December 18, 2019


Absent: Harry Bohrs, Susan Granoff, Pamela Lodish, Mariah Nobrega, Carlos Ridruejo, and Charles Swartz.

Also Attending: Town Moderator Sandy Gadsby, Select Board Chair Bernard Greene, Town Meeting members Rich Nangle, Kea Van Der Ziel, and Mark Gray. School Committee Sharon Abramowitz was also in attendance at the beginning of the meeting.

The Chair called the meeting to order at 7:30 PM, and noted that the only agenda item was a Town Meeting Post Mortem. A wide-ranging discussion followed and included comments on the six nights of Town Meeting; the Advisory Committee’s (AC) preparation for and participation at Town Meeting; possible future changes to manage long and complex warrants; and the role of the Advisory Committee going forward.

Advisory Committee Scorecard: It was noted that for several significant articles, including those that would impact the budget (specifically Article 30-Community Engagement Plan; Article 29-Equity Fund; and Article 24-Citizen Complaints), the AC’s recommendations were ignored. Passion (and ideology) outweighed budgetary concerns, and in some cases, budget impact was only briefly mentioned. Some members felt that the AC’s role is to make recommendations based on its best efforts to analyze articles and on its best advice at a particular point in time, and that if Town Meeting disagrees with its recommendation, so be it. The Committee’s job is to raise red flags as appropriate, and make sure that Town Meeting members understood them. The implications of an article being approved (or rejected) need to be made clear by the AC’s point person for the article.

Other members believe that that the AC is an important source of information on finances and financial impacts for Town Meeting and although there’s no obligation to “win” Town Meeting’s vote, there is an obligation to persuade a majority (or in the case of bonding, 2/3) to vote in a way that takes into account the Town’s finances. One member pointed out that some AC members voted one way on some articles but changed their vote at Town Meeting and that this was problematic.
Other comments:

The financial literacy of Town Meeting members is all over the place and the Committee need to come up with a way for the AC to be consistent in its financial analyses and to come up with a uniform way to communicate that information to everyone, particularly those members who have very basic financial knowledge.

- Our reports should include more graphics when that would help TMMs better understand the impact of their decisions.
- The budget book is dense, perhaps too dense to be comprehensible to many TMMS; it needs an executive summary.

There are special interest groups in Town Meeting: Climate Change, the Public Schools, PAX, and the Environment (Green Caucus) but there’s no constituency for issues with financial impacts. How can the AC incorporate these factions into its perspective? The Green Caucus is now a de facto AC and tells its members how to vote. It was also noted that some precincts have pre-Town Meeting caucuses during which some members may be influenced/influenced on how to vote on particular articles.

Perhaps before every Town Meeting there should be a financial overview to provide context for those warrant articles that have budgetary or departmental workload implications.

At this Town Meeting, ideology was apparently more important than the budget, and because the AC has only one turn at the podium and therefore only one opportunity to point out the financial impacts of articles, such comments get lost when there are multiple article supporters who are not concerned about the budget or believe that their “cause” is so important that it should be supported by budget reductions in other areas (TBD).

**Warrant Articles:** There is currently no way of determining whether three Special Town Meetings with 38 warrant articles is the new normal for the fall or whether this recent experience was an anomaly. Members noted that it was not just the number of articles but also the complexity of some that made it difficult to explore all of them, comprehend their purpose, and anticipate their impacts on Town departments and on the Town budget. The Planning and Regulation Subcommittee was assigned either singly or jointly some of the most challenging articles and at least two of them required multiple public hearings.

- Once the Warrant closes, the AC should have a meeting to review the articles and brainstorm as to what questions should be asked by individual subcommittees and what additional information is needed before votes are taken.
- Subcommittees should have a checklist of information to be provided by the petitioners and not schedule a public hearing until that list is completed.

Other Comments:
Petitioners should understand that it is their responsibility to gather the information and preferably to include it in the warrant article’s explanation, thereby increasing the possibility that relevant parties, such as department heads, Town Counsel, or the Moderator, have been consulted.

There is a need to educate petitioners as to the necessity for more detail and more substance in the articles they submit. Some articles that were submitted were not well thought through, and although AC members can sometimes assist with word-smithing, it is not their job to rewrite articles or to fill in the missing gaps in information and detail.

The Brookline Fiscal Advisory Committee (BFAC) will offer recommendations to address some of these problems in its upcoming report. Increasing the number of signatures required for a Special Town Meeting is one option; requiring all articles with budgetary impacts to be submitted to the Annual Town Meeting at which time the annual budget is voted is another. As one member noted, the current practice of having budget items, zoning and general bylaw amendments as well as Resolutions on a wide range of topics makes Town Meeting a free-for-all.

Another possibility is for the AC to consider all warrant articles but only do a “deep dive” and make recommendations for those that have budgetary or operational ramifications. A clear set of criteria for deciding for which articles the Committee will make recommendations is needed before this approach is implemented.

Role of the Advisory Committee: There was a lengthy discussion concerning the role of the Committee at Town Meeting and in Town governance. The idea of being solely a finance committee appealed to some members, but others felt that as part of the article vetting process, the AC is the most qualified and most objective entity to thoroughly examine all matters that come before Town Meeting. Without the information that is included in the Advisory Committee’s reports in the Combined Reports or from the podium, particularly regarding such matters as zoning changes, Town Meeting members could end up making decisions based on misinformation or insufficient information. In addition, Advisory Committee reports submitted to the Combined Reports, unlike the shorter and less analytical reports from the Select Board, establish a legislative history on each proposal that is presented to Town Meeting.

Other Comments:

The Combined Reports, particularly for 30+ article Town Meetings, is too long and consequently is not read, at least in its entirety, by most Town Meeting members.

A one-page Executive Summary highlighting budget and operational impacts, if appropriate, should accompany all AC write-ups. Eliminating repetition, particularly with site plans, spreadsheets, and the reproduction of existing portions of the Zoning or General by-laws would
make the document shorter. There is no need for the petitioner, the AC, and the Select Board to all submit the same documents as part of their reports.

Members need to pay more attention to the comments we make to Town Meeting on behalf of the Committee. The past practice of “on the one hand, on the other hand” is not an effective technique to use to gain votes. More explicit financial information, when appropriate, is needed, as is higher-level analysis. Presentations need to have “more punch.”

- It might be more effective to have the AC representative speak towards the end of an article’s presentation, as opposed to first, second, or even third, so that if necessary, assumptions or arguments made by the petitioner can be addressed. Or perhaps an AC speaker could lead off, followed by an AC speaker to wrap up (although that will require close coordination with the Moderator).
- AC members need to be more alert to misstatements from the podium or from the floor and be ready to raise a Point of Order.
- Members who are well versed in an article’s subject matter and details should sit at the AC table so they can let the Moderator know that they are available to answer questions or clarify information.

AC members are disadvantaged by not being able to participate in the discussions that take place on the TMMA listserv. One suggestion was to post the Committee’s recommendation on a warrant article immediately after it has voted so that Town Meeting members are made aware of the Committee’s position, even before the Combined Reports are published.

**Relationship to Town Meeting:** Given the number of Town Meeting members serving their first term and the limited interest(s) of some of them, it is important to remind all Town Meeting members of the role of the Advisory Committee and to establish better communication with Town Meeting early in run-up to Town Meeting. This can include postings on the TMMA listserv for informational purposes (see above) and being available the week before Town Meeting to discuss the Committee’s recommendations and answer questions. Such interactions could dispel the misconception that the AC enjoys a position of power and does its work “in secret”.

It is important that the first time a Town Meeting Member learns of the Advisory Committee’s position is not when the Committee’s representative speaks from the podium. In addition, Town Meeting is unlikely to realize that the Committee plays an instrumental role in improving articles as they make their way through the vetting process. This recognition would counterbalance the perception that the Advisory Committee plays an adversarial role.

**Miscellaneous Comments and Suggestions:**

1) Reinstate the “Reconciliation Meeting” between the Select Board and the AC to address minor differences in each body’s motion;

2) Go back to the AC meeting two nights each week;
3) Start warrant article review a week earlier in order to ensure that Town Meeting is over by Thanksgiving;

4) Poll TMMs to learn who Town Meeting members rely on for guidance on how to vote, and on when Town Meeting members make their decisions on how to vote;

5) Consider amending by-laws to eliminate the requirement that each precinct must have a Town Meeting member representative on the AC and replace it with the requirement that each precinct must have a resident from that precinct on the Advisory Committee, thus enabling the Moderator to appoint individuals with relevant backgrounds (Finance, Construction, Real Estate, Business, etc.) for the work of the AC and to create greater diversity on the Committee;

6) Consider assigning lower Warrant Article numbers to those articles with budgetary impacts, including resolutions. Traditionally, resolutions have been given higher numbers, consequently they are either discussed late in the evening or on the last night of Town Meeting, times during which there are fewer Town Meeting members in attendance. Despite they’re being resolutions, they now seem to carry significant weight and should be treated accordingly.

Respectfully Submitted,

Carla W. Benka