

Middlesex Town Meeting Solutions Committee
Meeting Minutes
April 12, 2001

Present: Russell Alger, Wilson Brett, Susan Clark, MaryAlexander, Gregory K. Whitchurch, Barbara J. Whitchurch, Henrietta Jordan, Martin Pincus, Mary Just Skinner, Dave Shepard

The meeting was called to order by Mary Just Skinner at 7:10 p.m. Mary stated that she and Mary Alexander had been tasked by the Select Board to set up the first meeting of this group. She said she would be willing to act as liaison between the committee and the Select Board but didn't feel she should chair the group; rather she thought some of the citizens in attendance at the meeting should be in the leadership roles. It was decided to set out an agenda for this meeting and Susan Clark agreed to record people's thoughts and ideas on flip charts. Dave Shepard agreed to take meeting minutes.

The agenda was set out as follows:

- Introductions
- Goals and Objectives
- Determining officers of the committee
- Issues and Solutions

During a brief discourse on legal matters with regard to potentially changing how voting is conducted, it was noted by Susan that in order to do this, according to the Secretary of State's office, Middlesex would need to change its town charter. Mary then reported that Middlesex does not currently have a charter.

Discussion then moved to determining goals and objectives of the committee. Members noted that our town voted at Town Meeting to maintain the traditional face-to-face Town Meeting format, but that our committee was charged with increasing participation in Town Meeting.

Greg offered that he had been pondering on how Town Meeting developed over the years, how it ended up being held in March and during particular hours of the day. He wondered about how it was made welcoming to town residents to attend and express their opinions on matters of town government. Others added that it is important to increase public involvement in town government as a whole and not just attend Town Meeting. This involvement should include controversial or volatile issues.

Martin indicated that he thought the committee had a narrow issue to address and that it could probably be done in one meeting. He phrased the issue as maintaining participation at Town Meeting while extending the opportunity to vote on issues to those who can't attend the meeting.

Wilson noted the importance of involving as many as possible in decision-making when it is a controversial or volatile issue. He pointed out that many issues are non-

controversial and are passed easily but that when issues are controversial it would be beneficial if these could be taken up at a separate meeting, with notification to town residents, where voting would be by Australian ballot. Several people asked if that isn't already achieved by the process of petitioning for a re-vote.

Henrietta suggested a need to help people participate who aren't able to attend Town Meeting, perhaps because they are house-bound or are out of town on Town Meeting Day. She also mentioned wanting to find a way not only to improve Town Meeting attendance, but to motivate participation in self-government and community.

In reference to Wilson's concern about broad participation in determining controversial issues, including participation by those who may not feel comfortable attending meetings, Susan proposed that it would be ideal to inform people about issues and get their input before an issue became polarized; this way, by the time an issue came to a vote, enough of people's concerns could have been addressed in the proposal, and it would not be as controversial. It is important that everyone have a chance to participate before voting.

With regard to the idea of postponing voting to another meeting for volatile issues, Greg questioned how "hot-button" issues would be determined--who makes the decision of what is controversial? He doesn't necessarily feel comfortable with only those who attend Town Meeting being the ones to make the decision that an issue is controversial or important enough that it ought to be voted on at a special meeting. Greg feels the important thing is how well town residents are informed and how welcome they feel to take part in decision making, even if not a lot of people actually show up to vote. We shouldn't measure success just by how many people vote at Town Meeting.

Wilson posed the question of what obstacles there might be to allowing an issue on the agenda for Town Meeting to be postponed for a vote at a later date. Mary Just Skinner reviewed the Vermont League of Cities and Towns handbook for select persons but didn't find an answer to this question.

Martin suggested our committee could make recommendations to the Select Board and leave it to them to resolve any questions of legality. Dave proposed it would be more helpful to the select board if the committee were to make an effort to research whether any of the recommendations we might make are not allowed under law.

A key problem the committee must grapple with is that those who don't attend Town Meeting can't vote. There was discussion of the reasons why people might not attend Town Meeting. Some of the barriers suggested were:

- people need more information throughout the year so they can feel informed and understand the need for their involvement
- need for a sign language interpreter
- people who are homebound
- people who may have difficulty in attending but don't want to ask for help/don't want to be a burden

- people out of town on Town Meeting Day (including those in military service)
- those who have to work during the time of the meeting
- some people are uncomfortable in public situations
- insufficient space
- the town report comes out too late, people don't have enough time to digest it prior to Town Meeting

There was also some discourse on whether some reasons for not attending are more legitimate than others. Should efforts to improve attendance be extended to everyone who can't attend or only to certain categories of those who don't currently attend? Some concern was expressed over making value judgements about people's reasons for not attending Town Meeting. Mary Just Skinner suggested that we should make as many reasonable accommodations as possible to allow as many as possible to attend. In this way, the town isn't making value judgements about reasons people don't attend.

A preliminary list of possible solutions was developed as follows:

- Use the Middlesex Monthly as a vehicle to inform voters
- Automatically budget for a sign language interpreter (or at least make it easy to have one come)
- Use of "streaming video" or other computer or audio options
- Televised select board meetings to keep voters informed/engaged
- Bigger space for Town Meeting and make it more accessible
- Investigate the possibility of a motion to postpone for controversial issues
- Town budget include money for mailing of informational material to Middlesex voters
- Town web site with interactive elements
- More creative ways to get information out--e-mail, posters with tear-offs, etc.
- Investigate changing the time, date or location of Town Meeting
- Use of phone calls/phone tree to encourage people to come to Town Meeting
- Have the meal before the meeting
- Offer child care and transportation

Wilson felt there are four main points to consider in assessing barriers and proposing solutions:

1. Issue volatility
2. How can the most amount of voters be included
3. Importance of an issue - some issues aren't important enough to galvanize people
4. Solutions should be simple and timeless

By the end of the meeting the goals and objectives of the committee had been further refined as follows:

1. Support continuation of, and increase participation in, face-to-face Town Meeting
2. Facilitate access to Town Meeting and town governance (including better access to information)
3. Improve participation in town issues all along (including volatile issues, preferably before they get too volatile)
4. Motivate participation in self-governance and community

Officers were elected as follows

Chair - Susan Clark

Vice Chair - Greg Whitchurch
Secretary - Dave Shepard

A list of next steps to be taken was developed as follows:

- Identify groups with needs to target and name solutions
- Research possible “technological fixes”(computer streaming etc.)
- Develop a survey and explore “focusgroup” format to obtain input from Middlesex residents on TownMeeting participation issues

The next meeting will be held on May 24, from 7:00p.m.-9:00 p.m. at the Town Hall. The agenda will include.

1. Introductions
2. Reports on committee members' research/work:
 - a. Survey/focus groups (Henrietta and Barb)
 - b. Motion to postpone for controversial issues (Mary Just Skinner)
 - c. Legal issues involved in improving TM participation (Martin)
 - d. Computer technology to enhance access (Greg)
 - e. Pending legislation in this area (Henrietta)
3. Expand and refine list of target issues and solutions (Susan)
4. Plan of action for committee, focusing on next steps

Please invite all interested folks to attend our next meeting! If you have any questions about the committee or would like to add an agenda item, please contact committee chair Susan Clark at 223-5824, e-mailsclark@sover.net.

Minutes recorded by Dave Shepard

Middlesex Town Meeting Solutions Committee
Meeting Minutes
May 24, 2001

Present: David Lawrence, Wilson Brett, Susan Clark, Gregory Whitchurch, Barbara Whitchurch, Kim Cheney, Stanley Scribner, Martin Pincus, Mary Just Skinner, Dave Shepard

1. Minutes of the April 12, 2001 Meeting

A motion to accept the minutes of the April 12 meeting was made by Stanley Scribner and seconded by Mary Skinner. The minutes were accepted. Stanley suggested publishing the minutes in the Middlesex Monthly.

2. Meeting Agenda

The agenda for this meeting was established as follows:

- Reports from committee members
- Discussion on representative meeting
- Expand/refine list of target issues/solutions
- Plan of action/next steps

3. Reports from committee members

•Computer Technology

David Lawrence provided information on some computer technology issues related to assisting people who may not be able to physically attend Town Meeting to participate from a remote site, such as their home. One possibility is streaming video; David thought Sovernet might be willing to provide free access for the Town Meeting. One way this could be accomplished would be for volunteers to set up a lap top computer with an internet connection in a home. Having a satellite site where people could gather is another possibility. A question was raised as to whether a motion could be made at Town Meeting to allow people not physically in attendance to vote via the internet. The Secretary of State has indicated allowing voting in this manner might have to be included in a town charter.

Mary posed the question of whether there should be criteria for receiving the Town Meeting via internet service. Wilson asked if computer technology could enable any voter to vote and whether such technology is likely to reach people who don't attend Town Meeting?

It was suggested that the survey of voters could be used to gauge interest in computer technology and get a reading on whether it may be likely to help people who otherwise couldn't attend Town Meeting. David noted he was curious about how much of a problem there actually is with people not being able to physically attend Town Meeting and feels the survey could be a good way to assess this.

- Review of Draft Survey

Copies of the draft survey, prepared by Barbara and Henrietta Jordan, were passed around for review. A number of suggestions were offered:

- Include lists of issues with a simple ranking system (strongly disagree, disagree, no opinion, agree, strongly agree).
- Susan felt that in addition to the survey, we ought to have informal “living room” meetings with some voters, including some of those who signed the petition seeking to move from Town Meeting to Australian ballot.
- A suggestion was made to include a question, phrased in a positive manner, about what people like about Town Meeting.

Additional comments on the survey can be sent to Barbara via email. A revised draft will be prepared for review at the next meeting. For the next meeting Susan would like to discuss “living room” meetings or other approaches to get more feedback from voters.

•Motion to Postpone

Mary reported on her research into the question of a motion to postpone voting on a given issue at Town Meeting. The Vermont League of Cities and Towns informed her that it is allowed to pass over or table an issue at Town Meeting. At the end of Town Meeting another meeting can be set at a date certain to take up the issue again. A question was posed as to whether an issue that is tabled or passed over could be voted on at a later date by Australian ballot? Kim said if that isn't currently allowed, the law could be changed. Mary will check on whether it is allowed to postpone a vote on an issue at Town Meeting and specifically vote on the issue by Australian ballot at a later date.

•Pending Legislation

It was reported that two bills in the legislature related to voting (S.92 and H.127) are unlikely to be voted on this year. Discussion of this issue was postponed to a later meeting when Henrietta is in attendance to give the committee a report.

•Legal Issues

Greg asked if we should look into the definition of attending Town Meeting. After some discussion it was agreed that we don't need to answer this question.

4. Representative Meeting

At the request of Kim, the committee considered the concept of a representative meeting. The town of Brattleboro uses this concept and Kim explained how it might work. The town of Middlesex would be divided into districts and the voters of each district would elect a representative who would be the person to actually vote on the issues at Town Meeting. Stanley suggested adding this concept to the survey but after some discussion it was decided not to do so. For the present time, the committee agreed not to pursue this concept further as it seemed to be getting away from the goal of this committee to increase participation in Town Meeting.

5. Frank Bryan Data

Susan reported on information she obtained from University of Vermont political science professor Frank Bryan about his many years of data collection about Town Meeting. He

is interested in attending a meeting with this committee at some future date. His suggestions/recommendations regarding promoting participation in Town Meeting are broken into two categories: structural and procedural.

Structural:

1. Don't go to an Australian ballot format.
2. Providing child care increases participation, especially for women.
3. Don't start the meeting too late (in any case don't begin later than 7:00 p.m.), attendance is lower when the meeting starts too late.
4. Having a meal is important in boosting attendance.
5. Town Meeting and the school meeting should be joined. Having both together increases attendance. It is not a good idea to have one meeting before the meal and one after. It's ideal to start each meeting before the meal, pause them for the meal, then complete each meeting after the meal.

Procedural:

1. Town meeting is more successful when a town's population is less than 2500 and there are issues with some degree of controversy to be voted on. Dr. Bryan recommends that town leaders put some budget items on the agenda as specific items to be voted on rather than having them buried in the budget.
2. Involve the school and children.
3. Form a committee to publicize issues. Use many media and different formats.

Check town reports that have won awards to get ideas.

4. Celebrate citizenship. For example, make it a point to recognize young people who are voting for the first time ("coming of age") and for accomplishments such as many years of continuous attendance at Town Meeting.
5. Vote on "out of town" petitioned items separately rather than in one big group.

With regard to moving Town Meeting to a larger space, Dr. Bryan said it shouldn't inhibit participation but it is important to do microphones carefully if they become necessary because microphones can inhibit people.

Concerning the timing of Town Meeting, Stanley agreed to look into the past times that Town Meeting has been held in Middlesex and the resulting attendance.

6. Issues for the next meeting

- Review new draft of survey
 - Discuss living room/community discussion as options for expanding survey
 - Report from Henrietta on pending legislation
 - Brief history of Middlesex Town Meeting - Stanley
 - Review of award winning town reports - Susan
 - Cost of mailing the survey to all registered voters - Dave Shepard
 - Further clarification of legal issues - Martin
 - Cost of mailing the survey through a mailing service - Wilson
- The meeting was adjourned at 9:18 pm. The next meeting will be held on June 21, 2001 from 7:00 to 9:00 pm at the Middlesex town office.

Minutes recorded by Dave Shepard

Middlesex Town Meeting Solutions Committee
Meeting Minutes
June 21, 2001

Present: David Lawrence, Susan Clark, Gregory Whitchurch, Barbara Whitchurch, Martin Pincus, Dave Shepard, Angelo, Henrietta Jordan, Chris McVeigh, Wilson Brett

1. Minutes of the June 21 Meeting

Greg moved to approve the minutes of the May 24 meeting with a second from Wilson. The minutes were approved.

2. Review of Survey

Question #1:

Henrietta suggested adding to question #1 something to the effect that the items listed are some examples of reasons that someone might not attend Town Meeting. In terms of format, Wilson said that each of the possible reasons ought to have numbers from one to five for ranking. It was also recommended to delete the last paragraph in #1.

Wilson stated that he would also like to see an open ended question where people who have concerns about Town Meeting (in particular those people who signed the petition for changing to Australian ballot) could explain their concerns. Susan proposed wording for this question that was approved by the committee.

Question #2:

Under the section entitled "Town Meeting Accessibility", it was noted that there needs to be wording for the item pertaining to participation from remote locations that makes it clear this is not referring to absentee ballots.

Greg posed the question of whether the answers received pertaining to participation in Town Meeting without being physically present will really have much bearing on what is done.

Susan proposed that people make wordsmithing type of comments via email. She will also check with Mary Skinner about money for printing and mailing the survey.

Finally, there was a suggestion regarding the survey that each committee member get one non-committee member to review the draft of the survey. Additional comments on the survey should be sent to Barbara by August 8.

3. Youth Involvement

Susan reported on ideas from John Puleio:

-Kid's Vote

This has a curriculum already available from the Secretary of State's Office and focuses on voting. It also has a website.

-John will contact a couple of interested teachers on involving youth.

-A mock Town Meeting or symposium involving students is a possibility.

-The 21st Century Grant will make money available for after school programs, some of which could be related to youth involvement in town government.

Wilson expressed concern that in school politics can be a problem such that some kids who express unpopular views get trampled on. What role should our committee take with involving youth? We need to be careful not to cross into an advocacy role on issues. The goal should be to promote involvement of youth.

Martin suggested the committee have a meeting at Rumney that involves students. A few students could be invited to one of our meetings prior to a meeting to be held at Rumney School.

Henrietta suggested we get an interested teacher to attend a committee meeting in order to guide our efforts with students at Rumney.

4. Town Report

Susan reported that she has been reviewing other town reports and explained about some of the rewards that town reports can receive. She will contact June Lakin about ideas for the Middlesex town report that might make it more interesting and inviting.

5. Date for next meeting

The date for the next meeting was set for August 21 at 7:00.

Minutes recorded by Dave Shepard

Middlesex Town Meeting Solutions Committee
Meeting Minutes
September 13, 2001

Present: Susan Clark, Gregory Whitchurch, Barbara Whitchurch, Dave Shepard, Henrietta Jordan

1. Town Meeting Survey

The Select Board has estimated that printing and mailing the survey will cost \$375-\$500 and they don't have that much money to spend on this now. They have asked if mailing the survey could wait until January. The Planning Commission recently printed and mailed a comparable survey for about \$265. After some discussion it was agreed that it would be worth checking with the Select Board to see if they could afford the survey this fall if it were closer to the \$265 figure.

Greg posed the question of when might be the most appropriate time to send out the survey. Susan mentioned other ways, such as small group meetings, to get feedback, some of which could be done before the survey is mailed. Another possibility is some kind of event featuring Frank Bryan as a speaker.

Feedback was also provided on the most recent draft of the survey, some of it gleaned from comments of non-committee members who reviewed the survey. It was felt that having five choices in question #1 was too many. Henrietta suggested having a 1-3 ranking instead of 1-5. For question #2, there was a concern that there were too many choices under each of the main headings. There was a suggestion for fewer choices to be provided and leave it open for the respondents to add other suggestions.

Some other means of distributing the survey, besides mailing, were also proposed:

- send them home with students at Rumney; and
- put the survey in the Middlesex Monthly; and
- have boxes of surveys at various locations around town.

A concern was expressed that if the survey can't be mailed until January there won't be time to implement anything that might come out of the survey by next Town Meeting. Dave mentioned that if we have some things that can be accomplished by Town Meeting and can perhaps present survey

results that would be ok. There was a suggestion to seek money from some businesses to fund the survey.

2. 21st Century Grant

Susan reported that John Puleio is thinking about an event with Rumney students connected to democracy in the classroom to take place around the time of Town Meeting. Two 5/6 grade teachers, Susan Amestoy and Michaela Martin are interested in working with this committee.

3. Susan's Meeting with June Lakin

Susan recently met with June Lakin about the activities of this committee. Highlights of their conversation were as follows:

- June is interested in the idea of a website for the Town.
- Development of a "welcome packet" for new town residents that would include information about town government.
- Improvement in the cover for the town report; Susan will approach Brian Prendergast.
- June indicated there would be some logistical problems with moving Town Meeting to Rumney School.

4. Plan of Action

A possible two-pronged approach was suggested as a way to proceed.

1. An event featuring Frank Bryan that would incorporate some small group discussions. The target date would be early November.
2. "Living Room Sessions" to reach some of the people who might be less likely to attend a larger event or meeting. This would require contacting someone to host a session and to invite participants, particularly those who signed the petition seeking a vote on replacing Town Meeting with an Australian ballot. Susan will contact June about getting a list of those who signed the petition. Greg and Barb will check with Camp Meade about the possibility of using their space for a meeting.

Next meeting: Tuesday, October 9, 2001.

Middlesex Town Meeting Solutions Committee
Meeting Minutes
October 9, 2001

Present: Susan Clark, Gregory Whitchurch, Barbara Whitchurch, Dave Shepard, Henrietta Jordan

1. Status Update

Susan brought the committee up to date on actions and activities since the last meeting. Brian Prendergast has agreed to design a new cover for the Town Report. Susan has spoken with Russ Alger who expressed concern that the committee isn't addressing the issue of absentee voters. She also talked with the grade 5/6 teachers at Rumney. These teachers have a monthly town meeting with their students and have invited anyone on the committee to attend. There is interest in a town/school event related to Town Meeting. The idea of a Town Report treasure hunt for the students was one idea.

2. Town Gathering

Plans are moving forward for having Frank Bryan come to Middlesex for a talk concerning Town Meeting. This event would include facilitated discussion in smaller groups to gather information. This could be an opportunity to have people take the survey the committee has been developing.

3. Committee Tasks

The committee discussed the priorities for this committee to accomplish and it was agreed we should aim for presenting some recommendations to the Select Board prior to Town Meeting. Regarding priority tasks for the time leading up to next Town Meeting, the committee developed the following list:

- 1) Complete the survey.
- 2) Investigate transportation options for people who may have difficulty in getting to Town Meeting but who would like to attend.
- 3) Investigate the pros and cons of holding Town Meeting at the Town Office or at Rumney School.
- 4) The event with Frank Bryan as speaker.

The concept of living room meetings to gather information on residents feelings about Town Meeting was brought up. Greg suggested it might be helpful to have one of these to help fine tune the survey. Greg will visit Russ Alger and discuss with him the concept of a town resident being able

to attend Town Meeting without being physically present at the meeting; most likely using communications technology.

4. Communication with Town Residents about Town Government

Means to communicate with residents about town government issues, most of which have been discussed at previous meetings, were briefly noted:

- Town website
- Guide to Middlesex for new residents
- Column in Middlesex Monthly

5. Meeting with Select Board

Part way through this meeting, Susan left for a time to speak with the Select Board (who were having a concurrent Select Board meeting) about our request for funds to mail the Town Meeting survey. The Board gave approval for up to \$300 for the Committee to go ahead with mailing the survey. Peter Hood and Mary Alexander of the Select Board are interested in receiving past meeting minutes from this committee.

6. Absentee Voters

Concerning absentee voters it was agreed that the committee needs to further research potential technological assistance for voters who would like to participate in Town Meeting but can't physically attend for various reasons. Another issue that needs further research is what role a town charter may play in the amount of flexibility there could be for allowing people to vote who aren't physically present at Town Meeting. Susan mentioned this issue to the Select Board and Peter Hood indicated he wasn't sure that Middlesex doesn't have a charter. The question was also posed of whether a charter is needed to pursue options for allowing voting at Town Meeting by voters not physically present. The committee may need to check with the Secretary of State or the League of Cities and Towns about the possibility of legislative changes to allow for electronic voting.

7. Surveys

Comments on the Town Meeting survey need to get to Barb by October 16. At the next meeting the surveys will be prepared for mailing.

8. Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on November 8 at 6:00 pm at the Town Office.

Minutes recorded by Dave Shepard

Middlesex Town Meeting Solutions Committee
Meeting Minutes
November 8, 2001

Present: Susan Clark, Gregory Whitchurch, Barbara Whitchurch, Dave Shepard, Henrietta Jordan, Martin Pincus, Wilson Brett and David Lawrence

1. Town Meeting Survey

The Town Meeting surveys were prepared for mailing to the voters of Middlesex.

2. Frank Bryan Talk

The committee discussed the format for the Professor Frank Bryan talk as to whether there should be some form of information gathering from the attendees prior to Professor Bryan's talk. Possibilities mentioned included a question and answer session or facilitated small group discussions. It was questioned whether people might be reluctant to engage in group discussion if they hadn't come planning to do so. After considerable debate it was decided to make paper available for people who might wish to make comments and committee members will attempt to mingle with the audience and take opportunities to engage in conversations. There could also be a flip chart available if some people are interested in that type of interaction. Both Martin and Wilson expressed concern that our best efforts may not engage those who were in favor of replacing Town Meeting with Australian ballot voting.

3. Rumney Town Meeting

Susan announced that she had attended a grade 5/6 Rumney Town Meeting. She found it interesting and said that the children were quite engaged.

4. Other Discussion

Greg passed on a comment from his recent conversation with Russ Alger. Russ cautioned the committee to remember the proposed septic rules issue where he felt a lot of people were unaware of the issue at the time of the first vote.

Wilson mentioned that some issues are of such importance that they need to be voted on by something other than a voice vote at Town Meeting. Greg asked if an issue is voted on at Town Meeting, could concerned citizens petition the Town for an Australian ballot on this issue? This is a question that will need some research.

Susan encouraged the committee to call people to encourage them to attend the Frank Bryan talk and to fill out the surveys.

Next Meeting: Wednesday, December 5, 2001

Minutes recorded by Dave Shepard