



Town Meeting in the Modern Era

According to William Galvin, Secretary of our Commonwealth, "The purest form of democratic governing is practiced in a Town Meeting. In use for over 300 years and still today, it has proven to be a valuable means for many Massachusetts taxpayers to voice their opinions and directly effect change in their communities. Here in this ancient American assembly, you can make your voice heard as you and your neighbors decide the course of the government closest to you."

Indeed, 300 hundred years ago when there was roughly one vote per family (the male landowner), and people did not travel outside their communities to work, and when there was no night shift, this may have been true. However, in this day and age, Town Meeting disenfranchises people who work odd shifts, people who travel on business, and people with care-giving responsibilities. Never mind the fact we would be unlikely to be able to hear all 21,000 plus neighbors at a Town Meeting.

My bottom line criticism of open Town Meeting is the lack of a suitable mechanism for people who cannot attend to cast their vote on the important issues that face us as a community.

Any person with any type of care giving responsibilities, must provide, at their expense, some sort of dependent care in order to exercise their vote. This might even be construed as a Poll Tax. Caregivers in our community are not offered a proxy vote so that the wishes of all age eligible parties could be expressed as a household.

The business traveler is unable to exercise their vote if they are unable to attend. The Amendment process eliminates the possibility of an absentee mechanism. The night-shift worker is disenfranchised for the same reason. The citizen unable to attend, for whatever reason, is disenfranchised by the open Town Meeting.

There are more than 21,000 people now living in Acton. The open Town Meeting has outlived its usefulness. Designed for a different age when the community was very much smaller, it has been a liability for some time. We, as a community, can arrive at a better solution.

Typically when population sizes increase, direct democracies give way to more republican forms of government. Indeed this has historically been the case for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and to a greater extent the rest of the United States. Interestingly, the Commonwealth does have recommendations for us to consider as we seek to eliminate disenfranchisement from our Town.

The Commonwealth has taken the time to demarcate levels of direct democratic involvement as they relate to population. It is the Commonwealth's sense that populations less than 6,000 are best governed by open Town Meetings. For those greater than 6,000 there is the option to move to a limited (representative) Town Meeting. For population sizes greater than 12,000 there is the option to take on a City form of governance.

My sense is that we like open Town Meeting because it allows us to directly participate (if we so choose) in the discussions and debate around the issues. I would hazard a guess that we also prefer the more direct democratic nature of an open Town Meeting. I would say that, at this moment in time, the solution for Acton falls outside what the Commonwealth offers us as choices, and we should seek to innovate.

Perhaps we could do it this way:

We could continue to hold a non-binding open Town Meeting where the issues before the Town would be discussed and voted upon by the people who can attend. At the conclusion of Town Meeting, the issues, any amendments, and the non-binding vote results would be published on the Town website. Finally, two weeks after Town Meeting, the issues, as voted (with amendments), would be put to a general election with the option of filing an absentee ballot.

The benefits of such a plan are clear and three-fold. We would preserve the one-person-one-vote principal of an open Town Meeting. We would continue to have a forum for open and public debate on the town issues. Lastly, we would now enjoy the re-enfranchisement of those who by virtue of personal or business circumstance could not attend the actual Town Meeting.

On March 29th please cast one of your votes for Alex Horovitz