

Introductory Guide to Town Meeting

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

- It sets the salaries for the elected officials.
- It votes to appropriate money to run the town.
- It votes on the town's local statutes, which are called bylaws.
- Other items that impact the quality of life in town.

The Warrant: The Select Board schedules 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 Select Board, 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]

Key Participants

Quorum – The minimum number of voters, set by town by-law, required in attendance for Town Meeting. The quorum in Marblehead is 300 .

The Moderator – The Moderator presides over and 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]

Town Clerk – Serves as clerk of the 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 clerk.

Select Board – Is the executive branch of town government. As the town's executives the Select Board takes an active role in presenting motions for various articles and can make recommendations to the meeting.

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, Recreation and Park Commission or Board of Health, will be called upon to give recommendation on articles pertaining to their areas of responsibility within the town.

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 meeting.

The Motion - All actions taken by a town meeting are taken by votes through properly formatted and moved motions. While the 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 sufficiently 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.

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 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 amended¹ and requires majority vote for approval. Proposed amendments must be in writing.

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 town bylaws.

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.