

SELECTBOARD SPECIAL INFORMATIONAL MEETING

November 30, 2021

Attending the meeting in person; Merrily Lovell, Maggie Gordon, Phil Pouech, Todd Odit.

Attending remotely; Mike Loner, Joy Dubin Grossman, John Lyman, Frank Twarog, Bill Baker, Anne Sullivan, Mary Crane, Minton Jeffrey, Eric Spivak, Chuck Reiss, Natacha Liuzzi, Morgen Decker, Marianna Holzer, Roger Kohn, Ginny Roberts, Patty Whitney, Carl Bohlen, Sandy White, Tom Marrinson, Bee Cellars, Jen McCuin, Lenore Budd, Andrea Morgante, Melissa Ross, Janet Francis, Tom Whitney, Kate Kelly, David Gardner, Geoffrey Gevalt.

Merrily called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m.

Merrily read the two articles that will be on the ballot.

Merrily turned the meeting over to Frank Twarog, acting as moderator.

Frank asked for any comments the Board members wanted to make.

Phil said he can see both sides of the question, particularly to get as much participation on budget decisions. That said the other side is that this is small town democracy and it is good to allow people to have their say and have good discussion. He thinks we can still have a good discussion at the meeting even if voting by Australian Ballot.

Merrily said the most important thing for her is community but feels it is valid to point out that it is a small percentage of our whole community that show up at Town Meeting.

Maggie said she has completely changed her mind in the past months. In 2019 only 3% of registered voters attended Town Meeting. She thinks we can do better in participation and hopes to find a way to have open discussion.

There was a question of what Australian Ballot is. Todd explained that Australian Ballot is basically a secret paper ballot.

It was questioned why this issue is being decided now and not in March. Phil explained last year the Legislature allowed towns if they wanted to vote by Australian Ballot without the full year warning to make the change. That rule does not apply after December. If voted in March any change would not take place until the following March.

It was asked what was the number of votes cast last year by Australian Ballot. Maggie said in 2019 153 people attended Town Meeting. Missy said there were about 910 Australian Ballot votes in 2020.

Merrily explained what the ballot layout will look like.

It was questioned as to how many people attend the Board meetings when they are working on budgets to get information. Phil said 4 or 5 unless they are discussing a big issue. They hope it would change if the Town moves to Australian Ballot.

34 Phil said the Board typically starts looking at budgets in October and by mid-November regular Board
35 meetings include budget discussions. From the end of November till mid-January meetings are held
36 almost every week.

37 There was a request to explain the difference between the current process for addressing budget
38 amendments and votes and how it would change if both articles are passed. Todd explained if the
39 budget is voted by Australian Ballot and the Board has final review of the budget on January 5th, people
40 attending could make suggestions but there would be no binding vote to require the Board to make any
41 changes to the budget. The Board would take the suggestions and decide if they want to change the
42 budget but are not required to change the budget. At Town Meeting if people decide to change the
43 budget and vote to do so the Board has to change the budget.

44 Will the Australian Ballot be more costly? Missy said it would not. The Town currently has an Australian
45 Ballot and this would just be adding articles to the ballot.

46 Will there still be a Town Meeting the night prior to voting if Australian Ballot is passed?

47 Todd said the Selectboard is required to hold an informational meeting within 10 days before the vote.
48 Voters could also vote to move Town Meeting day which could combine the informational meeting with
49 Town Meeting.

50 Andrea said it would be helpful to have the informational meeting 10 days prior to alert people of the
51 items being voted so they have a chance to get more information and allow for conversations on items.
52 The budget is a reflection of the values we have as citizens, the numbers represent where we put our
53 priorities. We need to be aware and hold our elected officials accountable.

54 What is the time frame needed to make any budget changes to be on the ballot? At the January 5th
55 meeting people can give input including on particular line items. The Board will take that input and
56 think about the request and have the option to agree or disagree. Currently approval of the final
57 warning is scheduled for January 26.

58 Mike encouraged people to communicate with the Selectboard via email if they can't attend the Jan 5th
59 meeting.

60 Roger Kohn said he has expressed his opinion on FPF in hopes people would find those comments
61 persuasive. He feels if the change to Australian Ballot passes it will be hard to get people to attend
62 Town Meeting particularly if a vote is not involved. He noted people mentioning a hybrid meeting but
63 there are State Statute restrictions that come into play. He feels the push for Australian Ballot, while it
64 makes logical sense, it will remove the oversight that citizens have provided at Town Meeting. People
65 can come to budget meetings ahead of time but only 5 or 10 do so. If we had a history of close budget
66 votes Australian Ballot would make more sense. The Town budget will be decided by the Selectboard
67 with few people attending budget meetings and will likely pass each year without people really having a
68 chance to have a lot of input. He would like people to reconsider their entrenched positions. The Town
69 used to have a very robust school budget meeting and since the switch to Australian Ballot the budget
70 has always passed but how many actually attended the meeting to get information on what they were
71 voting on. If going to Australian Budget for the school budget ended up having much less input from
72 citizens, why do you think a different result will happen here? Why do you think by having more people

73 be able to vote by Australian Ballot it would have a better input on the process of oversight of our
74 Town?

75 Morgen Decker said she read Roger's comments in FPF. She is wondering what is actually going to help
76 our community connect with dialogue if there is no Town Meeting. She wants to hear the passionate
77 arguments on both sides of items. How do we make our government really accessible so people feel
78 they have a voice?

79 Bill Baker said he was on the school board at the time of the transition to Australian Ballot. At that time
80 about 40 people were attending the meeting. He asked how can anyone support only 3% approving the
81 budget? He feels not having Australian Ballot is totally disenfranchising people. He addressed
82 transparency by stating that allowing people to make amendments from the floor totally disenfranchises
83 everyone but those at the meeting. He gave an example of those at Town Meeting possibly changing
84 the budget by \$50,000.

85 Patty Whitney asked what happens if the Australian Ballot has an item that is voted down, for example
86 the Police Department? Merrily explained the Selectboard would look at the budget again to work on
87 making changes and have another vote. She asked if there has been any thought to having a weekend
88 Town Meeting? Phil said a change of date would need to be voted on by Australian Ballot. She said she
89 does not understand why this change is being put to the Town if other options have not been explored.
90 Mike said it came down to opportunity as this year items like this are allowed to be decided by
91 Australian Ballot if done before the end of 2021 and that was not the procedure in the past.

92 Phil addressed Bill Baker's comment of making a large change to the budget from the floor and said it
93 could only be changed by a minor amount. Frank T said that addresses the question of if it is germane.
94 A large change would not be germane.

95 John Lyman said informational meetings are important. There is no good time with the changes in
96 society where everyone can attend. Informational meetings need to be held at different times so
97 people can express their opinions.

98 Chuck Reiss is against the move to Australian Ballot. We have so few moments where we can generate
99 the idea of community. He always looks forward to Town Meeting to listen to the comments and
100 participation from everyone. He hopes people weigh heavily the end of this participatory community
101 event. He agrees with Roger that he does not think many people will come to the meetings. People will
102 vote without having attended the meetings. He hopes people think seriously about the loss this would
103 bring.

104 Carl Bohlen said it is sad to lose Town Meeting but it is hard to argue against a way to have more voters
105 vote on the budget. He hopes there is a way to engage and encourage people to come to the budget
106 meetings. Once budget amounts are decided the meeting would be recorded, as they are now, and
107 people could at least watch to see what is being discussed before they vote if it is Australian Ballot. He
108 encouraged the Board to list department budgets on the ballot.

109 It was questioned if the vote of an item was turned down what might the cost be. Missy explained that
110 to re-vote a single item they would likely create the ballot themselves and count by hand. Phil added
111 people should try to use absentee balloting when they can.

112 Mike said he is having a hard time reconciling the concept of community being used with the concept of
113 holding the vote to a select and privileged group of voters in Hinesburg who are able to attend Town
114 Meeting. There are numerous reasons people cannot attend Town Meeting. To say we have a real
115 sense of community when less than 4% of the community members are showing up is hard for him to
116 reconcile with also having the most powerful tool in democracy, the right to vote on your Town's
117 budget, being withheld from so many.

118 Andrea M. noted there are two items on the ballot. When voting you are giving feedback to the
119 Selectboard by the amount of support shown. We need to help people understand how the Town is
120 run.

121 Lenore Budd said looking at last years ballot, she sees three articles that would fall in the second
122 category that were not specifically budget items. She finds the wording of the second article confusing
123 when using the term "shall we discuss", it does not address voting. Merrily said it states "vote" on all
124 public questions.

125 Morgen D. asked if a FAQ could be created so people can review the issues and have time to think about
126 them.

127 Geoffrey Gevalt appreciates peoples point of views they shared. He has learned more about the Town,
128 how it is governed and its history through Town Meeting. There is something powerful and important
129 about a Town Meeting and does not want to lose the ability to meet in person, argue an issue and still
130 walk away getting along and with an understanding. The underlying issue is finding ways to get more
131 people involved and adapt to change.

132 Phil finished by saying he agrees with Geoffrey and added that at Town Meeting people share different
133 opinions and you can have good discussion. It has always been respectful and you walk away feeling
134 good about your Town and the people in it, probably learned a few things and perhaps changed your
135 opinion some. His worry is if it is all Australian Ballot and we don't have a way to interact in that way we
136 may not develop the same level of respect for each other and different opinions, but go in with our
137 opinion already made, up vote and just go our way.

138 Maggie said one take away she has it that we need to do more in the first week in January in getting the
139 budget out to people to look at it and let everyone know that it is a good time to bring feedback to the
140 Board. The idea of losing a night we can all get together for discussion is hard. However people vote on
141 this, we need to have more community gatherings for discussion.

142 Merrily also liked the way Geoffrey described that Town Meeting gives us the opportunity to meet in
143 person. Zoom is a wonderful gift of technology but not as good as meeting person to person and
144 disagreeing and discussing different points of view which builds a strong community. If the vote does
145 pass for Australian Ballot, because the other side of the issue is also compelling, how do we engage
146 those who do not come to be part of the community?

147 Missy said she does not think this is an either/or situation where if we vote for Australian Ballot Town
148 Meeting will fall apart. She feels this way because we do have good community engagement

149 Todd said he has some ideas if the Town approves Australian Ballot to engage the community in
150 discussion.

151 Joy volunteered to work with Morgen D on the FAQ.
152 Meeting adjourned at 8:45 p.m.
153 Respectfully submitted,
154 Valerie Spadaccini, Clerk of the Board