

Middlesex Town Meeting Solutions Committee
Meeting Minutes
January 23, 2002

Present: Susan Clark, Gregory Whitchurch, Barbara Whitchurch, Dave Shepard, Wilson Brett and David Lawrence

1. Review of Survey

Results of the survey of town residents were reviewed. Susan pointed out that the results are not a quantitative measure but do provide useful qualitative information.

2. Update on Rumney School

There hasn't been any recent contact with Rumney School but there is still interest on the part of teachers in coordinating with this committee.

3. Recommendations to the Select Board

Considerable time was spent discussing what recommendations the committee might make to the Select Board from the information gathered so far. The discussion was divided into items categorized as those the committee feels certain about and those that are hunches.

"What We Know"

- Participating voters at the 2001 Town Meeting voted about four to one to maintain a traditional meeting.
- Participating voters chose to maintain Australian ballot for the school budget by about a four to one margin.
- Respondents to the survey (74 individuals) support traditional Town Meeting by three to one.

A number of pieces of information come from research conducted by Professor Frank Bryan of the University of Vermont:

- Smaller towns get better participation in Town Meeting.
- Towns with significant issues on their warning get better participation.
- Providing child care increases Town Meeting attendance for women.
- Initial data indicates that a 5:00 p.m. meeting is effective in maintaining participation and still having an evening meeting.

"Our Hunches"

- Some number of Middlesex residents feel that the Town Meeting process doesn't work for them.
- A 5:00 p.m. start is a good time for Town Meeting.

- A move to a larger space, such as Rumney School, may be in order. It will be helpful to get feedback on this possibility from voters at Town Meeting. The committee is also interested in knowing if there is support for increasing the space at the Town Hall.

- Wilson reported support from people he has spoken with for allowing volatile issues to be voted on at a later date by Australian ballot. This would likely require either a change in state law for all towns or Middlesex getting a town charter to allow this.

- Having Town Meeting be a state holiday would help participation.

- Changing the winter school vacation could help participation. Greg expressed reservations about advocating for such a change.

- Getting more information out to people could help participation.

- Recognition at Town Meeting for residents who have made big contributions to the town could boost the feeling of community.

- An insert in the Middlesex Monthly informing residents when official meetings are to be held could help people feel better connected and able to participate in town government. The committee should seek approval from the Select Board for this - the insert might be an extra for a few months and then could be incorporated directly into the paper.

- A Middlesex website would likely foster knowledge of town government issues among some residents.

- The committee should pursue alternate voting possibilities using technology to reach out to people who currently don't attend Town Meeting.

- Considering the importance of town size in participation at Town Meeting, this issue could be something for the Planning Commission to keep in mind.

Following this discussion, Susan said she would draft proposed recommendations from the committee to the Select Board and email them to committee members for comments prior to January 29, 2002.

Minutes recorded by Dave Shepard.

Middlesex Town Meeting Solutions Committee
Meeting Minutes
March 28, 2002

Present: Susan Clark, Gregory Whitchurch, Barbara Whitchurch, Dave Shepard, Wilson Brett, Henrietta Jordan and Phil Chase

1. Direction for the Next Year

Susan presented a list of possible projects for the next year.

Phil stated that his major concern is an overall lack of community in Middlesex unless one is involved in the political aspects of the town or has children in school. He has spoken with longtime residents who don't generally attend meetings because they don't feel comfortable speaking in front of large groups.

Greg suggested that having the moderator repeat questions asked from the floor might make people feel more comfortable.

2. Reflections on Town Meeting this Year

Committee members spoke about some of their thoughts and observations from Town Meeting this year. Henrietta said she doesn't think it works as well as it could when Peter Hood is acting both as moderator and as a spokesperson for the Select Board.

Wilson said some working class people don't feel like they belong in town anymore. He feels more explanation on Australian ballot items could be useful. Greg wondered if ballots could be worded to be more easily understood and not so legalistic.

Some feedback was received from resident Peter Clark who indicated he felt the new part-time assistant for the Select Board should spend at least part of their time making people more aware of what the Select Board does.

There were also some comments about the timing of Town Meeting. Perhaps it should be started somewhat earlier to have less competition with the dinner served at the church.

3. Project List

A list of potential projects was gone over in some detail and members indicated issues they would be interested in working on.

a. Town Charter

Henrietta said she thinks the changes necessary to allow an issue at Town Meeting to be voted on by Australian ballot at a

later date may be easier to bring about than using technology to allow someone to vote who is not physically present at the meeting. Wilson stated he feels being able to vote on an issue at a later date by Australian ballot is an important issue and one that we could make progress on. Henrietta suggested the Snelling Foundation as a possible grant source.

b. Sign Language Interpreter

Henrietta knows of someone who could use this service but doesn't want to cost the town extra money. Some discussion ensued as to whether this person should be approached about whether she would use this service if it were provided or if the service should just be provided and make sure the person is aware.

c. Events

Phil mentioned being invited to events at Rumney School where the children would show some of their work. This kind of event can foster a feeling of community. Wilson suggested a church could sponsor an event that would raise money for the fire department.

People expressed interest in working on projects as follows:

- "This is Middlesex" publication: Susan, Dave and Henrietta
- Middlesex website: Susan and Greg
- Create more opportunity for citizen participation with existing boards: Susan
- Town Charter: Henrietta, Wilson and Dave
- Links with Rumney: Susan and Phil
- Community Building Events: Wilson, Susan and Phil
- Research need for Interpreters: Barb
- Research need for Transportation to Town Meeting: Dave

Minutes recorded by Dave Shepard

Middlesex Town Meeting Solutions Committee
Meeting Minutes
May 8, 2002

Present: Susan Clark, Gregory Whitchurch, Barbara Whitchurch,
Dave Shepard, Martin Pincus

1. Potential Committee Tasks

The meeting began with a discussion of tasks that could be worked on over the next year.

a. Town Charter

The committee should check with Mary Skinner or Henrietta Jordan about a list of towns that have charters. Patty Wiley believes Middlesex does have a charter but it may not be relevant to seeking to implement alternative means of participating in Town Meeting.

b. Website

Greg agreed to look into towns that have interesting websites.

c. Education

Susan reported there is a Woodbury College mediation student interested in doing an internship who is available until July. One idea is for this intern to present a workshop on how to discuss controversial issues in a civil manner and to be able to make progress on these issues. Martin reported that a presentation about "restorative justice" may be upcoming for the Middlesex Select Board. There is a group forming in Montpelier, of which Martin is a member, to establish a restorative justice center involving Montpelier and some neighboring towns.

Greg mentioned he was aware of school children involved with Town Meeting activities in Barre. He can get more information on this for the committee.

d. Guide to Middlesex

Ideas were discussed for topics that might be included in a guide to Middlesex. The guide might be published in the Middlesex Monthly or it could be a stand alone document. Susan suggested meeting with the Select Board to get their input and support. A list of topics that committee members had reviewed before the meeting was modified based on discussion at the meeting and topics were divided up among committee members to be worked on for the next meeting.

Next Meeting - June 12 or 19, committee members will contact Susan with their preferred date.

Minutes recorded by Dave Shepard

Middlesex Town Meeting Solutions Committee
Meeting Minutes
June 27, 2002

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

1. Town Charter

Greg reported on some research he has done on town charters. He contacted the Office of the Secretary of State and their opinion was that voting while not physically present at Town Meeting would likely be a problem. The question is what is meant by "attending" a meeting. The statutes seem to assume "attending" means being physically present at the meeting but there have been changes in technology that could change the legal definition of "attend".

One possibility concerning voting without being physically present would be to try a new method of voting, with care to address the likely meaning of "attend" a meeting, and see if that approach is challenged.

Another possibility could be to adopt a town charter to allow voting by means other than being physically present at Town Meeting. The charters of other towns that Greg looked at don't address the kind of voting issues this committee is concerned about.

One difficult question that arises is how to determine who would qualify for voting by alternative means. So far Greg has only asked about voting by the use of a telephone. Susan suggested brainstorming the issues around voting by telephone. One concern would be a future time when significant numbers of people might choose to stay home and vote by telephone. There may be both legal and technical questions that will need to be answered.

Susan suggested forming a subcommittee to look into the issue of voting while not being physically present at Town Meeting. She suggested having one meeting to come up with a list of issues around voting by some technological means. Greg, Henrietta, Susan and Dave agreed to form this subcommittee and will also check with Wilson Brett to see if he is interested.

2. Report on Susan's Meeting with the Select Board

Susan has talked with the Select Board about the idea of a Middlesex owners manual. They were enthusiastic about the idea but wanted to make sure that town residents wouldn't think all

the information they would need about town regulations, such as zoning, would be found in the manual. Susan asked committee members to get her text for the owners manual by August 15.

3. Homebound Ministries

Phil Chase reported about a project he is involved with where community members develop a relationship with homebound people. This would include providing information to homebound people about town issues including voting and governance.

The date for the next meeting was set for September 5 at 7:00 at the Town Hall.

Minutes recorded by Dave Shepard

Middlesex Town Meeting Solutions Committee
Meeting Minutes
September 5, 2002

Present: Susan Clark, Dave Shepard and Heath Wilson

1. Technological alternatives to allow voting when not physically present at Town Meeting

It was agreed to send out the list of questions and issues developed by the subcommittee that met to discuss this issue. Susan offered one additional question - "Are we really sure it is a good idea to offer an alternative to showing up at Town Meeting"? This is not necessarily Susan's opinion but rather a question that we should consider.

2. Guide to Middlesex

Susan said she would like to have this put together by January for printing. The list of topics to be covered was reviewed and Heath volunteered to do the churches in town. He asked whether businesses would be included? Including businesses raises the question of how extensive this guide might become. It seemed to the committee that including businesses starts to expand the scope of this guide larger than originally intended.

It was agreed the guide should include pictures and a map. The map should include the following:

- roads and road names
- water bodies and names
- recreational areas and public land including access points
- trails
- Rumney School
- Town Office
- Fire Stations
- Town Garage
- churches

Dave agreed to follow up on the map.

The next meeting will be held on October 9 at 7:00 at the Town Office.

Middlesex Town Meeting Solutions Committee
Meeting Minutes
October 9, 2002

Present: Susan Clark, Greg Whitchurch, Barb Whitchurch, Kelly Ault and Dave Shepard

1. Technology

Susan asked how the committee wanted to proceed with the list of questions developed by the subcommittee that met in August to discuss issues relating to technology to allow voting without being physically present at Town Meeting. Greg mentioned that Brattleboro's representative Town Meeting seems to have a lot of interest and support. He asked if we should offer it as an option? Susan posed the question of whether this alternative reaches more people or just appeals to the same people who would likely attend Town Meeting anyway. Greg suggested that if we decide to pursue a town charter we should not be too specific about the methods of voting without being present at Town Meeting. Susan mentioned that we still need to determine if a charter is actually necessary to allow voting without physical presence. Susan will email the Office of the Secretary of State and the League of Cities and Towns to ask this question. There was agreement that if a method is approved to allow voting without physical presence, it should be available on the basis of need rather than just a matter of preference.

2. Promoting Discussion of Issues at Town Meeting

The committee would like to promote more discussion of issues at Town Meeting. The question was raised whether conducting Town Meeting according to Robert's Rules of Order may cause some people to feel intimidated and may serve to stifle debate and discussion of issues. It was suggested that perhaps the committee could speak with Peter Hood about means to promote more discussion. Some ideas for promoting more discussion were to provide guidance on how to participate at Town Meeting including a brief primer on Robert's Rules. This guidance might be included in the guide to Middlesex that the committee is going to produce or it might be able to go into the Town Report. Susan thought it might be helpful to produce something for the Select Board to review and get guidance from them on whether it should go into the Town Report. The Middlesex Monthly is another avenue for distributing this information.

3. Middlesex Operator's Manual

Susan has learned that it is likely that National Life will print this for free. They can do four color printing or something more basic.

The question of possible business support for this publication, perhaps in the future, was raised. Including businesses could be a useful service to both the businesses and town residents. It was decided to put a notice in the next Middlesex Monthly seeking businesses and services in Middlesex that would like to be listed in the owners manual. This notice could include a short form that could be cut out of the paper and returned to the committee to allow businesses to provide a brief description of what they do. Greg said it should be made clear that part time businesses are welcome.

Susan has asked Patty Wiley about historic quotes and photos that might be included. Photos of current residents could be included; Kelly is interested in pursuing this.

The meeting concluded at 8:30 p.m.

Minutes recorded by Dave Shepard

Middlesex Town Meeting Solutions Committee
Meeting Minutes
November 7, 2002

Present: Susan Clark, Greg Whitchurch, Barb Whitchurch,
Kelly Ault and Dave Shepard

1. Middlesex Operator's Manual

The schedule for completing and printing the manual was discussed with the following dates determined:

- final text to Susan by December 15, 2002
- send to printer by January 15, 2003
- distribute by February 15, 2003

There was discussion of topics that still need to be covered in the Operator's Manual. Kelly described the people and categories of people she wants to conduct interviews with.

Maps for the manual were discussed; Dave proposed one larger map (8.5" X 17") and one smaller map (8.5" X 11") with different information on each. Items that the committee would like to be included on the maps were discussed, those items with asterisks were deemed to be most important for inclusion on the map:

- roads with names and classification*
- streams and water bodies*
- trail heads and trails
- churches
- school and town hall
- cemeteries
- public lands and recreation areas*
- fire station
- town garage
- swimming holes? (this would require landowner permission)

2. Technology

Susan has contacted both the League of Cities and Towns and the Secretary of State's Office about technology to allow voting at Town Meeting without being physically present. The Secretary of State's Office responded that they didn't think the technology to allow this is currently available but if it was it would probably require a legislative change to allow it. The League also felt a legislative change would be required. Susan added that these responses

were on voice mail and she will try to speak with someone directly.

3. Next meeting date: December 5, 2002.

Minutes recorded by Dave Shepard