

# A Voter's Guide to Vermont Town Meeting Procedure

Since 1762, Town Meeting has been the basic system of governance for Vermont. Town Meetings are held on the first Tuesday of March (although they may legally be held on any of the three preceding days). Fire districts, school districts, villages, even some cities hold meetings at which voters have an opportunity to speak and be heard and vote on budgets and other articles affecting the life of the municipality.

These "meetings" aren't meetings of selectboards or other municipal bodies. Town Meetings are meetings of the voters, where binding action can be taken based on warned articles.

Town Meeting is the one time of the year when voters have their marching orders on appropriations and policy. If you

don't go to Town Meeting, you can't beef about what goes on during the rest of the year. Some people go to Town Meeting and leave in frustration. They are put off by the formality of the meeting. They don't understand the basic rules of parliamentary procedure, and may be embarrassed to ask how to frame a motion, make an amendment, or ask for a paper ballot vote on a question.

This pamphlet was developed to provide the basic rules on the conduct of town and other municipal meetings. Knowing how it all works—how motions are handled, the role of the town moderator, voting methods, and more—is critical for anyone who wants to play an active part in the Vermont Town Meeting.

Town Meetings in Vermont are governed by Robert's Rules of Order,\* as amended by several state laws:

Meeting. No articles or subjects may be raised that did not appear on the warning.

up or down, it cannot be reconsidered after the assembly has taken up work on another article; for an article to be reconsidered, a new warning and meeting are required unless, immediately following a decision on an article, voters move to reconsider the vote.

to request a paper ballot, state law permits seven voters to request one (unless the town has adopted a higher threshold for paper ballots).

Robert's Rules of Order are published in various editions. Buy and read the latest edition. Stick with it; the time you spend will be worth the effort. Remember to bring your copy of Robert's Rules to Town Meeting, and don't hesitate to use it to raise issues of procedure with the moderator.

\*A town may adopt some other rules of order if it chooses.

State law requires that Town Meetings be warned for thirty to forty days. The warning and notice are posted in at least three public places in town, including the town hall, the town clerk's office, and the town library, unless the town puts them in the town report.

The warning and notice announce the date, time, place, and agenda of the meeting. They also give information on voter registration, including the cut-off date for applying for addition to the checklist (which is always at noon on the third Saturday preceding Town Meeting day). If the Australian ballot is used, the warning and notice provide information about when polls open and how to get an absentee ballot. You may also complete a voter registration form on the day of the election. You'll need to present your voter registration card at the election the same day.

The warning for Town Meeting is prepared by the selectboard; it includes articles proposed by the board that deal with town business. Sometimes articles suggested by individual townspeople will be included on the warning; otherwise, voters may petition to have articles added to the warning for consideration at the Town Meeting (as long as the subjects of the articles are not illegal, frivolous, or beyond the authority of the electorate). Petitions must be signed by 5 percent of the voters on the checklist, and the town clerk must receive petitions at least forty calendar days before Town Meeting.

A petition should begin with the statement, "We, the undersigned voters of the town, hereby petition the selectboard to add the following article to the warning for the annual meeting:." This statement should appear on each page of the petition.

Examples of articles that might be added to the warning by petition include a request for an appropriation for a social service organization, a proposal to change the size of the selectboard, a request that the delinquent-tax collector be put on salary in lieu of fees, or a recommendation that budgets be voted by Australian ballot in the future. A petitioned article might set a time for Town Meeting to begin, change the location of the town polling place or require the town plan to be approved by the electorate rather than the selectboard.

Petitions may also cover political subjects of interest to petitioners, but must do so in an advisory way. For example, an article might suggest that the electorate support or oppose a particular bill, urge the legislature to adopt or prohibit something, or send a message to the governor, the president, or even the United Nations, expressing its position on a particular issue. The Vermont Supreme Court has ruled that these petitions are allowed solely at the discretion of the selectboard or school board.

1. The school board is prohibited from entering into a contract with teachers by a petitioned vote. Some things voters simply don't have the authority to do.

Make sure your petition has a place for each voter's signature and printed name and address. Get plenty of signatures (in addition to the minimum) to ensure that a majority of voters on the checklist and that the petition will survive a challenge by the town.

business at Town Meeting; the moderator sometimes steps down for this election to avoid any appt p7(e)-80-12(t)r §pa5ownr9.5

# Basic Parliamentary Motions

Remember that a Town Meeting can't take up an issue unless it is warned. The same general principle applies to amendments. You can't take an article to buy a truck and amend it to buy a road grader, because the amendment raises a subject that hasn't been warned. For the same reason, you can't convert an article to raise money by taxes

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