

Neighbor to Neighbor

What to expect at Town Meeting

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Town meeting is the cornerstone of a direct democracy form of government. Town Meeting is both the legislative body of Dunstable and a gathering of the Town's eligible voters. Town Meeting makes some major decisions, such as the Town's operating budget, other expenditures including capital projects, appropriations from revolving and enterprise accounts, and local bylaw changes. Dunstable has one annual Town Meeting on the second Monday in May. There may be additional special town meetings called by the Selectmen if an important issue arises during the fiscal year.

At Dunstable's Town Meeting, there must be 50 registered voters present to conduct business (this is called a quorum). While any member of the public may attend Town Meeting, only registered voters may speak unless others are authorized at the discretion of the moderator or Town Meeting.

Every Town Meeting is run by a moderator. The moderator declares the outcome of all voice votes. Dunstable's moderator is elected at the Town Election. When the elected moderator is absent, a temporary moderator may be elected at the Town Meeting. (Side note, there is no one on the ballot for Moderator at the Election to be held on May 15th this year.)

In addition to the elected and appointed officials you may recognize, you will also find Town Counsel seated at the front of Town Meeting. Mirick O'Connell represents the town in legal matters and will send a lawyer who has helped prepare the warrant for the Selectmen (which is like the Town Meeting's agenda, you can find the warrant in your Town Report). During the Town Meeting, the town counsel answers legal questions that come up.

So what is a warrant? A warrant is a list of questions (articles) to be asked at Town Meeting, like an agenda. The Selectmen issue the warrant. The largest appropriation, the operating budget, is in one warrant article, the motion (statement on the floor requesting the article pass or fail) for that particular article will include the salary and operations details for each department. Every year the elected Advisory Board, Dunstable's finance committee, prepares a balanced budget in the months before the annual Town Meeting.

Each article at Town Meeting will have a recommendation from the Advisory Board as well as the Board of Selectmen. These recommendations are meant to be advisory in nature, to help voters decide which way they would like to vote. Both boards discuss the warrant articles and their recommendations at open meetings in the weeks leading up to Town Meeting. Voters and residents are encouraged to attend these meetings to begin learning about the issues well before votes are called at Town Meeting and/or the ballot.

The moderator, before discussion on the floor of Town Meeting, summarizes each article or reads it in its entirety. When it comes to the budget article, a member of the Advisory Board moves that the Town Meeting appropriate the money recommended in the Town report. Then the moderator entertains motions to amend the budget article. When the Town Meeting has voted on all amendments, the Town Meeting votes on the Advisory Board's motion as originally presented or amended. Any resident at Town Meeting can participate in the

discussion around an article, and may also ask to amend the motion. To do so, stand up and form a line at the microphone supplied for attendees and wait for the moderator to acknowledge you. When the moderator acknowledges you, state your name and your address. You may speak only about the topic being discussed. You may not speak about a previous or future topic. You must direct your comments to the moderator and not individuals. If another individual can answer or respond to your comment, the moderator will give that person permission to do so.

Voting can be done in a few ways. Most votes are counted simply by eyeballing the number of raised voter cards, which are given to registered voters upon checking into Town Meeting. In the case of a close vote or an article that requires more than a simple majority, you may be asked to hold up your card long enough that it may be counted. Occasionally a secret ballot will be called for. In that case you will be given instructions at Town Meeting.

At least five days before Town Meeting you will receive a post card in the mail notifying you of the availability of the Town Report. At this time Town Reports can be picked up at the Town Hall or the Dunstable free Public Library. This report contains details of the previous fiscal year and the warrant and budget for the upcoming Town Meeting. This information is also available on the Town website. There may also be additional guidance documents on the website to help you make an informed decision.

For more detailed information the Secretary of the Commonwealth issued a “Citizen’s Guide to Town Meetings” which can be found at www.sec.state.ma.us/cis/cistwn/twnidx.htm.