

Town Meeting

In the past several decades, a lot of things have changed about Wayland Town Meeting:

**WAYLAND
BY THE WAY**
SUSAN L.
WAGNER



• Time limits for those who wish to address the meeting as well as for debates.

• Microphones at the front of the room, duly designated for either the “pro” or “con” positions.

This replaces the system of students running up and down the aisles with traveling mikes and allows the moderator to orchestrate a more interesting and balanced debate.

• A requirement that those offering a main motion that differs by 25 words or more from the article must offer a printed copy for everyone in attendance.

• Live broadcasts on Wayland cable television.

As a result of some of these changes and others, the average amount of time spent per article has been reduced from around 40 minutes in the early 1980s to 14 minutes last year.

Average attendance remains around the same, hovering at about 300, except when highly controversial issues are being discussed. In these cases, the number of participants can swell to 2,000 or more.

One thing that hasn’t changed, however, is Town Moderator Peter Gossels. When he ascends the podium next Wednesday evening, Gossels will be marking his 28th consecutive year of chairing the Wayland Town Meeting.

It is expected to be a big event because both the Town Center and the High School building project are on the agenda. Managing such a large number of people is a difficult task, so Gossels has recently compiled and made available yet another update of “The Moderator’s Handbook for Wayland Town Meetings.” The booklet is divided into six main

sections. Since Wayland’s legislature is the Town Meeting, this section of the book is the most voluminous, covering a number of related matters, including the call for Town Meeting, the warrant, the authority of Town Meeting, the moderator’s rules and regulations, the debate, the vote, reconsideration and adjournment.

Through this publication, Gossels and others in town government hope to demystify Town Meeting, stimulate attendance and participation, and encourage civility.

As he says in the exhortation section, “As registered voters living in Wayland, we have the unusual opportunity to help make the political decisions that affect our property, bank accounts, and freedoms by participating fully in Wayland’s open town meetings, instead of delegating that power to an elected representative ... We even have the right on Town Meeting floor personally to question the conduct of our elected leaders and the officials they appoint about how Wayland spends the money it raises from our taxes and any other subject in the warrant. This is a right that residents of towns with representative town meetings ... do not have.”

All of this pretty much echoes the sentiments of a former town resident who told me that, when she arrived in Wayland in the 1950s, she was blown away by the opportunity for citizens to participate directly in the political process.

“I came from a place in New York where this wasn’t the case. So I got involved – and stayed involved – in Town Meeting.”

The new handbook is available at the Board of Selectmen’s office in the Town Building as well as online at www.wayland.ma.us/selectmen/ModeratorsHandbook.pdf

It can also be picked up from the registration tables at Town Meeting.

Susan L. Wagner can be reached at susanwgnr@gmail.com