

Warrant Article 9: Increase the Required Number of Signatures for Petition Articles in Special Town Meetings from 10 to 50

The Schools Subcommittee held a public hearing on WA9 on Wednesday, March 29 at 7:00pm via Zoom. Present were subcommittee members Cliff Brown (Chair, AL 14), Ben Birnbaum (AL 9), Katherine Florio (TM 10), Stephen Reeders (AL 14), and Carolyn Thall (TM 16). Also present was the petitioner Neil Gordon (TM 1). Anthony Ishak (TM 1) was present as a member of the public.

Recommendation: Favorable Action by a vote of 5-0-0.

To see if the Town will amend Section 2.1.13 of the General Bylaws, as follows (deletions in ~~strikeout~~, additions in **bold underline**): 8 SECTION 2.1.13 PETITION ARTICLES The Select Board shall insert in the warrant for every special town meeting all subjects the insertion of which shall be requested of them in writing by ~~ten (10)~~ **fifty (50)** or more registered voters in the Town. Or take any other action relative thereto.

Executive Summary:	<p>In recent years there has been a proliferation of Warrant Articles filed for Annual and Special Town Meetings. This volume of articles places a burden on staff, the Select Board, Advisory Committee, and other Boards, Committees and Commissions involved in vetting, editing, amending, and voting on the Articles.</p> <p>The proposed change seeks to ease those burdens and also to protect the integrity of the Warrant and the review process.</p> <p>The change would apply only to Article submissions for Special Town Meetings because the Town has flexibility there. Due to State statute, the Town has no flexibility with regard to Article submissions for Annual Town Meeting.</p>
Voting Yes will...	Change the number of signatures required to file a Warrant Article for a Special Town Meeting from 10 to 50.
Voting No will...	Cause no change to the signature requirement for the filing of a Warrant Article for a Special Town Meeting.
Financial impact	None foreseen.
Legal implications	None known.

The language of the Article is:

To see if the Town will amend Section 2.1.13 of the General Bylaws, as follows (deletions in ~~strikeout~~, additions in **bold underline**): 8 SECTION 2.1.13 PETITION ARTICLES The Select Board shall insert in the warrant for every special town meeting all subjects the insertion of

which shall be requested of them in writing by ~~ten (10)~~ **fifty (50)** or more registered voters in the Town. Or take any other action relative thereto.

Discussion

The petitioner, Mr. Gordon, noted that in recent years there has been a proliferation of Warrant Articles filed for Annual and Special Town Meetings, some of which are less than fully articulated or well vetted. He said the volume places a burden on staff, the Select Board, Advisory Committee and other Boards, Committees and Commissions involved in the process of reviewing, vetting editing, amending and voting on the Articles.

The proposed change seeks to ease these burdens and also to protect the integrity of the Warrant, the vetting, and the review process. Mr. Gordon asserted this change would also underscore the integrity of Town Meeting as a serious deliberative body.

The signature requirement change would apply only to Article submissions for Special Town Meetings because the Town has flexibility there. Due to State statute, the Town has no flexibility with regard to Article submissions for Annual Town Meeting.

Mr. Brown asked for comments or questions from the public. Mr. Ishak commented that 50 signatures is too high because some articles can be hard to explain, which slows down signature collection. He also noted that many people do not have the time needed to collect that many signatures. He stated that fears this would make it difficult for the public to file articles. He suggested 20- 25 signatures as the requirement. Mr. Gordon noted that he has heard feedback that this requirement would be “undemocratic.” He reiterated his point that “Town Meeting is not a suggestion box. It is a serious legislature” and that this is the basis for WA 9.

Mr. Birnbaum asked where the number 10 came from. Mr. Gordon replied state law requires 100 signatures but a Home Rule Petition allows Brookline to set a number between 10 and 100 in our Bylaw. Mr. Readers said he’s been frustrated with warrant articles that have come forward that are not mature, and he supports raising the bar. Ms. Florio asked how long it takes to get 50 signatures. Mr. Gordon asserted it is not difficult and there are easy methods to collect signatures (“It’s not hard to do but it takes some effort”). Ms. Florio asked where a newcomer can find guidance on filing WAs and Mr. Gordon replied there is information online. Ms. Thall said she agreed with previous comments that this would be an appropriate measure that would align with the seriousness of Town Meeting. Mr. Brown asked about the origin of the 10 standard and whether it was based on old population percentages. He said anything is welcome that makes people step back and take a close look at what they’re doing.

Roll Call vote: Yes: Birnbaum, Florio, Reeders, Thall, Brown.

Recommendation: The Schools Subcommittee recommends FAVORABLE ACTION on Warrant 9 by a vote of 5-0-0.

Recording: https://brooklinema.zoomgov.com/rec/share/ge6gli_XptA94qN0-MFAhPqtRfdBsOO3vd_pdAxjHXUkHbPyihTXmc5kq7Dm4IMcx.0rE3SALtdhkk634q