

Attachment A

Massachusetts Moderators Association Best Practices Guidelines for Informing the Public in Advance of Town Meetings Fall 2018

1. How far in advance of Town Meeting should the Warrant be published?

State law (MGL c. 39, §10) requires that the warrant be published at least seven days before an Annual Town Meeting, and at least fourteen days before a Special Town Meeting. Nonetheless, the recommended best practice is for the Warrant to be adopted and have first on-line publication **at least three weeks before** either an Annual or Special Town Meeting.

2. Where and how should the Warrant be published?

In addition to the formal posting requirements of MGL c. 39, §10, the recommended best practice is for the Warrant to be published:

- in printed copies mailed either to each Town Meeting Member (for Representative Town Meetings) or to each household (for Open Town Meetings);
- online; and
- in a general circulation newspaper.

3. What additional information should be provided along with the Warrant?

The published Warrant should include, at a minimum, the following information for each Warrant Article:

- **Proponent Identification.** Identification of the Town Board, Committee or other body, or individual(s) proposing the Article.
- **Summary.** A brief, neutral, plain English explanation of the Article. Many towns rely on the Town Administrator to draft these explanations, though some towns rely on the Article proponents. In either case, the Moderator should review the text of these explanations to ensure that they are neutral and accurate descriptions rather than advocacy.
- **Recommendations.** The recommendations (yea/nay) of the Board of Selectmen and the Finance or Advisory Committee, if any.

Many towns publish supplemental budget information with the warrant that provides detail beyond what is in the budget Article. The amount of detail varies widely.

The published Warrant should also include, at a minimum, the following general information about the Meeting:

- Date, time and location.
- Overview of basic Town Meeting procedures and expectations for decorum.
- Information about provisions for child care and how to request visual, auditory, access or other assistance.

- Where to find other information that may be relevant (such as Finance/Advisory Committee reports; detailed TM procedures; how to contact the Moderator in advance, *etc.*). These supplemental materials should generally be published on the Town website, with copies available at the Town Clerk's office and Town Library.

4. Should the Motions be published in advance of Town Meeting? If so, when, where and how?

It is a best practice for Town Meeting Motions to be published on the Town Website at least 24 hours before the Town Meeting session at which the Article is expected to be taken up. (In RTM Towns, the Motions should be distributed by whatever electronic means is in use, such as a special digital portal or via email.) Regardless of advance publication, printed copies of the text of the motions should be made available to Town Meeting members as they enter the hall. *Note:* Advance publication does not preclude the right of proponents to modify the wording prior to formally submitting the Motion on the floor of Town Meeting.

5. What general information about how Town Meeting operates should be made available on Town websites? See generally the accompanying document "Information Guides for Town Meeting."

For *RTMs only*:

- Names and contact information of Town Meeting members, sorted by precinct.
- Lists of committees and their members.
- [Results of roll-call votes]

For both RTM and OTM:

- A brief overview of Town Meeting procedures (suitable for those who just want a quick introduction), along with glossaries of common town meeting terms and municipal finance terms.
- Additional detail about Town Meeting procedures (suitable for those who want a deeper understanding of procedures).
- The town's Town Meeting bylaw (if any).
- Guidelines for presenters, including any rules around length of presentation and format (*e.g.*, videos allowed or not) and suggestions/examples for ensuring visibility of slides.
- Guidance on how to submit a Citizens' Petition.
- Minutes of prior Town Meetings.
- Videos of prior Town Meetings.

6. What specific information about an upcoming Town Meeting should be made available on Town websites?

At a minimum, Town Meeting websites should include:

- all the information specified in Question 3, published not less than three weeks before a Town Meeting; and
- the text of Motions, published at least 24 hours before the session at which they are expected to be introduced.

Some towns also publish the following types of information from proponents and opponents of articles. Towns may consider whether to publish these materials. However, given the practical challenges of collecting and posting these materials from multiple sources, such publication is not deemed a recommended best practice.

- Supporting statements from proponents
- Opposition statements
- Presentation slides from proponents and opponents

7. **What other mechanisms should towns consider for informing the public about Town Meeting warrant articles?** The following are in use in various towns.

- Formal hearings to review the Warrant, conducted by Board of Selectmen, Finance (or Advisory) Committee, and Planning Board.
- Informal panel discussions, involving the Town Moderator and other officials, such as Town Manager/Administrator, Chair of Board of Selectmen, *etc.*
- Formal warrant review meetings, chaired by Town Moderator, with proponents and opponents afforded brief opportunity to outline the issues and their positions.

In addition to holding such events live and in public, the above should be taped for broadcast on local cable television and made available on the town website.