

Annual Town Meeting: A Massachusetts tradition

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I become a bit irked every time I hear that politicians are holding what they call “Town Hall Meetings” to promote their campaigns for office or highlight their concern about their constituents.

These alleged Town Meetings are centered around one figure, the politician. In most formats, he or she calls upon people in the audience to participate. Audience members who ask questions have little chance to follow up — and in some cases appear to have been pre-selected by the politician or a moderator.

In other words, the politician-centered Town Meetings have little to do with the tradition New Englanders in small towns like mine, Hawley, experience when we go to our annual Town Meeting.

Our Town Meetings are remarkably democratic institutions in which all townspeople have the right to speak and make decisions — and in which outsiders may not speak unless given permission to do so.

According to political historian Janet Biehl, Town Meetings were not intended to be functioning democracies when they began in the 1600s.

“The Puritans who settled Colonial New England were neither willing nor conscious bearers of the tradition of direct democracy. The original generation who founded the Massachusetts Bay Colony ... thought democracy was, quite frankly, immoral,” writes Biehl.

Nevertheless, because they were fleeing the top-down government and theology they had left behind in England, Biehl explains, the Puritans founded small parishes that functioned as independent communities — and needed to be governed at the local level.

They more or less fell into the tradition of making decisions by having all voters (originally, property-holding, church-affiliated men over 21) convene to ponder town affairs.

Various Massachusetts communities claim to be the first to have held Town Meetings. According to the Dorchester Historical Society, the town of Dorchester pioneered by establishing the town meeting format in 1633. Biehl argues that the honor goes to Cambridge, which began monthly Town Meetings in 1632.

Pelham boasts that it houses the physical structure with the longest history of

holding Town Meetings. Its Old Town Hall was built in 1743 and is still in use.

As the decades went by, Massachusetts Town Meetings became less powerful but more inclusive.

State and federal governments established laws and practices that often superseded those of towns.

This defanging of local government occasionally still sticks in the craw of some residents here in Hawley, who have been known to utter dire threats about seceding from the commonwealth when state requirements and regulations seem particularly oppressive.

Today, Hawley democratically decides its own budget for personnel and equipment. It also votes on school and road-repair budgets, but figures in those categories are heavily influenced by outside forces like school districts and the state legislature.

Happily, religious affiliation, property ownership and gender eventually became irrelevant to participation in town affairs in Hawley and throughout the commonwealth.

In 1990, my late neighbor Annie Stiles (1907-2001) wrote a description of the integration of women into Hawley's Town Meetings. Her words reflect the era in which she grew up; they are both sexist and quaintly charming.

"When women finally were allowed to vote at local Town Meetings," Stiles recalled, "we soon decided to serve hot casseroles and desserts on those cold snowy March days.

"It worked wonders on dispositions and made for more gentle conversations. A piece of apple pie and some cheese could soothe an irate male voter like no other food."

Since 1976, Hawley's Annual Town Meeting has taken place in May rather than March, reflecting the town's transformation from a horse-oriented agricultural community to a car-oriented multi-profession town.

Casseroles and pies are no longer served — although perhaps they should be. Gentle conversations are occasionally in short supply.

Like many other towns, Hawley has encountered its share of controversy at Town Meeting. I remember acrimonious occasions on which voters disagreed to the point of anger about issues like school consolidation and post-storm river clean-up.

Such occasions have illustrated both the limits and the strengths of direct democracy, forcing townspeople to make decisions that entailed compromise. I know neighboring towns have had to make difficult decisions as well. Consensus is wonderful in theory but sometimes thorny in practice.

In general, however, Annual Town Meeting offers residents the opportunity to take pride in their direct part in town government. It also offers lighter moments. For years, residents in Hawley have found humor in odd annual budget items such as cemetery maintenance and repair.

"Is the maintenance effective?" one voter asked at a Town Meeting several years back.

"None of the cemetery residents has complained," was the response.

Hawley's most recent Annual Town Meeting was a model of good cheer and efficiency. We breezed through funding local government with no controversy. One article funding culvert replacement near Sears Road prompted a "Yay!" from someone buried deep in the crowd.

The only controversy arose over combined articles considering whether to adopt a state-recommended bylaw "allowing for the denial, revocation or suspension of a building permit or any local license or permit" to a person or entity behind in his/her/its taxes.

Farmer Tedd White suggested tabling this decision pending further study. "I think this is a well-intentioned article," he noted. Nevertheless, he argued that it might harm residents and also possibly affect the town's ability to collect tax monies.

The selectmen and all those gathered decided to agree to table the motion in order to conduct further study.

No other challenges or disagreements came up, and the meeting was adjourned a mere 20 minutes after it started. Moderator Lark Thwing informs me that this is not a record; according to him, one recent meeting lasted only 17 minutes.

Before going home, voters put away folding chairs and signed one resident's nomination papers for the position of selectman. We also chatted with our neighbors, gazed fondly at a photograph of recently deceased Selectwoman Sally Rich, and patted ourselves metaphorically on the back.

Our Annual Town Meeting had reminded residents that we are all responsible for what happens in our town.