

Introductory Guide to Town Meetings in Orange

Message from the Moderator

The traditional New England town meeting is the embodiment of "grass roots" democracy. Annual and special town meetings in Orange provide voters with clear, direct access to their municipal government and allow the highest level of citizen participation. As Moderator, I strive to conduct our town meetings fairly, openly, respectfully and efficiently, with the goal of making them a model of the best in local democracy.

An informed, educated citizenry is key to the effectiveness of town meeting. To that end, this guide provides background information about the town meeting process. I hope you will participate in our town meetings, and find this to be a useful resource. These guidelines exist to facilitate an orderly, dignified, respectful and fair discussion of issues that leads to informed votes and good decisions. We all deserve the respect and courtesy of our neighbors, and we owe them the same. Please feel free to contact me with questions, comments, or suggestions for improvement at cjwoodcock@verizon.net.

Chris Woodcock
Orange Town Moderator

Town Meeting acts as the legislative branch of town government and votes on a wide variety of issues:

- the type of programs and services that town government offers,
- the amount that the town will spend annually on services, including public safety, public works and facilities, education, general government, and a myriad of other activities,
- bylaws and other rules and regulations, including state-enabling legislation,
- major capital projects and other items that impact the quality of life in town.

The Warrant

The Board of Selectmen schedules town meeting and sets the agenda by publishing the "Warrant." Under state law, "Every town meeting shall be called by a warrant issued by the board of selectmen, 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]. The warrant consists of a series of **articles**, each of which provides a *general* description of the action proposed.

Key Participants

Quorum – The minimum number of voters, set by town bylaw, required to be in attendance to conduct business at town meeting. The quorum in Orange is 75 voters.

Moderator – The Moderator presides over (conducts) 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.

Board of Selectmen – Is the executive branch of town government. As the town's chief elected officials, the selectmen take an active role in presenting motions for various articles and making recommendations to the meeting.

Finance Committee – In Orange, the Finance Committee is responsible for recommending the annual budget for consideration at town meeting, for making recommendations on money-related articles, and for related reports and recommendations to town meeting. [MGL, Chapter 39, Sec. 16]

Other Boards and Committees – When appropriate, other committees, such as the Planning Board or Board of Health, will be called upon to give recommendations on articles pertaining to their areas of responsibility.

The Rules of Procedure

In Orange, we conduct our town meetings according to applicable chapters and sections of the Massachusetts General Laws and according to procedures outlined in *Town Meeting Time, A Handbook of Parliamentary Law* published by the Massachusetts Moderators Association.

The Process

The Motion -- All actions taken by a town meeting are taken by votes upon motions. While the article describes the general topic to be addressed, the *main motion* provides the specific details. All main motions, including those for citizen petition articles, must be in writing. As each article is taken up, the Moderator will ask someone to make a motion, which is a more precise statement of the action to be taken by town meeting. The motion must be “within the scope” of the article, which means the proposed action in the motion must be sufficiently close to what was stated in the warrant article to have provided voters with “adequate warning” about the potential action in advance of the meeting. The term “motion” also refers to various procedural actions that the town meeting might take, such as a motion to postpone action, move the question, or adjourn the meeting for that day and resume on another evening.

Debate -- Following any presentation by the sponsor of an 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 as the amendment, 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 and requires a majority vote for approval. Proposed amendments must be in writing, unless they involve simple, one or two-word changes.

Addressing the Meeting

- Raise your hand and wait to be recognized (given the floor) by the Moderator.
- Generally speaking, the usual time limit is five (5) minutes for someone presenting an article and two (2) minutes for comments from the floor. However, town meeting attendees will appreciate it if you limit yourself as much as possible (and you’ll likely be more persuasive).
- Begin by stating your name (or board/committee you represent). All comments should be restricted to the subject being debated and offered in a respectful and courteous manner.
- Address your remarks to the Moderator. No personal speech is allowed -- you may reference or respond to a prior speaker’s comments, but do not engage in personal commentary, e.g., about the person, his or her character, etc.
- Rude or disrespectful speech will not be tolerated.
- While voters may speak on a motion more than once, no one will be recognized to speak a second time on any one issue until everyone who wants to speak has had that opportunity.
- Repetitive or redundant comments should be avoided.

Voting -- Once debate is concluded or a motion is passed to end debate, a vote is taken on the motion before the meeting. Many motions require a majority vote, though higher standards (typically two-thirds) may be required by Massachusetts law or town bylaws. The Moderator will generally call first for a voice vote. If the outcome cannot be determined with a voice vote, a show of hands will be requested. If the Moderator is still in doubt as to the outcome, he will ask for a standing count. Please follow instructions given at these times. After voting by any method, the Moderator will declare the outcome. Any seven (7) voters may challenge the Moderator's call of the vote and demand a formal count (or recount). Such a challenge must be made immediately after the Moderator declares the outcome. The challenger should call out, “I question the vote!” and the Moderator will ask whether six additional voters also wish to challenge the declared outcome.