

Cambridge Front Porch Forum (includes Belvidere, Fletcher, and Waterville)

Posts about Town Meeting 2023 by George Putnam

Town Meeting was held on March 7, 2023

The following posts were published on February 1 - March 4, 2023

Contents

- 1 – Town Meeting in Cambridge (2/01)
- 2 – What Kinds of Matters Are Decided at Town Meeting? (2/03)
- 3 – Cambridge Town School District Meeting (2/06)
- 4 – Lunch and Other Details About Town Meeting (2/08)
- 5 – How Are Matters Decided at Town Meeting? Part 1 [elections] (2/10)
- 6 – How Are Matters Decided at Town Meeting? Part 2 [budget & public Qs] (2/13)
- 7 – The Australian Ballot Article (2/15)
- 8 – Amendments in Town Meeting (2/17)
- 9 – Discussion Articles in Town Meeting (2/21)
- 10 – How to Read the [2022] Cambridge Town Report (2/23)
- 11 – The 2023 Cambridge Town Budget (3/04)

Town Meeting in Cambridge

George Putnam • Selectboard Member, Selectboard, Cambridge

Election

The Cambridge Selectboard has approved the warning for an in-person town meeting on Tuesday, March 7th. It's been three years since we had an in-person town meeting. What happens at an in-person town meeting?

Town meeting is not just an informational hearing. It is an occasion where the voters make binding decisions about town affairs.

In the time leading up to town meeting, I will publish a series of posts on Front Porch Forum about town meeting in Cambridge. Some of the questions that I will address: What kinds of matters are decided at town meeting? How are they decided? What are some of the major issues for town meeting this year? What is the difference between town meeting and town school district meeting?

General information about town meeting in Vermont can be found on the Secretary of State's website:

<https://sos.vermont.gov/elections/election-info-resources/town-meeting-local-elections/>

The booklet "Citizen's Guide to Town Meeting" is available at that link and is especially helpful.

Keep in mind that this series of FPF posts is about town meeting in Cambridge. Things may be slightly different in other towns.

Town Meeting Day in Vermont, a state holiday, is the first Tuesday in March. The next town meeting in Cambridge will be held on Tuesday, March 7, 2023, in the gymnasium at the Cambridge Elementary School in Jeffersonville. The town school district meeting will begin at 9:00 AM. The town meeting will begin at 10:00 AM.

Email Author

Reply to Forum

What Kinds of Matters Are Decided at Town Meeting?

George Putnam • Selectboard Member, Selectboard, Cambridge

Election

The agenda for town meeting is called the warning. Items in the warning are called articles. Three kinds of articles are decided at Vermont town meetings:

- Elections
- Budget
- Public questions

Elections: There are elections every year for the following town officials: moderator, first constable, collector of delinquent taxes, and trustee for public money. There are elections every year for one or more members of the following groups of town officials: selectboard, auditors, listers, library trustees, and cemetery commissioners. There is an election every three years for the offices of town clerk and town treasurer. The next election for these positions will be in 2025. In Cambridge, these two positions are traditionally held by the same person.

Budget: Voters must annually approve a town budget. The selectboard proposes a budget and the voters act on it in town meeting. The selectboard may choose to present certain expenditures as separate articles in the warning. The proposed budget will be in the annual town report which will be distributed before town meeting.

Public questions: These are things that are not either an election or a budget matter.

The warning for the annual town meeting on March 7, 2023, has been posted in the usual places around town and on the town's website:

<https://cambridge.vermont.gov>

In the left sidebar, click on "Document Center / Agendas, Minutes." Then click on "Town Meetings / Hearings." Then click on "Warnings."

There are 13 articles in the warning. Nine articles are binding decisions to be made by the voters. One article is a non-binding, advisory question. A benefit of an in-person town meeting is that there is discussion. Three articles are discussion

items.

One additional benefit of an in-person town meeting, not mentioned in the warning, is that our elected representatives in the legislature are invited to address voters and answer questions.

In future posts, I will discuss specific articles in the warning and how voters make decisions at an in-person town meeting where there are no pre-printed ballots.

[Email Author](#)

[Reply to Forum](#)

Cambridge Town School District Meeting

George Putnam • Selectboard Member, Selectboard, Cambridge

Election

I have been writing about the upcoming town meeting in Cambridge. In fact, there are two meetings in Cambridge on Town Meeting Day:

- town meeting
- town school district meeting.

Not every town has a town school district, but Cambridge does. The town school district is responsible for the Cambridge Elementary School in Jeffersonville (CES). The voters in the town school district are the same as the voters in the town.

For the town, the primary governing body is the Selectboard. For the town school district, the primary governing body is the CES School Board.

In my previous post, I wrote about the warning for the annual town meeting that the Selectboard has posted. The CES School Board has similarly posted a warning for the annual town school district meeting. (Links below.)

As in town meeting, three kinds of articles are decided in the town school district meeting:

- Elections
- Budget
- Public questions

The warning for this year's town school district meeting includes eight articles. Six articles are binding decisions to be made by the voters. Two articles are discussion items.

The two meetings on Town Meeting Day will be held back-to-back. The tradition in Cambridge is to alternate which comes first. This year the town school district meeting comes first (9:00 AM) and the town meeting comes second (10:00 AM). Both meetings will be held in-person in the gymnasium at the Cambridge Elementary School in Jeffersonville on Tuesday, March 7, 2023.

Voting for Article 7 in the town school district meeting – the budget article – will be

by Australian ballot and the polls for that vote will be open in the gymnasium from 7:00 AM to 7:00 PM. In a future post, I'll explain the difference between voting by Australian ballot and voting at an in-person meeting where there are no pre-printed ballots.

Click here for the warning for the annual town school district meeting:

<https://gmquester.files.wordpress.com/2023/02/warning-for-town-school-district-meeting.pdf>

Click here for the warning for the annual town meeting:

<https://gmquester.files.wordpress.com/2023/02/warning-for-town-meeting.pdf>

Historically, the town school district meeting has not been a long meeting. Town meeting is usually longer. Lunch will be served on Town Meeting Day. It would not be unusual for town meeting to continue after lunch into the afternoon.

My next post: Lunch and Other Details About Town Meeting

Email Author

Reply to Forum

Lunch and Other Details About Town Meeting

George Putnam • Selectboard Member, Selectboard, Cambridge

Election

Following are five questions and answers about town meeting. I am using "town meeting" for brevity, but these Q&As apply to both town meeting and the town school district meeting.

Q1: Who may attend town meeting?

A1: Anyone may attend town meeting! Including lunch. (More about lunch below.) Whether you are a new resident, a long-time resident, a resident of a nearby town, the owner of a vacation property in Cambridge, or a visitor – all are welcome! It's an opportunity to see local democracy in action and perhaps participate yourself. It's also an opportunity to learn more about the people and culture of Cambridge. I grew up here, and I am still learning about the people and culture of my town. In fact, both the people and the culture change a little every year.

Q2: Who may speak at town meeting?

A2: Registered voters in the Town of Cambridge may speak, of course. People who are not registered voters in Cambridge may speak if the voters do not object. Please keep in mind that no one should speak until recognized by the moderator, except in unusual circumstances such as an emergency. The moderator will cover some rules about this at the beginning of the meeting. One basic rule about town meeting for everyone, registered voter or not: If you have a question at any time during the meeting, raise your hand. When the moderator recognizes you, identify yourself and ask your question. The moderator will know what to do.

Q3: Who may vote at town meeting?

A3: Only registered voters in the Town of Cambridge may vote. There will be a table inside the gymnasium where the election clerks will check your name against the voter checklist. If you need help registering to vote, call the town clerk's office at 802-644-2251 or visit the town clerk's office at 85 Church Street in Jeffersonville, upstairs over the Jeffersonville post office, prior to Town Meeting Day. It is possible to register at the meeting in the gymnasium on Town Meeting Day, the town clerk's office being closed that day, but earlier registration is encouraged. You can also register online at olvr.vermont.gov.

Q4: Where is the Cambridge Memorial Gymnasium?

A4: The gymnasium is attached to the Cambridge Elementary School at 186 School Street in Jeffersonville.

Q5: The stairs into the gymnasium are daunting. Can I get into the meeting another way?

A5: You can enter via the door at street level to the right of the main entrance to the gymnasium and take the elevator.

As I mentioned in my previous post, lunch will be served at town meeting. There is no charge for lunch, but donations will be gratefully accepted. Lunch is an opportunity to visit with your neighbors, perhaps including people that you don't encounter in your usual social circles. Lunch this year will be served by the Cambridge Elementary School Parent Teacher Association (CES PTA) and the 6th grade Junior Iron Chef teams:

<https://ces.Insd.org/families/ces-pta>

<https://ces.Insd.org/news/details/~board/ces-news/post/jr-iron-chef-update-132023>

My next post: [How Are Matters Decided at Town Meeting?](#)

[Email Author](#)

[Reply to Forum](#)

How Are Matters Decided at Town Meeting? Part 1

George Putnam • Selectboard Member, Selectboard, Cambridge

Election

How are matters decided at town meeting in Cambridge? This post, Part 1, answers that question for elections. I am using "town meeting" for brevity, but everything in this post applies equally to town meeting and the town school district meeting. Part 2 will discuss how the budget and public questions are considered. In that post, there will be a difference between town meeting and the town school district meeting.

When we vote in state and national elections, there are pre-printed ballots. There is a process for candidates to get their names on the ballot. Voters cast their ballots during defined times. Machines count the ballots. None of that applies to the election of local officials at the Cambridge town meeting this year. Everything is done "from the floor" during the meeting.

When it is time in the meeting to elect a town or school official, the moderator will ask for nominations from the floor for that position. So, if you want to run for a position, arrange for someone to nominate you. Tell them to raise their hand promptly when the moderator asks for nominations. Voters should wait for the moderator to call on them before speaking. They should not blurt out nominations.

It is not necessary to second a nomination. It IS necessary for the person being nominated to have given their permission to be nominated.

The moderator may ask the candidate(s) to make a brief statement about why they are seeking the position. Other voters may ask the moderator to pose questions to the candidate(s).

Voting for some positions, such as selectboard, is required by law to be by ballot. This is not a pre-printed ballot. This is a blank paper ballot on which voters write the name of the candidate they are voting for. If there is only one candidate, the clerk may cast one ballot for that person and the election proceeds quickly. If there are multiple candidates, the justices of the peace will collect and count the ballots, and the moderator will announce the results – all before the meeting continues. This lull in the meeting is one of the interesting parts of town meeting. There may be public service announcements. If not, it is a good time to visit with your neighbors. Consider introducing yourself to someone you don't know.

It is helpful to bring a pen for writing on the blank paper ballots. Otherwise, you'll need to borrow one from your neighbors.

Voting for other positions, such as library trustee, does not need to be by ballot. (The warning indicates which positions must be elected by ballot.) If there are multiple candidates for such positions, the moderator may choose from a variety of methods for voting: voice vote, show of hands, standing division of the house, or blank paper ballot.

Voters can challenge the moderator's actions at any time. If you question what the moderator is doing, raise your hand. When the moderator recognizes you, identify yourself and state your concern. The moderator is trained in how to handle this. The moderator's job is to facilitate the will of the voters assembled in town meeting. A simple majority can overrule the moderator's actions.

A key point about voting for local officials in town meeting: You must be present to vote. There is no ballot box where you can simply drop off your ballot. There is no voting by mail. There is no absentee voting or early voting or voting by proxy. You must be present in the meeting at the moment when the election happens.

Candidates for local office may campaign prior to town meeting, or not, as they wish. They may not campaign AT town meeting, other than to speak to the voters if asked by the moderator (and in private conversations with attendees). It is possible for someone to be elected to office without having indicated any interest in the position prior to town meeting. It is also possible to nominate and elect someone who is not present, but there must be evidence that such person consents to being a candidate. Elections "from the floor" can be interesting! Surprises can happen.

Candidates for selectboard should know that the first selectboard meeting after town meeting will be on Wednesday, March 8th, the day after town meeting. This is the annual organizational meeting of the selectboard, so it is an important meeting not to miss. For the rest of the year, regular selectboard meetings are on the 1st and 3rd Tuesdays of the month.

My next post: [How Are Matters Decided at Town Meeting? Part 2 \[budget and public questions\]](#)

[Email Author](#)

[Reply to Forum](#)

How Are Matters Decided at Town Meeting? Part 2

George Putnam • Selectboard Member, Selectboard, Cambridge

Discussion

How are matters decided at town meeting in Cambridge? This post, Part 2, answers that question for the budget and public questions. My previous post, Part 1, answered that question for elections.

For the budget and public questions, the matter to be decided is stated in the warning in the form of a question that can be answered by a vote of "aye" or "no." The moderator will ask for someone to move and second the article as written in the warning. Then the moderator will restate the article. The article is now the main motion on the floor.

Two things may happen before there is a vote. There may be discussion. And there may be amendments.

Discussion: The person who moved the article may speak first. Then the moderator will ask if others wish to speak. Voters may argue for or against the motion. Voters may ask questions. The discussion is usually informative, and sometimes entertaining. You may learn things that you didn't know before. You may even change your mind because of the discussion.

Amendments: Voters may propose amendments. I'll write more about amendments in a future post.

The moderator will manage any discussion and amendments according to Robert's Rules of Order as modified by state law. It is not necessary for voters to know Robert's Rules of Order or state law. The moderator has been trained in the rules and is prepared to explain the rules to the voters as needed. The moderator's job is to facilitate the will of the voters.

Voting: The moderator may choose from a variety of methods for voting on amendments and the main motion: voice vote, show of hands, standing division of the house, or blank paper ballot. Any voter may question the moderator's declaration of the outcome of a voice vote and force a division of the house. Any seven voters may demand a vote by blank paper ballot, but the voters can change this number. In recent Cambridge town meetings, the voters have changed this threshold to 25.

There is one article that is not voted on by the method described above: Article 7 in the town school district meeting – the school budget. That article is voted on by Australian ballot.

My next post: [The Australian Ballot Article](#)

[Email Author](#)

[Reply to Forum](#)

The Australian Ballot Article

George Putnam • Selectboard Member, Selectboard, Cambridge

Announcement

There is one article that is not voted on "from the floor" on Town Meeting Day in Cambridge: Article 7 in the town school district meeting – the school budget. This article is voted on by Australian ballot.

An "Australian ballot" is a pre-printed ballot that voters can cast at the polls, which in Cambridge are open from 7:00 AM to 7:00 PM on Town Meeting Day in the gymnasium. Voters may also cast their ballot before Town Meeting Day under standard early voting procedures in Vermont. Voters do not need to attend either the town school district meeting or the town meeting to cast their ballot. (But those meetings will be taking place in the gymnasium from 9:00 AM until adjournment, possibly in the afternoon.)

This method of voting is called the "Australian ballot" method of voting because it originated in Australia in the 1850s. Hardly anyone outside Vermont uses the phrase "Australian ballot" anymore, but it is ingrained in Vermont law and culture.

When the moderator gets to Article 7 in the town school district meeting, he or she will ask if there is any discussion. Discussion is allowed, but amendments are not.

State law requires that when an article is decided by Australian ballot, there must be a public informational hearing within the 10 days before the meeting. The CES School Board will hold its informational hearing for Article 7 at the Cambridge Elementary School at 6:00 PM on Monday, March 6, 2023. The public may also attend electronically via Google Meet. Details are in the warning:

<https://ces.lnsd.org/community/town-reports/2022/budget-informational-meeting-and-voting-information>

For interesting context and history about the "Australian ballot" method of voting in Vermont, this 2014 article in the Burlington Free Press is good:

<https://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/story/news/local/2014/03/02/in-vermont-ballots-are-australian/5907591/>

The headline on the article is: "In Vermont, ballots are Australian."

My next post: Amendments in Town Meeting

[Email Author](#)

[Reply to Forum](#)

Amendments in Town Meeting

George Putnam • Selectboard Member, Selectboard, Cambridge

Discussion

The ability to amend articles in town meeting is a significant power that resides with the voters when articles are decided "from the floor."

On Town Meeting Day in Cambridge, voters may propose amendments as follows:

- in town school district meeting: to public questions but not the budget article (Article 7)
- in town meeting: to public questions and the budget article (Article 5)

A key point about an amendment is that it must be "germane." It must be closely related to the article that it proposes to amend. The moderator has the authority to reject a proposed amendment if he or she considers it to be not germane. The voters, however, can challenge a decision by the moderator to reject a proposed amendment. A simple majority can overrule the moderator.

One can think of germaneness as "guardrails" for town meeting. Amendments should not stray too far from what was warned. That is because voters make decisions about whether to attend town meeting based on what was warned.

Once an amendment has been moved and seconded, the moderator will restate it. Discussion on the amendment may then begin. The person who moved the amendment may speak first. When an amendment is being considered, discussion may only be about the amendment, not the underlying article. Eventually, the amendment will be voted up or down, and discussion may resume on the underlying article.

Additional amendments may be proposed. Eventually, there will be no more amendments under consideration and the underlying article will be voted up or down, as amended if any amendments were passed.

If this seems complicated, remember that the moderator is there to help you. If you have a question at any time during the meeting, raise your hand. When the moderator recognizes you, identify yourself and ask your question. If you know what you want to do but don't know how to do it, ask the moderator for help. The moderator can assist you with formulating the proper motion.

My next post: Discussion Articles in Town Meeting

[Email Author](#)

[Reply to Forum](#)

Discussion Articles in Town Meeting

George Putnam • Selectboard Member, Selectboard, Cambridge

Discussion

The ability to have discussion is one of the strengths of an in-person town meeting. Voters can ask questions and get information. Voters can share information and opinions. Voters can hear about their neighbors' concerns and views. Voters can question and challenge their elected officials.

Some articles are specifically for discussion. Unlike other articles, no question is presented to be voted up or down. There are usually at least two discussion articles at an in-person town meeting in Cambridge:

- Reports of the town officers or school board directors (Article 2 in both meetings)
- Other business (Article 8 in the school meeting, Article 13 in the town meeting)

Voters may not take any binding action under a discussion article, but this does not mean that such articles are unimportant. In some years, the most interesting parts of town meeting occur under "other business"!

Additional Discussion Articles in Cambridge This Year

In the town school district meeting, Article 7 (the budget article) is essentially a discussion article for purposes of the floor meeting. Discussion is allowed, but amendments are not. The vote on Article 7 is by Australian ballot.

In the town meeting, Article 11 (about the Cambridge Community Center) is a quasi-discussion article. The article does ask for a vote, but it is a non-binding, advisory vote. The discussion leading up to the vote may be as interesting as the vote itself. Article 12 (about the town hall) is a discussion article.

In addition, not mentioned in the warnings, our elected representatives in the legislature are invited to attend an in-person town meeting to address voters and answer questions. This time in the meeting is also, in essence, a "discussion article."

What can be done during a discussion article?

While no binding action may be taken under a discussion article, voters have other

ways to influence their government. Voters may speak their mind. Voters often ask probing questions. If voters wish to be more direct, they may move, discuss, and pass non-binding motions.

If you have a question at any time during the meeting, raise your hand. When the moderator recognizes you, identify yourself and ask your question. The moderator's job is to help you understand and participate in the meeting.

The annual town report will soon be in the mail and on the town's website. My next post: How to Read the Cambridge Town Report.

[Email Author](#)[Reply to Forum](#)

How to Read the Cambridge Town Report

George Putnam • Selectboard Member, Selectboard, Cambridge

Announcement

The annual Cambridge town report is a source of considerable information about the town. The 2022 town report should be arriving in mailboxes about now. Copies are also available at the town office. A PDF version will be posted on the town's website in a few days.

The front cover this year is about a riverbank stabilization project on the Greenway Path. An explanation is provided inside the front cover. Page 1 and the inside back cover include information about the town office, committees, and town services.

This post discusses portions of the town report relevant to Town Meeting Day. As noted earlier in this series of posts, there are two meetings in Cambridge on Town Meeting Day, and the agendas for the meetings are called warnings.

The town school district meeting starts at 9:00 AM. The warning is on pages 12-13.

Information about the Cambridge Elementary School is on pages 100-107.

Articles 1-5 in the warning pertain to school officers. School board directors are listed on pages 16-17.

Article 6 is about the handling of the June 30, 2022, fund balance.

Article 7 is the budget article. The budget of \$6,709,501 for the year ending June 30, 2024 (to be voted on by Australian ballot) is shown on page 104.

The town meeting starts at 10:00 AM. The warning is on pages 14-15.

Articles 1-4 pertain to town officers. A list of elected and appointed officers and employees is on pages 16-20.

Article 5 is the budget article. The Treasurer's Report on pages 21-41 is relevant to this article. I'll have more to say about the budget in my next post.

Article 6 is about a culvert replacement project on Hogback Road. See the Highway Department Report on page 10 for more information.

Articles 7, 8 and 9 relate to the Conservation Reserve Fund. See page 52 for information about this fund and these articles.

Article 10 is about the collection of property taxes. The due date has historically been November 15. This article proposes to change it to November 28.

Article 11 is about the possible acquisition by the town of the Cambridge Community Center. There was an informational session and open house on February 22 sponsored by the Cambridge Recreation Board. Their report in the town report is on pages 57-58.

Article 12 is a discussion article about possible renovations and expansion of the Town Hall. More information will be presented at the meeting.

Both meetings conclude with an article for "other business." As noted in my previous post ("Discussion Articles in Town Meeting"), no binding action can be taken under this article, but the discussion can be interesting!

Be sure to bring the town report with you to town meeting on Tuesday, March 7th.

My next post: The 2023 Cambridge Town Budget

[Email Author](#)

[Reply to Forum](#)

The 2023 Cambridge Town Budget

George Putnam • Selectboard Member, Selectboard, Cambridge

Discussion

The warning for town meeting is on pages 14-15 in the town report. Article 5 is the town budget:

"Shall the voters authorize, for the period from January 1, 2023, to December 31, 2023, total fund expenditures of \$6,513,497.42 of which \$2,851,859.56 shall be raised by property taxes and \$3,661,637.86 by non-property tax revenues?"

The 2023 town budget is on pages 22-36 in the town report. Last year's budget article called for total expenditures of \$4,882,762, so this year's budget is up by \$1,630,735 or 33%. Most of the increase in total expenditures is for projects that are substantially funded by grants which are included in "non-property tax revenues."

The number that taxpayers care most about is the amount raised by property taxes. That number last year was \$2,787,959, so this year's number is up by \$63,900 or 2.3%.

(Two caveats. First: in any year, in any town, other articles in addition to the budget article may affect property taxes. Considering all warned "money" articles, the amount to be raised by property taxes is up by 2.7% this year over last year. Second: This post is about municipal taxes ONLY, not education taxes. In 2022, the municipal portion of property taxes in Cambridge was 27% for a homestead taxpayer and 25% for a non-homestead taxpayer. The balance was education taxes.)

It is difficult to make comparisons to last year for some expense categories because the town recategorized several types of expenses in preparation for a change in accounting systems on January 1, 2023. For example, the town folded "Town Office Staff" into "Town Clerk/Treasurer." This led the News & Citizen in its article dated February 23, 2023, to erroneously say that "the cost of the town clerk and treasurer's office ... will increase by \$113,000 to over \$223,112." In fact, the increase is \$8,631 or 4%.

The News & Citizen also reported that "benefits for highway workers" increased significantly. The town did not increase employee benefits, but it did recategorize

such expenses (see the preceding paragraph), and medical insurance premiums from Blue Cross/Blue Shield increased by 9.3%.

Major highway projects for 2023, mostly funded by grants, are described in the Highway Department Report on page 10 of the town report. One of those projects is the subject of Article 6 about a culvert replacement on Hogback Road. That project is projected to cost not more than \$925,000 with 90% covered by a Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) grant.

Highway project grant income is recorded in account 1900. Highway project costs are recorded in account 3070. Both accounts are up about \$1 million from last year due to the culvert replacement on Hogback Road and other projects.

Account 1800 is used to record non-property tax revenues from a variety of sources, including transfers from reserve funds. The budgeted amount of \$1.1 million for 2023 consists mostly of:

- \$400,000 transfer of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds. See account 2076 for the expense.
- \$374,521 carryover from 2022
- \$340,000 transfer from the Highway Equipment Reserve Fund for a new grader. See account 2859 for the expense (a capital purchase).

The last payment on the 10-year fire station loan was made in 2022 (account 2851). A 3-year loan of \$250,000 for a fire truck was taken out in 2021. One annual payment was made in 2022, and two annual payments remain in 2023 and 2024 (account 2854).

The selectboard will be happy to answer questions about the budget at the town meeting on Tuesday, March 7th. Be sure to bring the town report with you!

[Email Author](#)

[Reply to Forum](#)