

Stowe Town Meeting Task Force Findings Report

November 7, 2016

Status: Approved by Town Meeting Task Force

Table of Contents

I.	Summary	1
II.	Significance of Town Meeting.....	2
III.	Findings	2
IV.	Reasons for decline in attendance	3
V.	Public Engagement	4
VI.	Discussion and Remedies	6
VII.	Recommendations for Increasing Attendance.....	7
VIII.	Increasing Voter Participation on Deciding the Budget.....	8
IX.	Appendices	A-1
	Appendix A. Town Meeting values	A-1
	Appendix B. Reasons why people do not attend town meeting.....	B-1
	Appendix C. Possible remedies to the decline in Town Meeting attendance	C-1
	Appendix D. Survey Results	D-1
	Appendix E. References	E-1

Town Meeting Task Force purpose: to make recommendations to the Selectboard on ways to improve attendance at Annual Meeting.

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Note: The terms “agenda” and “warning” are synonymous within this report.

I. Summary

The Stowe Selectboard created a Town Meeting Task Force to study the reasons for the decline in voter attendance at the annual town meeting and recommend changes to increase attendance. The Stowe School District conducts its annual meeting on the same date and location in a sequential timeslot.

The Task Force conducted research, undertook community engagement and deliberated internally. The decline in attendance is likely due to a combination of factors including increased population and economic activity, changes in how the town is managed and demographic, social and technological changes.

We conclude there is no single or easy remedy to reverse the decline in attendance at town meeting. However, neglect and business as usual at town meeting would certainly end in its demise.

Therefore, the Task Force recommends that the town attempt to address the attendance decline by trying a variety of approaches over the next three years.

The Task Force recommends the following to the Selectboard:

1. Promote the positive values of town meeting as identified by the Task Force.
2. Use modern communications technology to engage the public regarding town governance and town meeting.
3. Put important and forward-looking issues as articles on the agenda.
4. Create a Town of Stowe User Guide.
5. Create an ongoing entity to promote town meeting.
6. Change the starting time of the March 2017 town meeting agenda to the late afternoon or early evening. A Monday meeting would provide more opportunity to discuss Australian ballot articles than a Tuesday meeting.
7. Add an item under other business to discuss other changes to town meeting.
8. Create a town meeting attendance goal for the next three years.

The Task Force also considered the separate issue of how to increase participation in deciding the town budget. Far more voters participate in local decisions by Australian ballot than by attending town meeting. We studied a novel approach the Town of Charlotte is taking to meet the dual goals of increasing participation on the budget and preserving town meeting.

II. Significance of Town Meeting

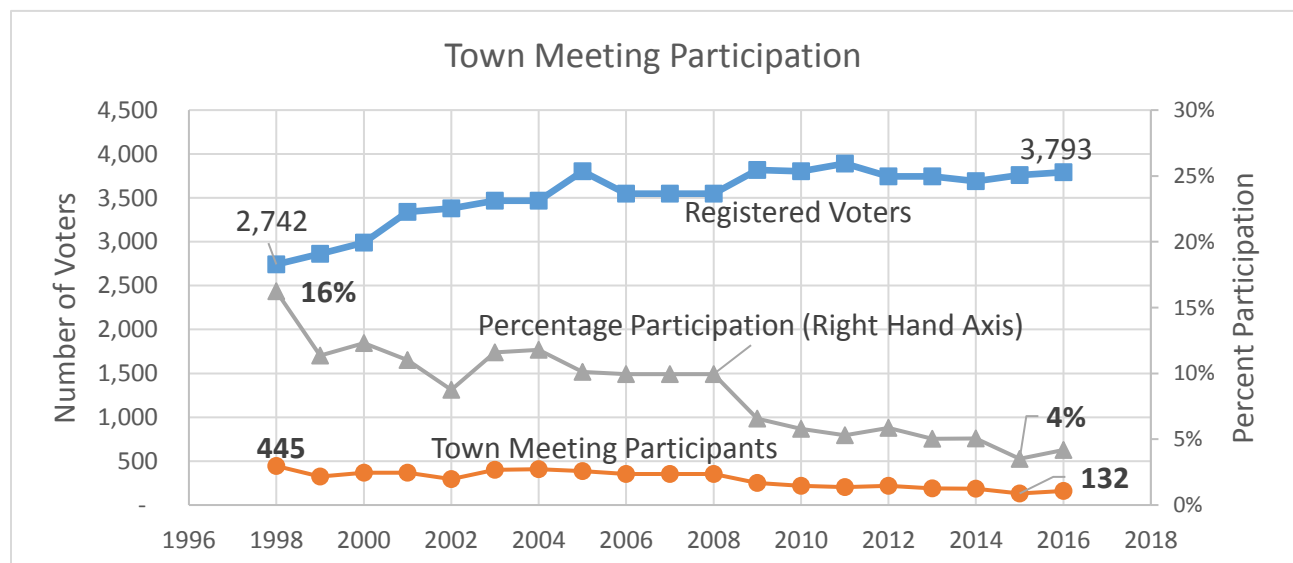
At town meeting the electorate acts as a legislative body to decide certain matters of the town. The matters are expressed as articles on an agenda, officially referred to as the warning. Any registered voter can attend. Each attendee has equal standing. Attendees can ask questions directly to the Selectboard, or to the meeting at large, on any article before the meeting. Attendees can motion to amend articles, and given the will of the attendees, have those amendments go into effect. Town meeting is democracy, direct rule by the people, at the town level. Cleisthenes, the father of Athenian democracy, would be happy.

Task Force members believe town meeting has important values that merit its continuation. These values include the opportunity for attendees to decide the budget, to listen to others and to influence the priorities of the town. Appendix A contains a list of these values.

III. Findings

Attendance at town meeting in many Vermont communities, including Stowe, has declined over the years.

Attendance at Stowe’s town meeting averaged 370 during the period of 1998-2008, remaining relatively steady throughout. About 10% of registered voters attended. Since 2009, there has been a steady decline in attendance. Attendance was 132 in 2015 and 159 in 2016, which is 3% and 4% of voters. During this 18-year period, the number of registered voters increased by about 1,000. The following chart illustrates these trends.



In 2016 Stowe conducted an Australian ballot election on the same day as town meeting. The election included ballot items on local issues and a presidential primary. There were 1,944 votes cast, representing 51% of registered voters. The 2015 Australian ballot election, which contained only local issues, had 490 votes cast, representing 13% of registered voters. These totals include early voting. This indicates significantly more Stowe voters choose to participate in local decisions using the ballot box than by attending town meeting.

The decline in attendance at town meeting is not a new phenomenon or concern.

Time was, when nearly every qualified voter took part in a town meeting. Of late years, interest has seemingly declined. As other levels of government have taken over new functions and as the complexity of modern life has increased, people have stayed away from town meeting. Vermont Life, Spring, 1947

Frank Bryan and Susan Clark, authors of **All Those in Favor**, found that attendance at 1,435 town meetings held in 210 towns between 1970 and 1998 averaged 20% of registered voters. An updated estimate by Bryan and Clark is that today 11% attend town meeting statewide. This may be optimistic if Stowe is any measure of trends.

IV. Reasons for decline in attendance

The Task Force researched reasons for the decline in attendance at town meeting.

The reasons cited by Bryan and Clark are threefold:

1. Australian ballot – “In a way, the Australian ballot is worse than deadly, because it doesn’t kill town meeting quickly.”
2. Size of a town’s population – “Town meetings work better, dramatically better, in towns with small populations.” “Analysis shows that increasing town size accounts for much of the decline in attendance at town meeting we have seen since 1970.”
3. Issues matter – When important issues are on the agenda, all other things being equal, attendance increases. Clark and Bryan mention the diminishment of “local control” due to the state’s continued tendency to limit municipal powers.

Reasons cited in other academic research:

4. Social capital - Harvard Kennedy School professor Robert Putnam in his book **Bowling Alone** describes the circumstances behind the decline in civic engagement in recent decades.

Additional reasons identified by the Task Force include:

5. Stowe town government has become more professionally managed than in the past, resulting in certain town meeting articles becoming more routine. For example, the article dealing with vehicle purchases used to present them by line item. Now the article contains an amount to be appropriated to an equipment reserve fund with no mention of individual vehicles. This method may be more efficient. It has led to less discussion. People may conclude that decisions have already been made, so why bother attending.
6. Increase in use of social media and technology that allows people to maintain relationships without meeting in person.
7. Changes in the Stowe Reporter over the past ten years, from being a Stowe-centric journal to being more regionally oriented.

Appendix B contains a list of the reasons for the decline in attendance.

V. Public Engagement

Task Force members engaged with community groups including Stowe Library Board, Stowe Vibrancy, Stowe Area Association, Stowe School Board, Lamoille Board of Realtors and Stowe Rotary to gain insight into how the community values town meeting.

Members of these organizations expressed attitudes about town meeting ranging from highly valuing it, to indifference, and to advocating the Australian ballot to decide the town budget. Some of the younger members of these organizations did not know much or anything about town meeting.

The Task Force undertook an open online public survey to understand community attitudes about town government and town meeting. The survey contained questions with multiple choice responses. Appendix D contains the survey results.

The survey was widely promoted on the town's website, Stowe Reporter, Front Page Forum and fliers distributed throughout town. Of the 224 survey respondents, 199 claimed to be Stowe registered voters and 25 not. Most of those 25 did not fill out the questions, so little can be said for this cohort.

Approximately 160 of the 199 registered voter respondents answered the questions meaningfully. An analysis of the response records and question 7 supports this. One hundred and sixty-one people responded to question 7 asking how often they vote,

with 38 leaving it blank. Questions 14 and 15 were directed towards people who either have or have not regularly attended town meeting. One hundred and fifty-eight people provided responses to either of these questions.

This analysis pertains only to the 161 respondents who claimed they voted sometimes or often on question 7.

Question 13 asked people, if they **regularly** attend town meeting, why they attend. The possible responses were civic duty, to understand the budget, and to find out what others think about town issues among others. Forty-nine people answered the question, which is 30% of the respondents. Seventy percent of the respondents are thus non-regular attendees. These percentages are disproportionate to the actual 3% to 4% of voters who attended town meeting over the past two years when compared to all 3,793 registered voters in Stowe.

- Regular town meeting attendees are 8 times over-represented in the survey.
- Non-attendees are significantly under-represented in the survey.
- The results are not adjusted for this over / under representation.

Question 7 asked how people are engaged with the Town of Stowe and the community. Of respondents who regularly attend town meeting, 100% said they vote often. Attendees are more likely to attend a Selectboard meeting, serve on a town commission and/or be involved with a business organization. Of respondents who do not attend regularly, 86% said they vote often. Non-attendees are more likely to be involved with recreational organizations. Near 100% of both attendees and non-attendees said they regularly read the Stowe Reporter and 90% said they utilize Front Porch Forum (FPF). That FPF is so popular indicates voters are comfortable and interested in receiving community information via email.

Question 8 asked how people feel about town government decisions. Forty-one percent thought the Selectboard made well informed decisions. This percentage was the same for regular attendees and non-attendees. Eighteen percent overall thought the Selectboard “did not reach out enough” when making decisions, with 30% for attendees and 16% for non-attendees respectively. Twenty-seven percent overall indicated they did not know how decisions are made, with 15% for attendees and 30% for non-attendees respectively. Attendees are on average more educated about how town government works and are more skeptical about how decisions are made.

Questions 10, 11 and 12 were designed to assess how informed people are about local governance and opportunities to participate in it. The responses indicate that 60% to 70% are well informed and 30% to 40% require some additional education.

Question 14 asked people, if they **do not** attend town meeting, why. One hundred and nine people answered the question. The most common response, at 56%, was that they could not take time off from work. The next most common response, at 30%, was that they do not like listening to other people go on and on. Child care is an issue for some. Transportation was not an issue. A variety of other reasons are cited in the responses and open ended comments.

Question 15 asked what would encourage people to attend town meeting. Finding creative ways to inform people about the issues in advance of the meeting had the largest response at 38%, with 27% for attendees and 41% for non-attendees. Holding the meeting on an evening had the next largest response at 33%, with little variation between attendees and non-attendees. There was some interest, at 25%, in moving the meeting to a Saturday day.

Several of the possible responses for question 15 dealt with structural changes to how voters decide the town and school budgets. One response was for town meeting to consist only of a very good discussion of issues followed by an Australian ballot vote for the budget. A significant number of people, at 31%, felt this was a good idea, with 24% for attendees and 36% for non-attendees. There was less support for moving the school budget back to town meeting at 22%.

VI. Discussion and Remedies

The committee researched and discussed possible remedies to address the decline in attendance at town meeting.

The Task Force reviewed the efforts in recent years by the towns of Bethel, Charlotte, East Montpelier, Middlesex and Waitsfield. Each of these communities has experienced a decline in town meeting attendance, established a committee to research the underlying issues and produced a report containing analysis and recommendations. A conclusion in many of the reports is that there is no single easy solution to address the decline. They are experimenting with various changes such as improving logistics, changing the date and time of the meeting and promotion. Bryan and Clark in their book suggest many remedies.

The Stowe survey found that 56% of non-attendees stated they could not attend town meeting due to work commitments. Changing the meeting date to a weekend and / or the time to the late afternoon or early evening could remedy this for some. Having the budget take vote take place at a time certain is another possibility. Research by Bryan and Clark suggest that such changes alone do not lead to a significant increase in attendance.

Appendix C contains remedies attributed to various sources.

VII. Recommendations for Increasing Attendance

Town Meeting Task Force recommends the following remedies to the decline in attendance at Town meeting. A list of all remedies identified and discussed by the committee is in Appendix C.

1. Promote the positive values of town meeting as identified by the Task Force.
2. Use technology such as email and the town's website to engage the public.
 - a. An engagement study conducted by school board members indicates parents prefer receiving information from the board via email.
 - b. The popularity of Front Porch Forum indicates that community members value regular correspondence containing community information via email.
3. Put important forward looking issues as advisory articles on the agenda and promote discussion of them in advance of town meeting.
 - a. Engage community members about goals and priorities.
 - b. Encourage the Stowe Reporter to cover town government issues.
4. Create a Town of Stowe User Guide that contains useful information of the workings of town government and town meeting.
 - a. Distribute to all residents and property owners.
 - b. Make available online.
 - c. Make available to newly registered voters and new property owners.
5. Create an ongoing entity to promote town meeting.
 - a. Many towns have created ongoing Town Meeting Solutions Committees.
6. Change the start time of the March 2017 meeting to the late afternoon or early evening. Meeting on Tuesday late afternoon or early evening would provide only a limited opportunity to discuss Australian ballot articles as voting closes at 7 PM. A Monday meeting would provide more opportunity to discuss Australian ballot articles.

7. Put on an item on the upcoming March 2017 town meeting warning to discuss changes to town meeting.

VIII. Increasing Voter Participation on Deciding the Budget

One issue that deserves attention, but was not included in the Task Force's purpose, is the disparity between Australian ballot participation and town meeting attendance. The requirement that voters be present during the meeting to participate in the decisions of the meeting is a significant barrier. This issue was explored in question 15 of the public survey. Thirty-six percent of non-attendees preferred to vote on the budget via Australian ballot. Over 10 times as many voters participated in the most recent town meeting day Australian ballot election than attended town meeting.

Many towns in Vermont have addressed the decline in town meeting attendance by moving the budget vote to Australian ballot on town meeting day. Bryan and Clark emphatically state that this approach leads to the rapid death of town meeting.

The Town of Charlotte recently adopted a methodology to enable greater participation in deciding the budget while maintaining town meeting. It deserves consideration.

Starting in 2012 a self-formed group in Charlotte began studying the decline in attendance at their town meeting. At the outset, they defined their goal differently than how the Stowe Selectboard defined the Task Force's purpose.

Charlotte Goal: Increase voter participation on the town budget while maintaining town meeting.

The group concluded that it was unlikely, given the various demographic, cultural and technological changes, to increase attendance at town meeting via various changes such as promotion, meeting format, changing dates and times etc. These changes at best might shift the mix of attendees, but not the total number in any significant way.

Their proposal is as follows. The Selectboard develops a budget under its normal process and presents it as a warned article at town meeting on the usual date. At the meeting, the budget amount is established through the normal process. All articles involving expenditures are handled similarly. These amounts are then warned for an Australian ballot vote that takes place six or so weeks later. Non-budgetary articles at town meeting are unaffected. Other articles that are normally voted via Australian ballot on town meeting day, such as Selectboard and School Board members, school budget, are unaffected.

The cost of this approach is a second election, sometime in mid-April. The participation in that election will likely be different, probably lower, than the town meeting day election. It does provide voters with a greater opportunity to participate in deciding the budget than does town meeting.

It was later learned that some towns in New Hampshire use a similar approach.

It took Charlotte three years to have this process established in law. They consulted with VLCT and the Sec. of State's office, vetting the scheme's constitutionality and consistency with election statutes. Their Selectboard, town voters and the Vermont legislature approved a charter change for Charlotte to put this method into effect. To accommodate the reluctance of certain Selectboard members, the charter change has a three-year sunset provision. Voting on the town budget will return to town meeting after three years unless a permanent charter change is established.

It is uncertain how this method of approving the town budget will affect attendance at town meeting. One could argue that it will lead to a decrease in attendance because the importance of the town budget vote at town meeting has been diminished. This is consistent with the research finding that the reduced importance of articles decided at town meeting leads to a decline in attendance.

Recommendations for Increasing Voter Participation on Deciding the Budget

1. Establish a three-year town meeting attendance goal. If the goal is not met after 3 years, consider:
 - a. Moving the budget vote to Australian ballot on town meeting day.
 - b. Adopting the town budget wherein town meeting determines the budget amount to be warned for an Australian ballot approximately 6 weeks later.

IX. Appendices

Appendix A. Town Meeting values

List of values of town meeting identified by Town Meeting Task Force.

1. Understand the budget, taxes, where the money is going
2. Listen to and interact with community leaders and meeting participants, an annual "homecoming" for engaged citizens
3. Discussion, debate and voting on discretionary items, such as community services and studies to be conducted by the Town, are expressions of community values and preferences
4. Discussion on issues and topics important to the town at a widely-attended meeting
5. Opportunity to influence Selectboard and Town Manager in the presence of many peers at the Town's Meeting as opposed to a Selectboard meeting
6. Gain perspective and feelings of other people
7. Opportunity to express thoughts on budgetary line items
8. Opportunity to make a difference
9. Fosters idea of ownership of decisions
10. Attendance and participation fosters responsibilities of and enlarges the idea citizenship
11. Opportunity to speak, and be heard by large audience
12. Participation of the electorate is ultimate check of a democracy
13. Attendance, participation, watchfulness, and engagement create context for ethical and responsive government
14. Attendance and participation leads to both a stronger community and stronger sense of community
15. Opportunity for Selectboard and Town Manager to gauge town's people at the town's people's meeting, are they happy?

Appendix B. Reasons why people do not attend town meeting

List of reasons why people do not attend town meeting identified by the Town Meeting Task Force, based on Task Force member observations and opinions.

1. School property tax is much higher than town property tax, so why bother
2. Work commitments
3. Snow birds
4. Tuesday ski bum race
5. Australian ballot for other items
6. School vacation
7. Transportation
8. Big issues are behind the town
9. Changing social fabric
10. Changing social media, email, social media
11. New comers are not as indoctrinated in traditional Vermont values
12. No passion, nothing is on the line
13. People generally less engaged with local issues
14. Lack of childcare
15. Town is well run by the Town Manager, so, town meeting is boring, even for those interested in participating
16. Everything is so complex for some people, so it does not matter to attend
17. People don't need to know more, they are disengaged
18. People don't feel informed enough to meaningfully engage
19. Apathy, attendance won't make a difference
20. Commuter town
21. Some people are intimidated in speaking in public
22. Some people consider it to be a hostile environment

Appendix C. Possible remedies to the decline in Town Meeting attendance

A. Town Meeting Task Force

Remedies identified by Town Meeting Task Force on September 26, 2016.

1. Promote the importance of town meeting to the community based upon the values identified by the Task Force
2. Write articles about the history of town meeting
3. Make town meeting more interesting by:
 - a. Electing the Selectboard and Listers at the meeting
 - b. Put interesting forward looking items on the agenda
4. Improve messaging by using social media, Front Page Forum, town's website, email
5. Utilize creative approaches to marketing
6. Employ focus groups to better understand community values and attitudes; use information to create strategies to improve attendance
7. Ask town bodies to bring forth issues that could be discussed at town meeting during other business
8. Change the date and time of the meeting
9. Change the venue
10. Change the agenda / schedule / format of the meeting
11. Separate town and school meetings
12. Create a permanent town meeting outreach and advocacy committee
13. Simplify the Annual Town Report by separating out the financial accounting statements. Make the report easier to read
14. Ask businesses to encourage employees to attend and provide time off for them to do so

B. All Those in Favor by Frank Bryan & Susan Clark

Chapter 11 - Things You Can Do **Now** to Improve Your Town Meeting

1. Highlight the issues
 - a. Hot issues are one of the most important reasons people attend
 - b. Structure of warning – articles
2. Arrange for child care at Town meeting
3. Skip the microphones if possible
4. Enjoy food together

5. Build an agenda that encourages attendance and participation throughout
 - a. Agendas create the rhythm of the meeting
6. Help make an excellent town report
7. Publicize, publicize, publicize
8. Include elements of celebration
9. Say “thank you”
 - a. Briefly recognize outstanding, exceptional contributions
10. It takes a team to make a great town meeting
11. Encourage new participation
12. Explain the rules
13. Host living room meetings
14. Make the room welcoming
15. Highlight the work of the year
16. Transportation – Offer rides to town meeting
17. Graduate voters – Voter oath at graduation

Chapter 12 - Things You Can Do Over Time to Improve Your Town Meeting

1. Use the Australian ballot as little as possible
2. Help make town meeting a real democracy holiday
 - a. Recognize businesses that encourage employees to attend
3. Combine School and Town meeting
4. Be an advocate for creative localism
5. Recognize the impact of population on local democracy
6. No matter what your town’s size, cultivate small town advantages
 - a. Small towns get better per capita participation
 - b. Larger towns can take steps to make their towns feel smaller
 - c. Spread the word
 - d. Foster local democracy
7. Involve youth in town meeting
8. Create a “Democracy Matters” committee in your town
 - a. Could work outside government in watchdog capacity
 - b. Could be institutionalized
9. Be prepared
 - a. Leaders be prepared for town meeting
 - b. But not too prepared – No Power Point

- c. Citizens be prepared
 - d. Listen to others
10. Resist temptation to delegate
- a. Don't appoint committee to do the work that has in the past been done by town meeting participants

C. Citation from the East Montpelier Town Meeting Solutions Committee, 2014

Many suggestions have been made to the committee and options explained in the books we have read about things the town could do to increase accessibility and participation. They include changing the venue to a larger space to accommodate more people, changing to an evening meeting, moving the meeting to a weekend, having separate meetings for the school and the town, and Australian ballot. Research by Frank Bryan looking at decades of data shows that none of these remedies increase attendance. We have also discussed technological assistance for remote participation, which did not exist at the time Bryan's book was published.

D. Citation from the Waitsfield Town Meeting Solutions Committee, 2014
Recommendations

Near Term - approach:

Tinker! The Town Meeting Research Group enthusiastically encourages the Waitsfield Select Board to take a 3 to 5-year approach to trying some new ideas and seeing if participation at Town Meeting increases. And then trying other ideas after that and seeing what changes occur.

Near Term - structure changes:

- 1) To reduce disruption of the town meeting the Town Meeting Research Group recommends separating the Town Meeting from the School Board Meeting and moving the School Board Meeting to a different date or time; consider holding the school meeting the night before or on some other date.
- 2) Move Town Meeting to a late afternoon start: 4pm or later with a hard stop at 9pm. (Meeting could overflow into the next night if required).
- 3) Pre-announce that the vote for the town budget will occur at a specific time, such as 6:00 or 6:30pm (depending on when Town Meeting starts).
- 4) Create a volunteer pick-up / return home rides service for those interested.

Near Term - information sharing strategy changes:

- 1) As a compliment to the existing Town Report, create the following printed materials
 - a. Executive summary of budget, issues for discussion
 - b. Budget and Tax impact of major / warned items (see examples in appendix from Middlesex, VT town).
 - c. Pie chart of sources [in one pie chart] and uses [in one pie chart] of town budget (see examples in appendix from Middlesex, Vermont).
 - d. Find a way to highlight large and/or potentially controversial items in the printed reports.
- 2) Distribute these materials in mailed town reports.
- 3) Have copies of these materials on chairs at town meeting.
- 4) Place information on town website
- 5) Encourage media coverage of same materials in advance of the Town Meeting day.

Longer Term:

- 1) Investigate and test various technologies such as email / text / phone response system to engage voters year around regardless of whether Town Meeting or Australian ballot is used.
- 2) Floor amendments on financial / budget items only considered at earlier scheduled (Jan/Feb) budget meetings.
- 3) Floor amendments on non-financial but policy matters reflecting sense of community are non-binding but must be reviewed and reported on no later than next annual Town Meeting.
- 4) Consider capping the amounts permitted in floor amendments by either a percent or by an absolute value of the original article.
- 5) Run a survey (yet to be developed) to all residents to quantify residents who can't attend Town Meeting because of infirmity, military service, work, children, other. Measure quantity and type of reasons for non-attendance. Run this survey in three different channels:
 - a. Before town meeting day via snail mail and/or email.

b. During voting hours of town meeting day

c. At Town Meeting itself

6) Run a survey (yet to be developed) to all residents asking whether they would support a special Town Meeting day – to be held during summer months – to determine if voters prefer Australian ballot over Town Meeting Day. Run this survey in three different channels:

a. Before Town Meeting Day via snail mail and/or email.

b. During voting hours of Town Meeting Day

c. At Town Meeting itself

Appendix D. Survey Results

Appendix E. References

All Those in Favor by Frank Bryan and Susan Clark, published by RavenMark, Inc.

A Citizens Guide to Vermont Town Meeting, Office of the Vermont Secretary of State, 2008

Town Meeting Day, A Vermont Tradition, Deborah L. Markowitz, Vermont Secretary of State and Kids Voting Vermont, 2003

Town Reports

Bethel Town Meeting Solutions Committee – Minutes

Charlotte Town Meeting Solutions Committee – Website

East Montpelier Town Meeting Solutions Committee – Report

Middlesex Town Meeting Solutions Committee – Discussions with Susan Clark

Waitsfield Town Meeting Study Group – Report

Election Data

Office of the Stowe Town Clerk