

## **Brief Introductory Guide to Town Meeting**

**Town Meeting** acts as the legislative branch of town government and considers a wide variety of decisions including:

- the type of programs and services that town government offers,
- the amount that the Town will spend annually on services including police, fire, education, and a myriad of other activities,
- by-laws and other rules and regulations including state enabling legislation,
- other items that impact the quality of life in town.

**The Warrant:** The Board of Selectmen schedule Town Meeting and set the agenda by publishing the “Warrant.” Under state law, “Every town meeting shall be called by a warrant issued by the board of selectmen, which shall state the time and place at which the meeting is to convene and, by separate articles, the subject matter to be acted upon.” [MGL, Chapter 39, Section 10]

**Rules and Procedures:** The rules and procedures for Town Meeting are outlined in three places. Town Meeting Time published by the Mass Moderators Association provides the primary framework for the proceedings. Requirements for Town Meeting are also specified in the Truro Town Charter and in Massachusetts General Law (MGL c.39, §§ 9-18).

## **Key Participants**

**Quorum** – The minimum number of registered voters is set in Section 2-1-4 of the Truro Town Charter. Quorum for Annual Town Meeting or Special Town Meeting is 100 registered voters.

**The Moderator** – The moderator presides (runs) the meeting. Under state law, “The moderator shall preside and regulate the proceedings, decide all questions of order, and make public declaration of all votes.” [MGL, Chapter 39, Section 15] The Moderator is elected by Truro voters to a three-year term.

**Town Clerk** – Serves as clerk of Town Meeting, and creates the official record of the proceedings. The record of the clerk is final and may not be changed or edited by the town meeting or anyone else but the Town Clerk.

**Select Board** – Is the executive branch of town government. As the town’s executives the Select Board take an active role in presenting motions for various articles and make recommendations to the meeting. The Select Board also creates the Warrant.

**Finance Committee** – The Finance Committee is responsible for analyzing the fiscal impact of proposed warrant articles and making reports and recommendations to Town Meeting. [MGL, Chapter 39, Sec. 16]

**Other Boards and Committees** – When appropriate other committees, such as the Planning Board or Board of Health may bring forward articles and also be called upon to give recommendation on articles pertaining to their areas of responsibility.

**Citizen Petition:** Any citizen can petition an article to Annual or Special Town Meeting. A petition on an approved form and signed by ten registered voters of the Town shall secure inclusion of an article in the warrant of the Annual Town Meeting. A petition on an approved form and signed by 100 registered voters of the Town shall secure inclusion of an article in the warrant of a Special Town Meeting. (Town Charter 2-3-3). Forms can be obtained from the Town Clerk.

## The Process

**The Warrant** - The warrant acts as the agenda for Town Meeting. It consists of a series of *articles*, each of which provides a *general* description of the action proposed. The Moderator will typically follow the order of articles as contained in the warrant, although the order may be changed by the moderator, or the Town Meeting body by motion.

**Motions** - All actions taken by a town meeting are taken by votes upon motions. While the warrant article describes the general topic to be addressed, the *main motion* provides the specific details. The motion must be “within the scope” of the Article, which means that the proposed action in the motion is sufficiently close to what was stated in the Article that the voters have been amply warned about the potential action in advance of the meeting. The Moderator will customarily turn to the sponsor of an article to make the motion. The term “motion” also refers to various procedural actions that the Town Meeting might take, such as a Motion to Adjourn the meeting for that day and resume the following evening. Please see the Table of Motions for more specific information about motions.

**Debate** - Following any presentation by the sponsor of the article and upon hearing the recommendations of town committees and boards, the moderator will “open the floor” for debate.

- All comments should be restricted to the subject being debated and conducted in a respectful and courteous manner.
- “No person shall address a town meeting without leave of the moderator, and all persons shall, at the request of the moderator, be silent.” [MGL, Chapter 39, Sec. 17]
- A motion can be amended so long as the amendment, just like the main motion itself, stays within “the scope of the article.” The amendment may consist of adding, deleting or substituting words in the motion to be amended and requires majority vote for approval. Proposed amendments must be in writing, except if determined by the Moderator otherwise.
- **Vote** - Once debate is concluded or a motion is passed to end debate, a vote is taken on the motion before the meeting. Many votes require a majority vote, though higher standards (typically two-thirds) may be required by Massachusetts law or Truro by-laws.

**Ending the Meeting: “Adjournment” vs. “Dissolving”** - The term “adjourn” refers to a temporary stop to a meeting with the intention to resume later. The term “dissolve” refers to the final closure of the meeting. A motion to dissolve is in order after all of the articles on the warrant have been addressed.