

Town Meeting Terms and Customary Procedures
Prepared by Sarah Cannon Holden, Town Moderator

TOWN MEETING: A NEW ENGLAND TRADITION

Town Meeting is unique to New England. Lincoln's first Town Meeting was held in 1754 and it is the Legislative Branch of our town government. It is direct democracy at its best, a place for robust debate, diffuse points of view, and majority rule. Deliberation is often inefficient and a little messy, but all registered voters of the town may participate in the process. It is a time when we reflect on our past, assess where we are, and plan for our future. Decisions by those who came before us made Lincoln the place that it is today including, for example, conservation lands, central commercial area, zoning, wetland protections, solar arrays, and by-right farming.

The annual Town Meeting is the culmination of a year of work done by volunteers and professional staff. Town boards and committees, all volunteers, make presentations on fiscal matters, by-laws and other matters on which they wish to gain voter support. The meeting is then opened to the citizens for comment and questions prior to a vote. The Town Moderator is the presiding officer of the Town Meeting.

Town Meeting is held on the Saturday before the last Monday in March. We meet in the Donaldson Auditorium in the Lincoln Public School building located on Ballfield Road. If necessary, overflow space will be provided within the building, equipped with audiovisual connections to the Auditorium. The meeting itself is broadcast live on cable TV and may be streamed on the internet. Unless it appears that taking photos is intended to intimidate or disrupt the meeting, there are currently no rules against taking photographs.

MAKING THE MOST OF LINCOLN'S TOWN MEETING

Attend Committee Meetings. Before the Annual Town Meeting in March, all interested voters should attend committee/board meetings in the fall and winter preceding it. At these early, smaller meetings, you can ask questions and voice opinions on developing proposals.

Attend the Fall State of the Town (SOTT) Meeting. These meetings were introduced many years ago to provide more information on the topics requiring a vote at Town Meeting. At SOTT, boards and committees make presentations and engage in preliminary discussions with residents – no voting – about the issues that will be presented at the spring Town Meeting. This is a critical opportunity for residents to listen, learn and provide input to the discussion of a particular proposal prior to Town Meeting where voting takes place.

Read the Warrant Booklet. The warrant booklet contains details of all the matters that will be voted upon at Town Meeting. The booklet is mailed to all households in Lincoln prior the Town Meeting.

Visit the Town Website: lincolntown.org

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

WHO MAY ATTEND AND VOTE AT TOWN MEETING?

Lincoln holds Open Town Meetings. All residents of Lincoln may attend. Registered voters may sign in and sit in the main sections of the auditorium. These voters constitute the legislative body for the Town. Residents who are not registered voters may attend but are asked to sit in the section set aside for them. They may not speak at the meeting unless the meeting grants permission. They may not vote.

When you miss Town Meeting, those in attendance decide important matters on your behalf. Towns with populations over 6,000 may hold Representative Town Meetings where citizens elect representatives to the legislative body to discuss and vote on issues.

WARRANT ARTICLES: WHAT IS DECIDED AT TOWN MEETING?

The Finance Committee Chair presents all town, school and library budgets and each is considered in an open and full discussion. Other committees such as Capital Planning, Community Preservation, and the Planning Board may also make presentations regarding town by-laws. Other articles may relate to unique matters, recognitions of specific citizens for their service or other traditional actions. All these articles are collected and added to the Warrant presented to the Town for votes. Citizen Petitions may be added to the Warrant if a proponent collects the signatures of at least 10 registered voters in support of the petition and submits their petition by a previously announced deadline, usually the end of January.

WHO MAY SPEAK AT TOWN MEETING?

The first speakers are the **Proponents** of a particular warrant article. Once they have explained the matter to the meeting from the podium at the front of the hall, the meeting will be opened to all registered voters for discussion.

Voters are asked to line up at one of the microphones in the middle of the hall to make a comment and/or ask a question. The Moderator will recognize speakers alternating between the microphones from all venues. They are asked first to state their name and street address and to limit comments to two minutes. All speakers must direct their comments/questions to the Moderator who will then ask if there is a Town official who wishes to respond. At no time should speakers direct their comments toward a particular individual, and all comments are expected to be respectful, civil and relevant to the Article under discussion.

Town Officials may or may not respond to comments but typically respond to questions. Discussion will continue so long as new points are made. A citizen may rise to 'Call the Previous Question' which is a motion to cut off debate. If the Moderator

decides that it is premature to cut off debate, he/she will deny the request. If, on the other hand, the Moderator permits the motion to 'Call the Previous Question' and it passes by a 2/3 vote, the meeting will go directly to the main motion under discussion for the vote. The Moderator may also suggest that it is time to cut off debate and take a vote. If there appears to be no objection, the Moderator will call for the vote on the main motion under consideration.

**“It is not the man or the woman, but the measure,
that is the subject of debate.”**

Robert's Rules of Order

WHAT ARE THE GUIDELINES FOR PRESENTATIONS?

The Warrant lists the articles for discussion and proponents present them using digital slides projected on the large screen above the stage. The slides must be submitted to the Town Tech person several days before the Town Meeting. The Presenters have agreed to a time limit at the podium. If the Proponent asks an unregistered voter to speak, the Moderator will ask the meeting if there are any objections. If not, that person will be granted permission to speak.

HOW IS VOTING CONDUCTED?

In Lincoln, we use a combination of techniques: Voice Vote, Standing Vote, Counted Vote and Digital Clickers, if approved at the March 2025 Town Meeting. If the Moderator determines that the vote is likely to be unanimous or close to it, he/she will call for a Voice Vote and announce the vote as Unanimous or Majority. If that vote is not clear, especially in the case of a required 2/3 vote, the Moderator has the discretion to decide which voting process will be used to determine the outcome of the vote.

The same process is in place whether it is a vote on the main motion or on an amendment to the main motion. Seven (7) voters may rise to ask for “reconsideration of a vote”, which is a request to the Moderator for another vote count.

WHAT ARE THE COMMON TERMS THAT VOTERS SHOULD KNOW?

Amendment. A proposal to change the language of the Motion

Article. A proposed item of business or agenda topic that is presented for discussion and a vote. Articles inform voters of the subject matter to be considered

Clerk. Records the votes taken at the Town Meeting. The Clerk is an elected position.

Clicker. A handheld electronic voting device

Citizen Petition. With the collection of 10 signatures of registered voters, a Citizen Petition may be presented to the Select Board for consideration on the Warrant prior to the Town Meeting.

Green-colored Sheets. A group of non-controversial articles to be voted on collectively.

Incidental Motion. Relates to the conduct of the meeting, *i.e.*, Point of Order, Division of a Question, Separate Consideration, to Fix Voting Method

Main Motion. All actions at Town Meeting are taken by votes upon motions. The language in the warrant states the scope of the topic within which the meeting may act. Someone must make a motion under a particular article which then must be seconded by another voter.

Meeting. The registered voters in attendance at the Town Meeting.

Moderator. The presiding officer of the Town Meeting, elected to a three-year term.

Motion. A proposal to act at Town Meeting.

Registered Voters. Residents who may participate in the Town Meeting. If a non-voter wishes to speak, he/she must obtain permission of the meeting.

Salmon-colored Sheets. Contain the language of the actual motion to be presented, available on the tables in the middle of the Auditorium.

Subsidiary Motion. A motion to take some action with respect to the main motion, *i.e.*, to amend, to postpone, to lay on the table, to limit or extend the limits of debate, to stop debate (the previous question), etc. The Subsidiary Motion is acted upon first; if that does not dispose of the matter, then the Incidental Motions are acted upon in the order in which they were made. Finally, the Main Motion is acted upon, amended or not.

Warrant. States the time and place of holding the meeting and the subjects to be acted upon. No action at a Town Meeting is valid unless the subject matter is listed in the Warrant.

Warrant Booklet. A printed document containing all articles and budget details mailed townwide two weeks before Town Meeting.

Within the Scope. Any motion made under a proposed article must relate directly and clearly to the action proposed in the published article.

HOW DOES THE TOWN MEETING UNFOLD?

The **Moderator** will call the meeting to order at 9:30 am once he/she has determined that there is a quorum (100 people).

The **Clerk** will read the Return of the Warrant, the required legal posting of the Town Meeting done by the Constable.

Article 1 The Moderator will announce the ballot election/questions that will be voted upon on the Monday following Town Meeting

Article 2 and Beyond. The Moderator will move the meeting through the articles in the order in which they have been published in the Warrant Booklet by asking: "Do I have a motion under Article X?" The Moderator then recognizes a representative of the entity sponsoring the Article who will rise saying: "I move Article X as written on the salmon-colored sheet." The Moderator will ask for a second. The sponsor will then explain the Article with a back-up slide presentation if so desired. If other representatives of boards or committees wish to speak, the Moderator will recognize them next.

Discussion. The Moderator will then open discussion to the meeting.

Vote. Following discussion, the Moderator will call for a vote on the motion saying, “All those in favor of the Motion under Article X please indicate by saying aye or opposed.” This process will continue until a vote is taken on the last article.

Motion to Dissolve. The Moderator will ask if there is a motion to dissolve and a second to the motion. By this time, the “ayes” will usually have it, and the Moderator will declare “The meeting is dissolved.” Most will understand this as being adjourned!

WHAT ARE IMPORTANT ELEMENTS OF THE MEETING DISCUSSION?

The **Consent Calendar** was adopted some years ago to avoid discussion of matters thought to be non-controversial. The Select Board groups these matters together to be voted upon as listed in the green-colored sheets available in the middle of the auditorium. When the meeting gets to the first article on the Consent Calendar the Moderator will go through the list of articles asking if anyone wishes to hold out any Article from it for discussion and separate consideration. If an Article is held out, the Moderator will then ask for a motion “To adopt the Consent Calendar as printed on the Green Sheet minus anything held out.” After a “second”, the Moderator will ask for the vote. Those articles which were held out (if any) will be taken up in their original sequence on the Warrant.

The **Budget Article** includes the budgets for the Town, Schools and Library. The details are printed in the warrant booklet. After making the motion to consider the Town’s Budget, the Finance Committee presents an overview of all the budgets after which the Moderator will go through the major budget categories found in the Warrant asking if anyone wishes to hold out an item for further discussion. The Moderator will then call for a vote on the items remaining. If there have been line items held out, they will be taken up separately with opportunities for questions and voted upon following the earlier comprehensive budget vote. The Moderator will then continue to the remaining Articles listed in the Warrant.

HOW CAN VOTERS MODIFY ACTIONS IN TOWN MEETING?

Changing the Order of Articles. After the Moderator recognizes a voter, the voter may speak to advance or postpone an article. The Moderator will ask for a second. The voter will then be asked to give reason for the motion. Discussion can follow. The Moderator will call for a vote on the motion. If it passes, the article will be advanced/postponed. The motion to advance is usually to be considered next or wherever it was moved.

Amending an Article. If a voter wishes to amend an article on the floor of the meeting, the voter should provide a written copy of the amendment to the Town Clerk, who is seated on the stage. This can be done well ahead of time and will make the process much smoother. It will also allow the amender to receive guidance on the amendment-making process. Once the voter is recognized by the Moderator, the voter says: “I move that the motion under Article X be amended by adding/deleting/changing the following words: ...” The amendment must be “within the scope” of the main motion. In

other words, it must directly and reasonably relate to it. The Moderator will ask for a second to the proposed amendment. The voter who offered the amendment will speak in support of same. Discussion and questions regarding the amendment (not the main motion) can follow. Once discussion is concluded, the Moderator will ask for a vote on the amendment. The meeting will return then to the main motion (either amended or not) to continue discussion.

Moving the Previous Question. After a voter is recognized by the Moderator, the voter may make the following motion: “I move the previous question.” It must be seconded by another voter. Such a motion may not be debated or amended. If passed, the motion cuts off debate and asks that a vote on the pending motion be taken immediately. Such a motion may be made with respect to a main motion as well as any amendments to a main motion. The voter “moving the previous question” may not first make a comment or statement.

To Lay on the Table. After a voter is recognized by the Moderator, the voter may make the following motion. “I move that this Article be laid on the table.” It must be seconded by another voter. Such a motion permits the relevant Article to be taken up later in the meeting. The meeting cannot be dissolved until the Article laid on the table has been acted upon.

Point of Order. A voter may rise from their seat without being recognized by the Moderator to raise a specific and important question, saying “I rise to a point of order.” The motion does not require a second. The voter may raise one or more of the following questions about the speaker and the motion and no others:

1. Is the speaker a registered voter?
2. Is what the speaker saying or proposing frivolous, indecorous, irrelevant, illegal or contrary to proper procedure?
3. Is any pending action frivolous, irrelevant, illegal or contrary to proper procedure?

WHERE CAN VOTERS LEARN MORE ABOUT TOWN MEETING?

Lincolntown.org, the town website, provides more information including a schedule of board and committee meetings. Meetings are also posted on the bulletin board outside the Clerk’s Office in the Town Offices.

Mass General Laws, Part I, Title VII, Chapters 39-43A

Town Meeting Time, *A Handbook of Parliamentary Law*, published by the Massachusetts Moderators Association.