

VILLAGE VIEW

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Town Meeting is a New England tradition, part of our heritage, and as such, has been sacrosanct as far as Barnstable is concerned. But exactly how traditional is town meeting at present?

By definition, town meeting is the sovereign authority for operating our municipality, a corporation less complex than a city. By definition, town meeting is a general assembly of all qualified voters, at which time all officers are elected, and decisions are made regarding all local matters.

Town meeting today is a far cry from that definition.

Weeks now separate elections from the general assemblage. No longer do all qualified voters have an opportunity to cast their votes for or against articles in the warrant. No longer are most decisions made at town meeting a reflection of the wishes of the constituency.

Approximately ten years ago Barnstable voters became so numerous there was no meeting place large enough to accommodate all who wished to attend. The auditorium at the high school, presided over by the elected Moderator, overflowed into the cafeteria where an alternate moderator was appointed to maintain control of additional voters assembled there, and to interpret, with the help of a loud-speaker system, each question as it arose in the other large room.

It was cumbersome, to say the least. After study, an elected Charter Commission proposed Barnstable change to representative town meeting; and voters accepted this plan.

With that, three principal characteristics of town meeting were eliminated. No longer did the assemblage consist of all qualified voters; no longer were all officials elected at the meeting; no longer were the views of the constituency fairly represented.

Those qualified to vote at town meeting were at first a group of approximately 200 people, duly elected by their friends and neighbors. The representatives or members, although open to recommendations and suggestions from the people who elected them, were charged to cast their votes "in the best interests of the Town of Barnstable." So sworn, the judgement of what was best for the town was left to each individual qualified.

Townpeople not elected as representatives have no way of knowing prior to his election what positions any member would take on issues; therefore election of town meeting members is a popularity contest.

It could not be otherwise: town meeting and election day was traditionally conducted at one and the same time. Well within the memory of most town residents, town meeting opened the day after elections were held. This has all changed; for reasons, yes; but changed.

In order to vote intelligently at town meetings, elected representatives need time to familiarize themselves with the warrant articles, and prepare themselves. Years ago, when the warrant contained ten or fifteen articles, necessary preparation time was short. There weren't that many decisions to make; now, with articles of the warrant numbering upwards of 200, weeks of lead-time are necessary to become familiar with the facts.

Another reason for separating election day and town meeting has been conflict between scheduled town meeting sessions and religious holidays that usually occur in March, as does election day. As the warrant grew longer, and the meetings were adjourned to night after night, town meetings dragged on interminably throughout the month of March,

sometimes into April.

A third reason was that the warrant itself was seldom ready prior to election day; the electorate was, for the most part, uninformed about problems to be faced by town meeting members, once they were elected. This is still true today; thus we elect representatives without foreknowledge of the questions they will vote upon and without foreknowledge of what positions they will take on those questions.

This is a far cry from qualified voters assembling to reach decisions regarding all local matters. This is a far cry from full representation of the constituency. This is a far cry from the traditional town meeting. The privilege of a direct voice in local government has been removed from the voter. The responsibility to exercise that privilege has been eroded. Although any registered voter is entitled to speak at town meeting, the percentage who do is hardly representative.

In practice, as Barnstable adjusted itself to limited town meeting, there was at first a healthy cross-section of the population elected to membership. Those people did their homework, studied the warrant from end to end, attended dozens of meetings to prepare themselves for the final assemblage, took their places at the appointed day and hour, and attended faithfully the day-long and night-long sessions.

They voted, when able, to operate the town as efficiently and economically as possible. When able, they attempted to save the taxpayer's dollar. Distressing to many members was the eventual revelation that nine times out of ten they were in no position measurably to affect how the tax dollar would be spent.

Town salary increases and fringe benefits are determined by arbitration between town employees and officials; the voting members were empowered only to confirm the contracts.

School budget pros and cons are hammered out between school administrators, the school committee and the town finance department. Once submitted to town meeting, the school budget is inviolate. If voted down, the school committee can sue. Massachusetts courts have never sided with voters on this issue; instead, taxpayers are fined for their trouble.

Beyond the salary and school budgets, representatives face a barrage of articles; among them, proposed funding for police equipment, road building and maintenance, trash disposal, and sewer system expansion and maintenance.

Since salary and school budgets are foreordained for passage, since it's unthinkable to cut police budgets with public safety already precarious, since it's hardly economical to let roads and highways deteriorate, and since waste disposal in Barnstable must be dealt with in the interest of public health, money articles are seldom denied.

There are some insignificant ways members can effect economies. Appropriations for holiday celebrations can be wiped out; programs for handicapped, disabled, the young and the old can fall to the axe. And many do. The pennies saved are but sops.

As recognition of their feebleness dawns on them, non-politician members drop out; feeling ineffective, even impotent, carries a natural inclination to cease attempts. Thus erosion of town meeting as a voice of the public is inevitable.

A return to open town meeting is one solution. Dividing the town into subdivisions, each village responsible for its own government, is another. Scrapping the town meeting system entirely and hiring a professional town manager is a third. Scrapping town government entirely and instituting county-wide government might offer all Cape towns an economical solution, one that works well in other parts of the country.

The present system is wasteful of time and money; whatever changes are made in our local government, and changes should be made, should either give each voter a voice in local affairs, or should give none such a voice. The present system disenfranchises the majority of the electorate.