

REPORT OF THE CONCORD TOWN MEETING STUDY COMMITTEE

May 1, 2025

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Concord's Open Town Meeting -- open to all registered voters of the Town -- is the local governmental body that approves funding for town and school operating and capital expenditures, legislates general and zoning bylaws, authorizes the disposition of real property, creates advisory committees, and addresses other dimensions of community life. An elected Town Moderator presides over the meeting, where every registered voter can participate by discussing and voting on all Town matters.

The April 2024 Annual Town Meeting created a Town Meeting Study Committee (TMSC) to assess the strengths and weaknesses of Concord Town Meeting (TM) and recommend steps *"to make town meeting more inclusive, effective, and responsive to the needs and desires of the town."* It also directed the Committee to make recommendations on three Citizen Petition warrant article proposals: 1-Use hand-held electronic devices ("clickers") for voting at TM; 2- Authorize the Select Board to request a change in state law to allow remote participation and voting at Concord TMs; and 3-Require all TM actions be approved at the polls afterward.

As the TMSC -- seeking to make TM more *"inclusive, effective, and responsive"* -- we asked:

- Are there ways to enable and encourage more voters to participate?
- Can the meeting be made more efficient and enjoyable?
- How can voters become better informed to participate more knowledgeably?

We held more than 30 meetings; fielded a survey to which more than 1000 individuals responded; held two public hearings; met with officials and staff from Concord and other towns; reviewed other documentation and prior recommendations to improve Concord TM; and carefully considered public input from citizens.

We recommend three primary changes:

- ✓ **Use electronic voting by "clickers"** at Town Meeting on Warrant articles -- to enable votes to be cast in private and to provide immediate precise vote counts.
- ✓ **Provide every household a comprehensive Town Meeting Briefing Book** prior to TM -- that includes warrant article texts, motions, explanations (some with maps or charts), Town body recommendations, and links to Town website updates.
- ✓ **File a Home Rule Petition (through the Select Board) to seek to change state law** -- so Concord voters could participate and vote in Town Meetings from home.

We do **not** recommend:

- ✗ Requiring that warrant articles be approved by town-wide precinct voting, or
- ✗ Replacing Open TM (where every voter can participate) with a Representative TM (where 100+ elected members would take on the role and functions of TM).

Our other recommendations to make TM more inclusive, effective, and responsive include:

- ✓ End Town Meeting earlier -- by starting earlier (6:30-9:30 pm).
- ✓ Include more items in the Consent Calendar (no deliberation) to make TM shorter.
- ✓ Schedule items of great public interest on the same day to facilitate participation.
- ✓ Enhance information on accommodations for persons with disabilities.
- ✓ Encourage increased Moderator action to shorten discussion and reduce repetition.
- ✓ Make full use of pre-TM hearings to consider Article pros and cons.

We believe that adopting these recommendations will help make future TMs more inclusive, effective, and responsive to citizen needs. Voters themselves, however, will have the greatest impact -- when deciding whether or not to attend TM, whether to speak, how long to speak, how to listen respectfully to neighbors, and how to make other decisions at TM.

I. PRIMARY RECOMMENDATIONS

As stated in the Executive Summary, we are making five primary recommendations related to proposed changes to Concord TM. We recommend adopting three of them – as well as making six additional changes, less far-reaching in scope, which we believe will help make our TM “more inclusive, effective, and responsive to the needs and desires of the town.”

1- Use electronic voting at TM. Concord TM voting is conducted using colorful paper voting slips provided to each voter when they check in for TM. Eight neighboring towns (and nearly 70 statewide) have adopted electronic voting using “clickers.” We recommended that Concord adopt electronic voting. The technology is mature and provides swift, precise – and private – voting tallies. The Select Board supports clicker use, and the Town Manager was able to repurpose funds to provide clickers for 2025 Annual TM.

2- Provide a comprehensive Town Meeting Briefing Book. Our Concord TM process produces a massive amount of material which evolves through time and can be difficult to keep up with, especially for voters not tuned in to the process. Many voters come to TM unclear about information related to warrant articles, motions, supporting material, and public body recommendations. We recommend that the Town, at least two weeks before TM, provide every household a comprehensive updated book containing all of this material. The Town has adopted this recommendation, and the first briefing book will be provided for TM 2025.

3- File a Home Rule Petition to allow remote TM participation. We recommend that the Select Board take immediate action to seek to amend state law so that Concord voters can participate and vote in Concord TM from home. Current state law requires Open TM voters to be present in person to vote. A Home Rule Petition (HRP) is the mechanism for a town to seek exemption from this statewide restriction. A 2025 TM vote approving Article 27, which is supported by the Select Board, is the first step toward amending state law.

4- DO NOT require voting approval at precinct polls on warrant articles. We recommend against adopting the TM 2024 Citizen Petition proposal that warrant articles must be approved by town-wide vote at the polls. Separating TM deliberation from voting would gut the TM legislative process. It would also be extremely complex and cumbersome, require a major state law change, and likely complicate and undermine our remote-voting Home Rule Petition. One argument for this proposal is that only a small percentage of registered voters participate in TM. However, significantly increased participation is unlikely given that the highest percentage of registered voters who participated in an annual town election not coinciding with a state or presidential election was 34% (in 2025). The Committee heard no convincing rationale for recommending this fundamental change.

5- DO NOT replace Open TM with Representative TM. We considered the suggestion that Concord follow Lexington’s example and adopt a Representative TM in place of Open TM. This too would constitute a wholesale change in our local governance – and without strong public sentiment. We agree with the 2014 Concord Town Governance Study Committee that RTM would provide voters less access and recommend that Concord retain Open Town Meeting.

II. ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

In addition to our primary recommendations (above), we recommend that Concord:

- **End TM sessions earlier.** We recommend that TM start at 6:30 pm and that no new business be taken up after 9:30 pm. Late night Town Meetings were a major voter concern in our town-wide survey. The Select Board has adopted this recommendation.
- **Expand the Consent Calendar and streamline its treatment.** Concord Moderators create a Consent Calendar of articles considered routine, or non-controversial, or that appear to be supported by a strong consensus. The Calendar is then voted on without deliberation on the first night of TM. (Any ten voters can remove an article from the Calendar for separate consideration.) We urge that the Consent Calendar be expanded and that it be presented as swiftly as possible to reduce the time needed to approve it.
- **Group “high interest articles,” to the extent feasible, on a single night.** Based on hearing presentations, letters to the editor, general discussion (and sometimes lawn signs), Moderators have designated certain warrant articles as “high interest.” These articles are discussed at pre-scheduled times, so that voters who cannot attend every hour of TM can arrange their schedule (or babysitter) to be present. When multiple high interest articles are scheduled on different nights, the intent to facilitate work or sitter schedules is undermined. Scheduling all high interest articles on one night will help voters be able to vote on items they care about most.
- **Conduct robust discussion of Article merits at hearings before TM.** The five pre-TM hearings should both be rehearsals for TM presentations and allow for examination and debate of Article issues and problems before they are presented at TM.

- **Manage TM deliberation more actively to promote meeting efficiency.** Survey responders voiced strong support for a brisk meeting pace that would both improve the experience and potentially shorten overall meeting length. We support active moderator discretion in curbing speaker length and repetition.
- **Provide enhanced information on accommodations for persons with disabilities.** Because many voters are unaware of our TM’s many significant accommodations (large print documents, hearing devices, wheelchair areas), they should be better publicized.

III. HOW THE COMMITTEE DID ITS WORK

Concord town policy has been decided at our Open Town Meeting for many years. Town Meeting has been called the purest form of democracy because every voter can attend, participate, and vote. Discussion and deliberation -- including ensuring that minority views are heard -- followed by a binding vote, is central to the democratic process.

Committee Members. After TM 2024 voted to have the Moderator appoint a study committee, Town Moderator Carmin Reiss appointed nine Concord residents: Keith Bergman, Katie Bresnick, Kristen Hagerty, Alice Kaufman, Eric Moore (Chair), Parashar Patel, Phil Swain, Chase Thompson, and Eric Van Loon. This group includes: a former Moderator; a former Town Manager; former Select Board, Finance Committee, DEI Commission, and Planning Board members (and some chairs); three parents of school-age children; and three members new to town government. Non-voting ex officio members were Moderator Carmin Reiss and Select Board Member Cameron McKennitt. Town Management Specialist Shannon McAndrew (also the Town Meeting coordinator) supported the Committee.

Committee process. Over thirteen months, the Committee met more than 30 times (hybrid and in person), held two public hearings, developed and conducted a town-wide survey (in which more than 1000 individuals participated), and researched other towns’ practices. More detailed information about many aspects of our work is found in the Supplements to this report and is also on line at <https://concordma.gov/3639/Town-Meeting-Study-Committee>.

Town-wide Survey. The Committee conducted a town-wide survey in October 2024 to gauge voter perspectives. We used multiple channels to get the word out: The Concord Bridge newspaper, mailed postcards with QR code, a Town website survey link, the Town News and Notices list, PTG email lists, local social media channels, and word of mouth.

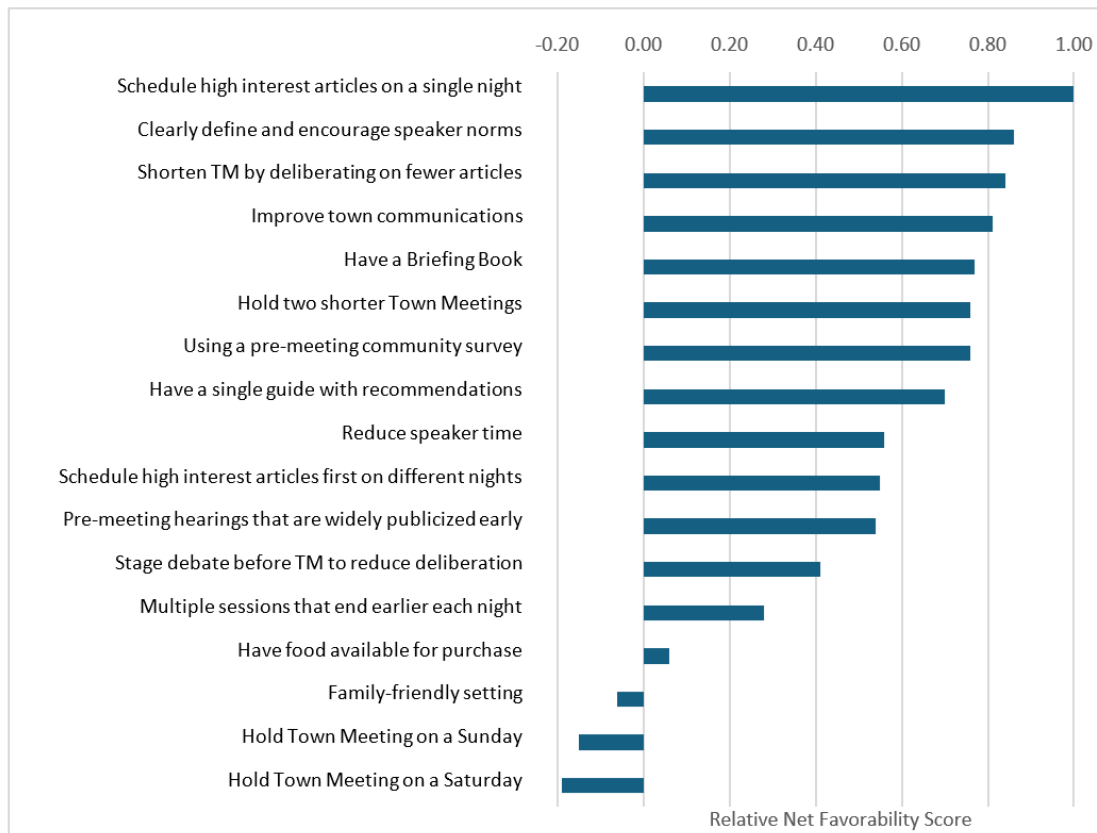
More than a thousand self-described registered voters (1012) responded.

- Respondents skewed older. About one-quarter fell within each of four age groups: under 50, 50s, 60s, and 70+.
- About one-fifth “never” attend TM, another fifth attend “most” sessions, while three-fifths (64%) attend when “interested” or “available.”

- About two-fifths (43%) trusted the work done by Town boards and committees and were generally satisfied with TM and local government, while a third (37%) reported dissatisfaction with TM and how local government represents their views.

A key finding of the survey is that many respondents want to shorten TM (60% said sessions were too long and ran too late) and make it easier to be present for votes on matters important to them. Half of respondents reported difficulty attending in person. Survey support for major changes (like remote participation, electronic voting, and separating voting from deliberation) was highest among those who “never” attended TM and lowest among regular attendees. Importantly, voters expressed strong support (73%) for maintaining Open Town Meeting.

When asked their views on seventeen potential TM changes, the top three most-favored changes were grouping high interest articles on a single night, more rigorous “speaker norms,” and deliberating on fewer Articles. Least-favored changes included weekend meetings or having more nights of shorter sessions. Importantly, while our survey results are useful data points, we do not know how representative these respondents are of all voters.



Conclusion. Ultimately, Concord Town Meeting belongs to the voters, and the Meeting should become as workable as possible for them. We believe the measures we are recommending here will help future Town Meetings achieve that goal.