

HELLO HINGHAM
TOWN MEETING AND THE WARRANT

By Cathy Salisbury
Hingham League of Women Voters

Have you read the Town Meeting Warrant yet? It arrived in your mailbox last week. Do you know what all the Articles mean, and how they might affect you and your taxes? The Warrant is the “program to annual Town Meeting” which this year starts Monday, April 24 at 7:00 P.M. at Hingham High School.

Town Meeting makes the final appropriation, i.e., money, decisions and most major policy decisions so Hingham can function until next year. Selectmen call a Special Town Meeting when there are important and time-sensitive issues.

Let's say you plan to attend. Here's what's to expect when you walk in to the High School, assuming you know what precinct you live in and for shame if you don't (it holds up the line). You'll be checked in, directed to the gym, where the action takes place, or if that's full, to the auditorium, where you'll watch the proceedings on closed circuit television, but not see the real action. So get there early.

Any town board or committee can propose Warrant Articles, or by petition signed by at least ten registered voters. The Selectmen prepare the Warrant and set a date it will be "closed" after which no further articles can be included, usually around December. That's to allow enough time for the articles to be organized, and numbered (very important) and the Warrant to be printed. It has to be available at least seven days before a Town Meeting and 14 days before a Special town Meeting.

The Warrant contains the proposed town operating budget for the following year, Article Six. Certain matters can be acted upon only at Annual Town Meeting: for example, appropriations from the stabilization fund, and proposed purchases or leases of land. And matters may not be acted upon at a Town Meeting unless the subject is listed in the Warrant. An Article takes the form of a question and begins with the words “Will the Town...” and continues with a clear and concise statement of the action that the proponent wants voters to take. Action on an Article is by a vote, usually a majority. Some Articles require a two-thirds vote (for example the transfer or acquisition of real property, incurring town debt, or an amendment to the local zoning by-laws).

Be sure to read page three of the Warrant about Town Meeting procedures. Although not governed by strict rules of parliamentary procedure, standing rules, loosely patterned on Robert's Rules of Order, do govern the proceedings. Moderator Thomas L.P. O'Donnell will explain all of this.

Sometimes a resident will propose a vote that's somewhat different from the Article. The Moderator then asks Town Counsel Jim Toomey if the proposed vote is “within the scope” of the Article. What's at question is whether a reasonable citizen reading the

Article would have fair warning of the proposed vote. Town Meeting can act only on votes within the scope of the Article.

In Hingham, the Advisory Committee makes its recommendations on all Articles, but other towns have a finance committee that reviews only appropriations and budgetary items. Planning Board members explain zoning by-law Articles and are prepared to answer questions within their area of expertise. Other department heads are also there to explain their budgets if needed.

The Moderator's role is to: determine if a quorum of voters is present; determine if a motion is within the scope of an article; enforce the applicable parliamentary procedures during the meeting; entertain motions; explain requirements for a vote in certain circumstances (simple majority or two-thirds); determine vote outcomes; and adjourn the Town Meeting. No one can speak at Town Meeting without the Moderator's permission. If the audience has spilled over into the Auditorium, the two places must be connected by a public address system, so that proceedings can be heard and participated in by all the voters present. An Assistant Town Moderator is appointed by the Moderator to oversee proceedings in the Auditorium.

Voters at Town Meeting frequently express frustration with their inability to exert more control over the town's budget (Article Six.) As explained in an earlier column, roughly half of the budget is allocated to the School Department. Voters can only vote for or against the total amount, and need to trust the School Committee members to recommend a budget that voters feel comfortable with. Even the remaining half of the budget earmarked for general government may seem impenetrable to voters. It's impossible for a voter to review the details of the town budget in the context of a Town Meeting. This job falls to members of the legislative committees who serve as budget watchdogs.

If you're interested in municipal budgets and finance you're urged to volunteer to serve on one of these important committees.

For information about membership in the Hingham League of Women Voters, please contact Christine Dietterich at coed@verizon.net or visit our web site at www.hingham.ma.lwvnet.org/.