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High Wayland Town Meeting turnout overwhelms accommodations

By **Katie Liesener**/ Daily News Staff
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WAYLAND -- The booming attendance at this year's annual and special town meetings was a boon to the town's democratic process, but also exposed deficiencies in the ability to accommodate the public's need to see, hear and participate.

"People could not really participate fully," said Moderator Peter Gossels. "We had the attendance, but we didn't have the facilities."

One difficulty was the sound system, which relies on overhead speakers in the Field House that's likely as old as the building itself, said Town Administrator Fred Turkington. The Field House was constructed in 1967.

"It's a system designed to announce basketball players coming out at a game," he said, not for the business of Town Meeting.

During the first night of annual Town Meeting, dozens of residents indicated they had trouble hearing after resident Kent George brought the problem to the moderator's attention.

"We've got a problem," said George in an interview. "They have to work with what they have, and they certainly don't have a lot of money."

Money was also a limiting factor in determining visual accommodations for the meetings.

Though a two-way visual connection was provided to the two satellite venues at last fall's special Town Meeting (allowing residents at the Field House to see speakers at other locations), the \$24,000 price tag for those connections was paid for by developer Twenty Wayland LLC, according to Turkington.

This year, it was up to the town to foot the bill. Town officials opted for one connected venue (Little Theater) instead of two, and limited visual accommodations to a one-way connection, so that residents in the Little Theater could see the Field House proceedings, but not vice-versa.

Assistant Town Administrator John Senchyshyn did not have an estimate of the town's spending for Town Meeting.

Residents who sat behind the bleachers at annual Town Meeting also could not see the proceedings because no provision had been made for a screen. According to Gossels, that also contributed to background noise, because those residents were less engaged and more likely to chat among themselves.

At April's warrant hearing, selectmen Chairman Michael Tichnor asked Turkington whether there would be a screen.

"So whenever there are chairs set up behind the bleachers, there will be a screen?" Tichnor asked.

Turkington said, "There will be a screen."

In an interview, Turkington said he did not remember whether or not plans had been made for a screen at annual Town Meeting.

"I don't think we felt at that point it was warranted if the override passed (as a ballot question)," Turkington said.

He said if the override had failed, he expected more residents would show up at Town Meeting to debate the particulars of the pared budget.

That underestimating of attendance also led to a chaotic half-hour delay while town officials struggled to find seating for a record-breaking 2,313 residents who showed up for special Town Meeting.

To continue the meeting without accommodating latecomers "would be disenfranchising people in town who came out to vote," Gossels told residents that evening.

According to the town code, when occupancy limits are exceeded, the moderator must immediately suspend proceedings.

Town officials had anticipated 2,000 to 2,200 people, based on attendance at the last special Town Meeting, Turkington said.

"We try to strike a balance between the amount of money spent on extra venues and at the same time, being prepared for the number of people who might show up," he said.

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"You can never tell how many are going to be there," said Gossels.

Turkington will head a committee of residents to investigate implementing recommendations made by the Town Meeting Study Committee in November.

"I think it's wonderful Fred (Turkington) is having this meeting so quickly after Town Meeting so it's still fresh in our minds," said Judy Currier, chairwoman of the Town Meeting Study Committee.

A handful of the recommendations were implemented this year, among them reinstating written motions and employing an assistant moderator. Currier acted as assistant moderator in the Little Theater for special Town Meeting.

"The people there were very quiet. They came to watch the process of Town Meeting and have their vote counted," she said.

This was also the first year a family-friendly room was created for parents and children in the Commons, where parents could watch the proceedings from a direct feed and children could have more room to spread out. Currier said the room worked well, though some people felt they did not have enough time to run over to the Little Theater to vote.

Most of the committee's recommendations are slated for the fall or next spring.

"We didn't want a lot of changes to give either side (on the Town Center debate) the opportunity to say, 'You changed the rules,'" Currier said.

Currier said the implementation committee would likely seek money for audiovisual improvements from grants, fund-raising or the Finance Committee.

Any resident who wishes to share a comment or recommendation with the implementation committee should e-mail Judy Currier at oberlynn2@aol.com.

Katie Liesener can be reached at 508-626-4436.

Wayland Town Meeting is a tight fit

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