**

A motion may also be made to amend the main motion, in which case that amendment will be discussed and voted on first. If the amendment passes, then discussion will return to main motion as amended. If the amendment is defeated, then discussion will return to the original main motion.

### **Motions to take no action**

A particular motion that may come up is the motion to take no action, which is often referred to as "**postponing indefinitely**". This motion simply is a proposal to take no action on the warrant article at this meeting. If the motion is approved, then no action will be taken on the article and the meeting will move on to the next article. If the motion is defeated, then the meeting would entertain a "positive" motion to take a specific action as relates to the article.

### **Discussion**

After a motion is presented, the floor is open for discussion, questions, and debate. In order to participate, speakers line up behind the microphones. When recognized by the moderator, they clearly state their names and addresses, so that others know who is speaking. Comments should be specifically about the *issue* before the voters, and not addressed to any particular person or group other than the moderator. One's time at the microphone should not exceed three minutes. In that amount of time, one should be able to make the key points that one wants to make, without talking for so long that people lose interest.

### **Ending discussion**

If a voter has heard a sufficient amount of discussion and wants to close off and stop further debate, they can make a motion to end debate, which is often referred to as "**moving the question**". A voter cannot both make a comment and move to end debate during the same turn at the microphone; he or she can only do one or the other. A motion to end debate is not itself debatable, and requires a **R** majority vote in order to pass. If the motion to end debate passes, then discussion is over and the meeting will move to a vote on the main motion. If the motion to end debate is defeated, then the discussion of the main motion continues.

### **Reconsideration**

If substantive new information is available such that the meeting could change its mind about a vote it has already taken, a voter can move to reconsider that vote. The moderator will not entertain a motion to reconsider simply because there are now a different group of voters in the hall or because some people wish that the vote had gone the other way. If the motion to reconsider is accepted by the moderator, then it will be discussed, and if the majority votes in favor, then the original motion that was previously voted upon will again be before the voters.

### **Voting**

Most voting is handled via voice vote, with the moderator asking voters to call out "aye" or "no", and the moderator determining which side prevails. If the prevailing side is not clear to the moderator, or if seven people rise to question the decision, a counted vote will be held. When indicated, voters raise the colored card they were given when they checked in, and tellers count each section of the auditorium. Most votes require a majority to pass, but some require a **R** vote or even more. The moderator only reveals the way he is voting if it would affect the outcome.