

Town meeting improvements aired

By John Hilliard / Daily News Staff

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WAYLAND -- While this month's special Town Meeting boasted an incredible attendance of more than 1,600 people, the second largest in the town's history, a committee is looking at ways to keep those numbers up at regularly scheduled annual town meetings.

Town Meeting Study Committee Chairwoman Judy Currier said her 18-member board developed a list of recommendations after surveying about 300 residents, holding public meetings and comparing town meetings in other towns.

"The most prevalent comments were (Town Meeting) takes too long, it's too many nights, the Field House is tremendously uncomfortable," said Currier. "And many people said it seemed to be a club."

The committee has recommended changes that would improve communication between officials and voters, streamline the Meeting, better meet the needs of residents and change the culture of Town Meeting to make it more welcoming for voters.

Currier said Town Meeting could be more efficient if the debate had tighter time limits and there were guides for voters to understand the information provided by town officials.

"Some issues are just too complex for the average citizen to cast a vote," without assistance, said Currier. "The better informed you are before you get there, the faster the meeting will go."

She said the challenge the committee faced was trying to balance voters' commitment to attending Town Meeting while they face the demands of everyday life.

"How do you get people at Town Meeting to discuss the budget and the day-to-day running of the town?" said Currier. "It's not exciting."

Some residents interviewed by the study committee were concerned that some Town Meeting attendees tend to dominate discussions and intimidate newcomers from speaking out or attending the event, she said.

"People didn't want to go to see posturing and town officials arguing on the floor of Town Meeting," she said.

Currier believes holding two meetings -- one in the spring and one later in the year -- would ease the pressure on voters who wish to participate in town government. Holding the Town Meeting on a Sunday is another option, she said.

The study committee also pushed for child care services for families and better promotion of public transportation for seniors and voters with disabilities. They also recommended the town take action to ensure the Field House complies with the federal Americans with Disabilities Act and other equal access laws.

Currier hopes officials put the committee's work to the test.

"Implementation is key," said Currier. "If nothing happens, we've wasted our time."

Town Moderator Peter Gossels supported the recommendations and credited the work of the study committee.

"I do think the recommendations of the committee were excellent," said Gossels, who believes many of the options should be put to use. He will prepare a response to the study committee's recommendation in the near future, he said.

But Gossels was concerned with provisions that would cut time devoted to debate and discussion. He said he works to treat voters equally at Town Meeting and disagrees there is a culture which discourages participation.

"As moderator of the town since 1982, I've tried to open it up to everybody," said Gossels. "I try to engage people, I try to involve people."

An open debate is needed for town government to function, he said, and allow residents to directly question town officials.

"I really do believe the integrity of the town has been high because we have an open Town Meeting," said Gossels.

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Selectmen Chairman Michael Tichnor said his board needs to discuss the study committee's recommendations before the town can move forward on them, but he hopes to have some in place quickly.



"There are several (options) I personally would implement as soon as possible," said Tichnor.

He said some Town Meeting debate could be "intimidating" for inexperienced voters, but a challenge would be encouraging broader participation without "stepping on other people's toes."

"It's a tough nut to crack," he said.

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