



A Guide to South Hadley Town Meeting

To educate and participate

Founded in 1947 by Margaret Saunders,
Know Your Town (KYT) is a nonpartisan organization
that seeks to acquaint townspeople with the resources
the Town of South Hadley has to offer and the various
issues and functions of town government.

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I. HISTORY

The Town Meeting has remained the basis of town government in New England and parts of New York State since early colonial times. South Hadley's elected Town Meeting representatives have the privilege and responsibility of being involved in town government through their participation in Town Meeting. South Hadley changed its Town Meeting from an open form to a representative form in 1933.

II. QUALIFICATIONS and ELECTION

- A. Any registered voter may run for election as a Town Meeting member from his/her own precinct. Nomination papers, obtained from and returned to the Town Clerk, must be signed by at least 50 registered voters. At least 10 of these registered voters must be from your own precinct.
- B. Town elections are held every year on the first Monday in April. One-third of the total number of precinct representatives is elected each year to three-year terms.
- C. Town Meeting members serve without pay.

III. THE TOWN REPORT

The Town Report gives a complete account of the previous year's Town Meeting, including the budget and voting results for each article. The Report also includes similar information from any special town meeting, as well as the annual reports from department heads, boards, committees and commissions.

IV. TOWN WARRANT

The Town Warrant is a legal document comprised of the articles that will be discussed and voted upon at the Town Meeting. Articles must be submitted for budget requests, confirmation of certain negotiated personnel contracts and collective bargaining, changes in personnel categories, zoning changes, borrowing, and other such substantive pieces of town business. Business that is not included in the Town Warrant may not be discussed or transacted during Town Meeting.

V. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Public hearings are held on most warrant articles prior to Annual Town Meeting. The Appropriations Committee public hearing includes presentation and discussion of all warrant articles involving the expenditure, appropriation, raising or borrowing of money.

Other boards and department, most notably the Planning Board and the School Department, also hold public hearings on articles particular to them.

VI. TOWN MEETING

Timing

The Annual Town Meeting is held in early May. Special Town Meetings can be held at any time, but are most generally held in the fall after the Commonwealth has determined its aid to Cities and Towns. Adjustments as deemed appropriate can then be made to budgets, and other important business can be addressed without waiting until spring.

Purpose

A primary purpose is to set the budgets for the next fiscal year (which begins on July 1). Town Meeting must also address other, non-financial, matters that come before it in the form of warrant articles.

Roles & Responsibilities

Town Meeting Members are the “board of directors” for the town. They represent the citizens of their precincts at Town Meeting. They are charged with being well prepared to discuss and evaluate the warrant articles. To do so, they should have attended the Appropriations Committee public hearing and have thoughtfully considered the materials sent to them. They should listen, critically but openly, to warrant article discussions. Town Meeting Members should ask questions both to obtain clarification, and to probe for additional relevant information. They should cast their vote sincerely and without personal bias.

The **Moderator** calls Town Meeting to order, conducts its proceedings (including recognizing speakers, calling for votes, and announcing vote results), and makes any other necessary procedural decisions during Town Meeting.

The **Town Clerk** oversees attendance to determine a quorum of voters and records the vote on every article.

Also known as the Finance Committee, the **Appropriations Committee** advises Town Meeting on money-related articles that come before it. It gathers information directly from departments during the budget review process and conducts a public hearing on those money-related articles approximately 4 weeks prior to Town Meeting. Anticipated revenue information, and the town’s free cash and Proposition 2 ½ levy-limit positions are also reviewed. Members discuss and vote on each such article, and their collective advice is presented in a report to Town Meeting members prior to Town Meeting.

The **Selectboard** generally authors articles in the warrant for those areas that report to them, and presents them at Town Meeting.

The **Board of Assessors** sets the tax rate once the budget is balanced, free cash is certified, and it is clear that the Town will not exceed its levy limit under Proposition 2 ½. This generally happens in late fall, after the fall special Town Meeting.

Town Counsel reviews all articles, and ensures that town-sponsored articles are in proper legal form before the warrant is printed. S/he provides Town Meeting with legal opinion upon request, which meeting members are free to act upon as they wish. Although Town Counsel is generally present at Town Meeting, his/her attendance is not required.

Other Boards, Committees, and Commissions prepare and present supporting materials for warrant articles pertaining to them.

Normal Procedure

Town Meeting begins with the Moderator calling the meeting to order and announcing attendance and quorum information. The Town Clerk reads the official “call to meeting” as posted.

Each article is taken in order according to the Warrant. A motion on the article must be made and seconded for discussion to occur. Typically, the sponsor of the article presents information in its support. If it is a money-related article, the Chair of the Appropriations Committee provides the Committee’s recommendation.

Once recognized by the Moderator, any Town Meeting members may speak to any article. The Moderator may also recognize non-Town Meeting members, if requested, to provide specific testimony. No one may speak if not recognized by the Moderator.

The Moderator calls for a vote when judging that sufficient discussion has occurred. Unless the Moderator senses a close vote, a voice vote will be held. If a voice vote is not indicated, or if the voice vote taken is not clearly decisive, a show-of-hand (or standing) vote will occur. The Moderator will call for tellers to successively count the affirmative and negative show-of-hand (or standing) votes. A tie vote defeats the motion.

Most articles require a simple majority to pass. Changes in zoning by-laws, appropriations by bonding, and certain other articles requiring approval by a 2/3 vote are so announced prior to the vote. Very few types of articles, e.g. appropriations of funds to pay prior bills from prior years, required a 9/10-vote approval.

Town Meeting is adjourned once all moved articles on the warrant have been addressed. According to by-law, “no article may be disposed of by a vote to lay on the table, to indefinitely postpone, or to take no action thereunder.”

Exceptions to the Normal Procedure

Articles may be addressed out of Warrant order if there is such a motion to advance or postpone that has been accepted by general consent or majority vote.

A motion may be amended by majority vote. The amendment must be moved and seconded, debated, and voted upon before the main motion. While amendments to amendments are permissible, they are usually discouraged by the Moderator due to the confusion they can engender.

Motions to reconsider a vote must be made by someone on the prevailing side of the first vote. The Moderator generally will not allow such a motion unless circumstances have changed or time has elapsed sufficient to expect a change in voter opinion. Approval requires a majority vote.

A request for a roll call vote must be placed before the Meeting is convened, and a request for a secret ballot would be denied unless arrangements had been made in advance with the Town Clerk so that proper facilities could be provided. In representative Town Meetings, roll count votes are discouraged since they prevent the public from knowing how their representative voted.

A “point of order” must be heard and answered by the Moderator at any time. This is not a motion, but a question about whether an action or activity during Town Meeting is “out of order,” or proceeding incorrectly.

The Moderator has the discretion to resume the proceedings of Town Meeting at another time and place of all articles cannot be addressed in the originally scheduled session.

VII. BUDGET GLOSSARY

Borrowing (or bonding) requires a two-thirds approval of Town Meeting members. The Town is limited in the amount of total borrowing. Care must be taken to assess borrowing’s long-term financial implications.

The **Cherry Sheet**, so-called because it was originally printed on pink paper, details of the funds to be received from the Commonwealth each fiscal year.

The town’s **fiscal year** runs concurrent with that of the Commonwealth, July 1 – June 30. Financial matters (budgets, appropriations, tax rates) run on a fiscal year basis.

Free cash is money remaining after Town Meeting appropriations have been made. It is carried over to the next fiscal year and is often used for special town meeting appropriations. Free cash should not be used for recurring expenses.

The Assessors prepare the **Huntington Report** (named after a report developed by the Town of Huntington). A forecasting tool, it provides details of expected revenue (income) appropriations (expenses), the levy limit, and free cash.

The Town’s **levy limit** is the amount of revenue that can be raised by taxes. Proposition 2½ limits the increase in taxation to 2 and ½% over last year’s base, not accounting for new growth.

The **stabilization fund** is often called the town’s “rainy day fund.” It is to be used only when a non-recurring emergency faces the Town and is increased periodically by appropriation from free cash. A sizeable stabilization fund is a sign of a town’s financial health.

For additional information about South Hadley Town Meeting, please visit the town website:
www.southhadley.org/Pages/SouthHadleyMA_Meeting/index