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How to make Town Meeting more efficient

By **Katie Liesener**/ Staff Writer
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A committee charged with improving attendance at town meeting received an endorsement from the Board of Selectmen on Monday night for a number of its recommendations, including plans to move town meeting to Sundays and add an annual town meeting in the fall.

Last year's Town Meeting saw an average nightly attendance of 469 residents, or roughly 3 percent of the population, which was the highest attendance rate in five years. Committee members said they hoped to improve attendance further by making town meeting more efficient and convenient, with information on important civic matters more accessible and understandable, particularly for those not used to following town government.

"There's a void between town committees and the populace," said committee member Kent George. "(Some residents) can't attend (committee) meetings for the same reasons it's hard for them to attend town meeting."

The committee determined that one of those reasons was the difficulty late weeknight meetings pose to seniors and young families. Committee members and selectmen agreed that the change to Sunday afternoons - which would be implemented on a trial basis no later than spring 2007 - would be better for seniors who may not feel comfortable driving at night and for families who may find it easier to arrange for child care on the weekend.

Selectmen also approved an earlier start time for subsequent meetings, if necessary, on Monday, Wednesday and Thursday nights. Those meetings would start at 7 p.m., 45 minutes earlier than previous town meetings.

Selectman Bill Whitney expressed concern about the proposed time being too early for people who work in Boston.

"I come from Boston too," said Judy Currier, committee chairwoman. "Seven p.m. is certainly less convenient for me; but for three nights, I could live with it."

Whitney also had reservations about a committee recommendation that the town hold two annual town meetings - one in spring for budget matters and another in the fall for all other town business.

He said he worried the provision would "unduly tie the town's hands" by limiting financial discussions to the spring. Selectmen decided to refer the recommendation to town counsel to review the wording.

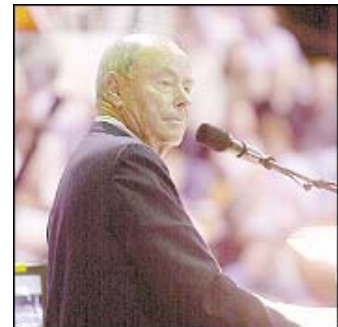
Selectmen also approved the following items:

- Holding a "State of the Town" forum prior to Town Meeting on an experimental basis to share information and opinions about issues facing the town.
- Previewing major spending articles in a live cable broadcast, during which questions could be taken in person, by telephone and by e-mail for live broadcast and then replayed on cable or the Web, also on an experimental basis.
- Providing a guide to town meeting procedure.
- Expanding the warrant to include more background information on articles, along with a contact for more information.

Though the committee has fulfilled its charge, Currier said, several committee members have volunteered to see some of the recommendations through to implementation, which the selectmen endorsed.

For example, the committee will seek outside funding for improving the Field House acoustics, lighting and sound system and purchasing a projection system to show motions and amendments, all recommendations that selectmen approved on the condition that funding was secured through grants or donations.

Other committee members will work on organizing a volunteer effort to drive seniors to Town Meeting, exploring options for organizing or providing child care, and creating a "family friendly" area in the commons. Committee member Juliette Fey said she envisioned a satellite location where families could watch the meeting on TV and have their vote counted as well as eat, spread out, and have their children with them.



Town Moderator C. Peter R. Gossels oversees the second largest turnout for a town meeting in the town's history last November. (Staff photo by Milton Amador)

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The committee, which was formed in May, based its recommendations in part on input gathered from two public hearings and a survey of over 300 residents.

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