



A Brief Guide to Norwell Town Meeting

What is Town Meeting?

Town Meeting is the legislative body of the Town of Norwell. Norwell has an “open” town meeting, which means that all registered voters are entitled to attend. As a result, without even having to campaign for elected office, all registered voters automatically become municipal legislators.

What matters does Town Meeting decide?

Town Meeting decides matters related to local governance that are placed on the Town Meeting Warrant. Most significantly, it approves the local rules by which we govern ourselves (in the form of by-laws), and it appropriates money to fund Norwell’s government.

What is a Warrant?

The Warrant is Town Meeting’s agenda and it is mailed to all Norwell residents in the weeks before Town Meeting. The Board of Selectmen issues the Warrant, which serves as a warning to voters of the matters that Town Meeting will address. The Warrant contains a number of proposals, called articles, upon which Town Meeting deliberates and votes. Articles are disposed of through Town Meeting’s actions on motions that are made pursuant to each article.

What is the difference between an article and a motion?

Articles define the *subject matter* to be addressed while motions detail the *specific action* that is taken under the article. Ultimately, Town Meeting exercises its legislative authority through actions on motions, not articles. A motion may be largely identical to an article or it may vary somewhat from the language of the article. To be valid, however, any variations must remain within the scope of the article.

What rules govern how Town Meeting's business is conducted?

Town Meeting is governed by a combination of state law, Norwell's by-laws, a handbook of parliamentary law called *Town Meeting Time*, and local tradition. These rules are enforced by the town's Moderator, who is responsible for regulating the proceedings, deciding all questions of order and declaring the outcome of Town Meeting's votes on motions.

What process does Norwell Town Meeting follow to take action under an article?

The process starts with a proponent of the article making a motion that recommends a particular action. The proponent's motion is called the main motion. Following this motion, the proponent will provide some information on the article and reasons why s/he believes the motion should be passed. The Moderator will then ask for the Advisory Board's opinion on whether it believes the motion should pass. The Advisory Board is a nine-person committee that is charged with making voting recommendations to Town Meeting on each article in the Warrant. Once the Advisory Board makes its recommendation, the Moderator will open the motion up for general discussion.

What should I do if I want to speak?

Come to one of the available microphones about half-way down the gym and wait to be recognized by the Moderator. When recognized, it is important that you state your name and address because only registered Norwell voters have an automatic right to speak at Town Meeting. A few rules for speakers: (i) limit your comments to the subject matter of the current article; (ii) address your comments to the Moderator and not a specific individual, and *always* address policy and not persons (e.g., "Mr. Moderator, I disagree with the argument we just heard," not

“Mr. Smith, you’re position is wrong”); and (iii) keep your comments as brief as possible - there generally is an inverse correlation between the power of an argument and the number of words used to make it.

What if I want to make an amendment to the main motion that Town Meeting is debating?

Under Norwell Town Meeting rules motions to amend generally must be in writing. Please provide the Moderator with two copies of the motion so that he and Town Counsel can determine if the motion to amend can be submitted to Town Meeting. Discussing any potential motions with the Moderator ahead of time will increase Town Meeting efficiency and decrease the chance that a proposed motion will be ruled out of order. At any one time only one motion to amend is allowed on Town Meeting floor. Motions to amend require a majority vote.

Are there other motions that are used in Norwell Town Meeting?

Yes. A common motion in Norwell Town Meeting is the motion to “indefinitely postpone” an article. In other town meetings it may be called a motion to “dismiss” or “pass over” an article. In Norwell it is generally offered as a main motion when proponents determine that an article is unnecessary or unripe for Town Meeting consideration. Motions to indefinitely postpone require a majority vote.

Other examples include a motion for “reconsideration” where a speaker wishes to reopen debate on an article on which Town Meeting has already taken action. The motion for reconsideration, although likely occurring in rare circumstances, may be appropriate when an error or omission in the original action requires correction or new information becomes available that may change the outcome of the initial vote. Motions to reconsider require a majority vote.

Norwell Town Meeting also sometimes approves a motion to “move the question” when a voter believes Town Meeting has given sufficient time to a motion. A voter who wishes to end debate should wait at a microphone and when recognized simply state “Mr. Moderator, I move the question.” It is important that the speaker not engage in any form of advocacy on a motion before moving the

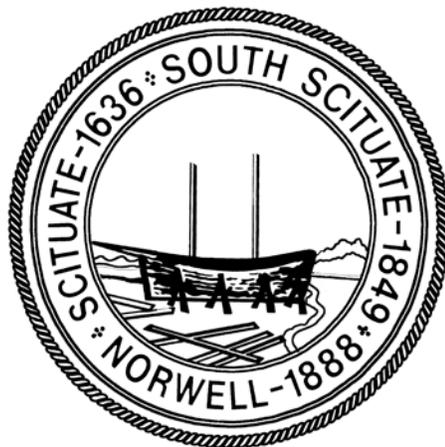
question because it would be unfair for someone to attempt to give her/himself the last word before ending debate. This motion will be appropriate if there has been a reasonable time for debate. A motion to move the question requires a two-thirds vote.

In addition to motions, Town Meeting attendees may bring up “points of order” that call attention to immediate issues concerning the conduct of the meeting. These could include requests for clarifications on pending votes or explanations of current procedures.

Once debate concludes, how are votes cast?

With one exception, the initial vote at Norwell Town Meeting is a voice vote, when the Moderator asks all those in favor of a motion to say “aye” and all those opposed to say “no.” The Moderator sometimes asks for a show of hands to confirm the voice vote. If he is still unsure of the results, he’ll move to a standing vote where tellers will count the “aye” and “no” votes by hand.

The one exception to the voice vote protocol occurs when motions call for the town to borrow more than \$200,000. In those cases, voting is done by secret ballot and the motion’s passage requires a two-thirds vote.



**If you have questions or would like more information,
please contact Town Moderator Bill Coffey**