



## ***Town of Adams Massachusetts 01220-2087***

### **GENERAL GOVERNMENT REVIEW COMMITTEE**

TOWN HALL BUILDING, 8 PARK STREET

**Tuesday, July 19, 2022, 3:00 p.m.**

**TOWN HALL, 8 PARK STREET, ADAMS, MA 01220**

**1<sup>st</sup> Floor, Sun Room**

**CALL TO ORDER:** On the above date, the General Government Review Committee held a meeting at 3:00 at the Adams Town Hall. Chairman Don Sommer opened the meeting. Present: General Government Review Committee Chairman Don Sommer; Members Virginia Duval, Carol Cushenette, Tim Burdick, Leah Thompson, George Haddad, and Jonathan Butler. Members Carrie Burnett and Jeff Grandchamp were absent. Also present were Brian Rhodes, iBerkshires; Joe Nowak and Christine Hoyt, Board of Selectmen; Haley Meczywor, Town Clerk; Jay Green, Town Administrator; Bri Hantman, Recording Secretary; Bernie Lynch, Government Review Consultant

#### **APPROVAL OF MINUTES:**

**Approval of Meeting Minutes, May 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022**

4 in favor of approval, two abstentions

**Approval of Meeting Minutes, June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2022**

4 in favor of approval, two abstentions

#### **DISCUSSION OF TOPICS RELATED TO THE LEGISLATIVE FUNCTION OF TOWN GOVERNMENT:**

**Representative Town Meeting v. Open Town Meeting:** Members discussed the positives of a Representative Town Meeting (RTM) including the fact that a representative body tends to be more informed. Representatives are given a lot of information in their Town Meeting Member Booklets. RTM also ensures that members are vetted and interested in the success of local government. Members noted RTM increases representation of parts of the town as certain neighborhoods and precincts are more active than others and tend to have more representation in non-RTM. If having a quorum of RTM body is an issue, the General Government Review Committee can consider lowering the percentage needed.

The group then moved on to discuss the positives of an Open Town Meeting. They agreed that an Open Town Meeting has the potential to be more responsive to immediate issues, a meeting may have a higher attendance rate if it is an open meeting, and that an Open Town Meeting may provide more opportunities for individuals to get involved in local government.

***The General Government Review Committee determined that it will be beneficial to stay with a Representative Town Meeting model and not move to an Open Town Meeting.***

Following this determination, *Bernie Lynch* moved the group to speak about the size of the Representative Town Meeting. Adams Town Meeting, at 150 has slightly less seats than the average, but is also amongst the smallest. With so many, individuals are essentially guaranteed a seat, which contracts some of the accountability that was listed as a benefit of RTM.

*Bernie Lynch* asked the group if it makes sense to have the RTM size the same as it was when it was set in 1937, even though the Town of Adams is about half the size that it was at that time. *Member Duval* explained that the numbers of the RTM were set, not on the basis of population, but rather on the number of registered voters. The number of current registered voters is still the same as it was in 1937, even though the population has dropped by half.

No one precinct is lacking significantly. There are currently 7 open seats across all precincts. The group agreed that there should be better communication so that people can be more aware of open seats in precincts. The lack of competition for seats undermines the accountability of being a member of the Representative Town Meeting. *Member Duval* suggested that chairman for each precinct would be helpful to aid in communication.

*Member Thompson* asked if it is healthy to have some individuals in their seats for a long time, or would it be beneficial for those seats to be more competitive so there is more movement? Some people feel like Representative Town Meeting is meant to be for people who have been involved in local government for a very long time.

Language of the charter still based off registered voters, not necessarily population. Precincts are reviewed every 10 years and based off of population.

Some people are perceived to be apathetic when it comes to local government. People are not competing for the seats that they are in, there is no competition so they do not have to be accountable for how they behave at meetings.

*Member Cushenette* noted that it has been a long time since there have been precinct meetings. If you are running for the first time, you need to get 10 signatures. If you are running for re-election, you don't need to get signatures. You could get 10 signatures in your first year and just sit on Town Meeting forever and never have to get signatures again or speak to your neighbors.

*Jay Green, Town Administrator* noted that perhaps referring to the group a "Town Council" rather than town meeting would potentially make it clearer for folks to understand.

Town Council, City Council, and Town Meeting are all the same thing, they are the legislative body of the town

Would a smaller Town Meeting encourage people to get involved in other ways?

**Number of Members to Reflect Current Population:** Adams is RTM of 150 and 85 is considered a quorum. Occasionally it is a struggle to get to this number, generally not an issue.

***Group decides that quorum of 85 is not an issue and that the Town of Adams will keep the Town Meeting number at 150 people.***

**Frequency of Meetings as a Charter Requirement:** *Jay Green, Town Administrator*, noted that having a set cycle to mandate a town meeting twice a year would be nice because it would get rid of some stagnation. Things get static because people don't want to go through the process of assembling a special town meeting. Issues tend to get pushed off and an extra meeting would be able to help clarify some general housekeeping issues. Members of the group wondered if there was any process for canceling a Town Meeting if there were two a year in the charter? What if two meetings are not needed? The issue of "having nothing to talk about" seems hard to imagine. The topic of free cash usages comes up often.

The group thought that there might be better attendance at the meeting in the spring it was in May rather than June. *Chairman Sommer* noted that flexibility is important.

*Jay Green* noted that the language should be permissive i.e. "annual town meeting on the third week of May" and "Special town meeting may be called in the third week of October if the Select Board determines it necessary". Town Meeting could still choose to call an off-cycle town meeting. Town Meeting Members are elected in May and bylaws state that those elected must be notified by mail. That is why the date of the meeting crept up into June and is currently held in the third week of June. If we were to switch to an earlier date, it would run into an issue with elections. If the election were to change, we would need to work with the town of Cheshire because the school districts are tied together. The Town Meeting could happen prior to the election, which would certainly make the case for a second meeting.

***The group recommends that the possibility of a second Town Meeting each year be included in the language while retaining the option to call a Special Town Meeting when necessary.***

**Utilization of Preliminary Town Meeting as a Charter Requirement:** This provides the opportunity for an introduction to Town Meeting and to go through the articles of the warrant. Some long-time members attended the orientation, along with new Town Meeting members. It is valuable for staff to attend and hear how people interpret warrants/ what questions people have that staff may not have thought of.

**Referendum Process:** You can put a preamble on the vote, if need be, for a referendum. Numbers for a referendum should not be so challenging that it blocks people out, but not so low that anyone can just put anything up to vote. Regarding Special Acts, *Bernie* can provide the modern language and provide the current best practices. Committee can tweak it accordingly from there. This process will be easier than picking through the whole thing. *Haley Meczywor, Town Clerk* confirms that the referendum has never been used.

*Member Butler* is open to a modification of the amount of money necessary to challenge an appropriation.

*Chairman Sommer* noted that 5 days to collect the signatures is really challenging. The group concurred that the referendum policy is set to be intentionally challenging. Individuals should prepare in advance.

***The General Government Review Committee agrees to change the minimum amount of money necessary to challenge a special appropriation by referendum from \$20,000 to \$100,000.***

**Finance Committee:** The finance Committee for the Town of Adams currently has 15 members. Adams is one of the only communities in Massachusetts that has a number that high. Finance Committee members are not able to be engaged in any other town governance so as to prevent instances of conflict of interests. It is challenging to get 15 people who are interested and engaged in local government. *Bernie Lynch* noted that the most common number is 7. The General Government Review Committee agreed that the Finance Committee currently has a good blend of individuals. The General Government Review Committee would like to move the finance committee number from 15 to 9 members.

The General Government Review Committee discussed the relationship of Finance Committee and Precincts. It is recommended to have one finance committee member from each precinct and then 4 at large for a total of 9.

***The General Government Review Committee agrees that 9 is a great number and will amend the language in the bylaws to say that the group strives that have representation from each precinct.***

**Moderator Terms:** The group discussed the positives and negatives of changing the term length of a moderator. 3-year terms could allow for continuity. *Chairman Sommer* is in favor of a 1-year term. 1-year term goes back to 1778. It was noted that the Moderator has to get 50 signatures each year. This is the only position that requires people to run each year.

***The General Government Review Committee agrees that the Term should be kept to one year.***

**NEXT MEETING DATES:** *Bernie* will send out a poll to determine the next meeting date. Next topics are related to executive functions. It will be important to get the Town Administrator's perspective as well as the Board of Selectmen's perspective. It is currently board's role is to build policy, while the Administrator handles the day to day functions of the town.

## **ADJOURNMENT:**

***Member Burdick made the motion to adjourn. The motion was seconded by member Cushenette. Meeting was adjourned at 4:59pm***