

Access to Town Meeting (ATM) Committee

Date Change Consideration

November 2022

Summary

At this time, the committee has identified no compelling impact on attendance related purely to the date and time of Town Meeting. There may be budget or process factors that would benefit from a future change but the committee concluded that attendance would likely not be dramatically impacted.

Background

From at least as early as 2010 until it was delayed by COVID-19 in 2020, Westford's Annual Town Meeting has taken place on the last Saturday in March. Prompted by the Select Board's charge to research whether a change to this date could increase attendance, the committee initially brainstormed which month would be the most agreeable, by reducing common schedule conflicts and increasing attendance. Some concerns raised ranged from busy youth athletic seasons, traditional social engagements like graduations during the late spring and early summer, and residents out of town during the colder months. It became clear that adjusting the meeting date to accommodate one group could create a negative impact on another group, and that no one date held significant popularity over others. Since then, the committee has found this assessment to be supported by statistical data, both that which was gathered through its own survey of other similar towns and that which was found in other studies of town meetings across New England.

Westford's Attendance

A qualitative look at the naturally occurring data from the recent history of Westford Town Meetings can help provide more information. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, large numbers of residents (500+, 700+ and almost 900+) sporadically attended for high profile, high interest topics on a March Saturday for Annual Town Meeting. Attendance was certainly lower between 2020 and June 2022, but it is difficult to correlate that to a specific cause since a number of factors were also at play - the month of June, the outdoor venue of WA Field, individuals' choices about in-person events with COVID-19, and the natural variability of issues. The moderate increase in attendance for the 2022 Special Town Meeting is most likely due to the planned votes on two debt exclusion construction projects and does not seem to be hampered by the change back to an indoors venue on a weeknight, after two years of Special Town Meetings on Saturdays outside on the WA Field.

| <i>Date</i> | <i>Day</i> | <i>Time</i> | <i>Type</i> | <i>Attendance</i> | <i>Location</i> | <i>Major Articles</i> |
|-------------|-----------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------------|-----------------|---|
| 10-17-2022 | Monday | 7-9p | Special | 578 | WA Gym | Library; 51 Main |
| 6-11-2022 | Saturday | 9a-2p | Annual | 285 | WA Field | Clickers passed; Cameron HVAC |
| 10-16-2021 | Saturday | 1p-2:06p | Special | 225 | WA Field | Self-funded Health Insurance Trust; Cameron HVAC; |
| 6-12-2021 | Saturday | 9a-3:20p | Annual | 275 | WA Field | Drive-through; zoning bylaws |
| 10-18-2020 | Sunday (Rain date) | 9a-3:40p | Special | 350 | WA Field | WA amenities bldg; Indigenous People's Day; Drive-through; 63 Main St sale; |
| 6-20-2020 | Saturday | 9a-11:59a | Annual | 301 | WA Field | CPC WA Trustees Field (294 votes) |

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|------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|---------|-----------------------------------|-----------|--|
| 10-28-2019 | Monday | 7-10:42p | Special | 343 | Abbot Gym | Clickers failed; Helena Crocker residences \$1M; created Stormwater Fund |
| 3-23-2019 | Saturday | 10a-5:34p | Annual | 758 | Abbot Gym | Drew Farms APR |
| 10-15-2018 | Monday | 7-9:02p | Special | 401 | Abbot Gym | Buy 63 Main; Adopt Senior Tax Program; |
| 3-24-2018 | Saturday | 10a-6:50p | Annual | 540 | Abbot Gym | Town Common Traffic Signal; Plastic bags; |
| 2017 | | | Special | | | 3 Special TMs |
| 3-25-2017 3-27-2017 | Saturday Monday | 10-5:06p 7-8:51p | Annual | 1151 (may have been overreported) | Abbot Gym | Drew Farms APR (688 votes); WPS override (891 votes); childcare used by ~50 kids |

Resident Survey Working Group

Several members of the ATM Committee formed a working group to orchestrate a survey of Westford residents and learn the respondents' level of attendance at open town meetings. The working group recognized that a high participation rate and broad representation from all of Westford's demographics would be vital to using the survey data to drive decisions. The group wrestled with how to achieve a high participation survey rate, considering the Town Clerk shared an anecdote of receiving less than 10% responses to a survey enclosed in a tax bill sent to 10,000 households. The group also wanted to consciously solicit input from the residents who are not regular attendees of town meeting, and worried that a tax or census mailing may reach the same audience that is already attending. A recent survey on whether Westford should allow drive-through businesses had received 1,695 responses after being shared in town communications and social media. With a community of 18,000 registered voters, a survey would be capturing less than 10% of resident voices. Without being able to expect a significant response rate, the group decided to focus on asking respondents to identify barriers and obstacles, i.e. "what's broken," and to have the ATM Committee propose solutions and fixes. It seemed unlikely that a balanced consensus would arise through a non-representative resident survey.

Other Community Input Working Group

A survey was disseminated using the Massachusetts Moderators Association to try and reach the other 250+ municipalities that use the open town meeting format. The responses from 46 moderators indicated that the most common choice for their Annual Town Meeting is a Monday evening in the month of May. However, it is worth noting that almost every other town still hovers around the same level of participation that Westford has.

Other Research

The committee also investigated a number of other sources that have further confirmed these findings.

A 2017 study by Southborough that look at data from 90 towns over 2013-2015 found no reason to change their meeting date and time away from Mondays in April, stating that while most towns held their meetings in May (matching our committee's own external survey), percentage participation levels were generally the same if very slightly lower when held later in the year. Notably, the data did indicate towns holding their meetings on Saturdays had three percent higher attendance than those holding meetings on weekdays (average 8% of voters vs 5%), though only ten percent of the towns did so, making it difficult to say whether that number is statistically significant. In the end, Southborough's study did recommend experimenting with holding meetings on Saturdays to see if attendance would increase.

In their 2008 study surveying town meeting voters in eight towns including Westford, the League of Women Voters did not find evidence for recommending a day of the week, with voters split between Saturday and a weekday, and support and opposition mirroring the committee's own internal discussions. They recommended more research, rather than making a recommendation at that time.

Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How It Works, which compiles data over several decades from the 1970s through the 1990s on town meetings across communities in Vermont, looked at day vs night meetings. Night meetings seemed to average 4% lower participation (21.6% of voters vs 17.3%), but that data is complicated by the tendency at the time for larger towns with lower average attendance in general to hold their meetings at night. The data is further convoluted by the fact that some towns switching from day to night meetings and vice versa saw increased attendance.

Finally, a 2018 survey in Lynnfield indicated that location, date, and day of the week were medium to low factors for voters in their attendance. Work conflicts and time of meeting (along with length of meeting) were consistently big reasons for voters not being able to attend, both for those who always or usually attended and for those who rarely or never did. Notably, for those who indicated they never attend, childcare and lack of knowledge (specifically of where the meeting was being held) were larger factors than in the other groups.

Conclusion

Considering all of the nuances and tradeoffs inherent in the decision of when town meeting should take place, there has been no compelling reason identified through the current work of this committee to change the date of annual or special town meeting. Our research on meeting dates shows attendance is influenced more by population size and the meeting-to-meeting variation of contentious articles than by meeting date and time choice.

It should be noted that any change to the date of Annual Town Meeting would require a change to our town bylaws, which would be voted on at a prior Annual Town Meeting by the voters in attendance and could approve or reject such a proposal.