

# **WRENTHAM**

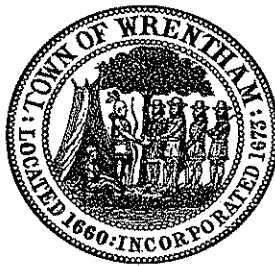
# **CITIZEN'S PRIMER**

# **ON**

# **TOWN MEETING**

**Third Edition**

Written by Kenneth Bresler and modified for Wrentham with his permission  
By Keith Billian, Wrentham Town Moderator



Original version is available at the Secretary of State's office

<http://wrentham.ma.us>

**Town meetings are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they bring it within the people's reach, they teach men how to use and how to enjoy it.**

--Alex de Tocqueville

**The most important office...is that of private citizen.**

--Louis Brandeis

## INTRODUCTION

The history of Town Meetings is the history of liberty in Massachusetts.

Massachusetts residents began holding Town Meetings over 350 years ago, shortly after the Puritans arrived from England, seeking liberty.

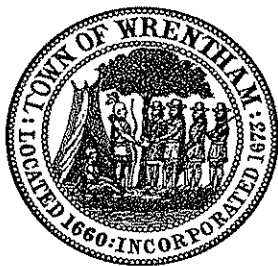
One reason that Massachusetts colonists revolted against Great Britain was the British attempt to ban most Town Meetings except by permission. In 1774, British Soldiers tried to stop a Salem Town Meeting in progress, but the citizens barred the door of their town house and continued to meet.

On the American Revolution's first day of fighting, members of the Lexington militia gathered on the town common at around 2:00 in the morning on April 19, 1775. There they held an impromptu open-air Town Meeting to "consult what might be done" about the British soldiers marching from Boston, as the local minister later wrote.

Attending Town Meetings was once mandatory for freemen who owned land. Some towns fined eligible citizens who did not attend. But now attendance at many Town Meetings has fallen off.

While some towns do provide their citizens with written primers to Town Meeting, until now, not all citizens who moved to Massachusetts from states without Town Meetings had a primer on this venerable form of government. Not all citizens who moved within Massachusetts, from cities to towns, had a primer. Not all citizens who lived in towns, but did not attend Town Meetings because they did not know how to participate, had a primer on Town Meeting.

The purpose of this publication, *Wrentham Citizen's Primer on Town Meeting*, is to rectify that situation. This primer encourages Wrentham town residents to participate in Town Meetings, which the seal of the Town of Danvers calls "the strongest of all citadels of civil liberty, the purest of all democracies."



Keith S. Billian  
Wrentham Town Moderator

### ***What is a Town Meeting?***

A Town Meeting is both an *event* and an *entity*. As an event, it is a gathering of a town's eligible voters, and is referred to as "*the* Town Meeting." As an entity, it is the legislative body for towns in Massachusetts, and is referred to simply as "Town Meeting." So you may say, "I went to *the* Town Meeting. Town Meeting approved the budget."

### ***Does Wrentham have Town Meetings?***

Yes, Wrentham has what is called open Town Meetings.

### ***What's an open Town Meeting?***

An *open* Town Meeting means that all of Wrentham registered voters may vote on all matters.

### ***What does Town Meeting decide?***

Town Meeting decides three major things. 1. It elects the town's officers (town election), paid and unpaid, and sets the salaries for the paid positions. 2. It votes to appropriate money to run the town. 3. It votes on our local statutes, which are called by-laws.

### ***What is a Moderator?***

Generally, a moderator's job is to run the Town Meeting. Specifically, the moderator declares the outcome of all votes. Wrentham has an extensive set of by-laws that govern Town Meeting procedure. The elected term of the Wrentham Town Moderator is 1 year.

### ***What is a Selectman or Selectwoman?***

Selectmen are Wrentham's executive officers. Voters elect them to the Board of Selectmen, which in Wrentham has 5 members and are elected for 3 year terms. In Wrentham, the Board of Selectmen hires a Town Administrator who reports to the board and runs the day to day operations of the town.

### ***What does the Town Clerk do?***

At the Town Meeting, the clerk records all votes and takes minutes. Wrentham's Town Clerk is elected for a 3 year term.

### ***What is a Town Counsel?***

The town counsel is a private lawyer that counts Wrentham among his/her clients. The town counsel helps prepare the warrant language (the Town Meeting's agenda). During the Town Meeting, the town counsel answers legal questions that come up. He or she is appointed by the selectmen.

### ***What is a Select Committee?***

A select committee is assigned to investigate and report back to the Town Meeting on a certain subject, or to undertake a certain substantive task. The moderator

frequently appoints its chairperson and members. Select committees are also called special committees.

***What is a Standing Committee?***

A permanent committee. Some of Wrentham's standing committees are, the Finance Committee, the Capital Budget Planning Committee, the Personnel Board and the Community Host Committee.

***What does the Finance Committee do?***

The Finance Committee is a 7 member board appointed by the moderator for 3 year terms. They prepare the budget in the months before our Annual Town Meeting starts. They also prepare financial articles (which are agenda items) and give a recommendation on all financial items on an advisory basis. Per our by-laws, all articles of a financial nature must be moved (motion made) by our Finance Committee.

**ANNUAL AND SPECIAL TOWN MEETINGS**

***What's the difference between annual and special Town Meetings?***

Each town in Massachusetts must hold an annual Town Meeting. Additional Town Meetings are called Special Town Meetings. Per Wrentham by-law, we are to hold one Special Town Meeting per year, the second Monday in November and, if the second Monday is an observed holiday, the meeting will be held on the following day. Additional special Town Meetings may be called by the selectmen or by citizen petition.

***When is the annual Town Meeting?***

Per Wrentham by-laws, our annual election is held, the first Monday in April and the business meeting (annual town meeting) is held on the second Monday in June. As mentioned there are two parts to the annual Town Meeting - town election and the business meeting, and both are called for by separate warrants.

***What takes place at the business meeting?***

All financial matters, including Wrentham's town budget, pertaining to the next fiscal year. The fiscal year runs from July 1 through June 30. Other items may be placed here also by the selectmen or by citizen petition. The Annual Town Meeting is held in June because the Town doesn't receive the exact state aid numbers until then, so the finance committee knows exactly how much money the Town will have to spend.

***How am I reminded when the annual Town Meeting will take place?***

The town clerk will publish the date in our local newspapers; the Sun Chronicle and the Country Gazette. Also, per town by-law, the warrant for each annual Town Meeting must be posted in at least 6 public places, with at least one copy in each precinct at least 7 days prior to each annual Town Meeting. The information will also be on the town website [www.wrentham.ma.us](http://www.wrentham.ma.us).

***How do I find out about special Town Meetings?***

Watch our local newspapers. They normally are also posted on the sign at the parking lot at the intersection of routes 140 & 1A. You can also call the town clerk's office, 508-384-5415 and check the town website at [www.wrentham.ma.us](http://www.wrentham.ma.us).

***Who calls the special Town Meetings?***

The Selectmen.

***May voters call a special Town Meeting?***

Yes. Two hundred Wrentham registered voters may request a special Town Meeting by petition. Copies of petitions are available at the town clerk's office that can be used to get the two hundred signatures needed.

***May a special Town Meeting be called for more than one reason?***

Yes. For example, a special Town Meeting could be called to consider amending a zoning by-law and for buying a new fire truck.

**THE WARRANT**

***What's a warrant?***

The warrant lists a meeting's time, place and agenda (articles). A warrant is also known as a warning. A Town Meeting's action is not valid unless the subject was listed on the warrant, and all action taken at Town Meeting must be within the scope of the article. It is up to the moderator's discretion if amendments made to an article are within the original scope of the article.

***When is the warrant available?***

As previously stated, per Wrentham by-law the warrant must be posted at least 7 days before the annual Town Meeting and 14 days before a scheduled special Town Meeting and posted in at least 6 public places. You can usually find one posted in the post office and at our town's web site, [www.wrentham.ma.us](http://www.wrentham.ma.us). You can also get a copy at the Selectmen's office.

***Who makes up the warrant?***

The Selectmen, who "issue" it.

***What are articles?***

Items on the warrant. Article 1 on our annual Town Meeting warrant is usually to hear reports from town officers and or town committees. Appropriations for each town function or department may be in separate articles. Or, one article on the warrant may propose a zoning by-law change. Each article is a separate issue.

***May voters place articles on the warrant?***

Yes. Wrentham voters may “insert” articles in the warrant. They have to do it before the selectmen “close” the warrant; a cutoff date set by the selectmen.

To insert an article in the warrant for an “*annual*” Town Meeting, at least 10 Wrentham registered voters must sign a petition. If you want a sample of an article to use to draft your article, go to town hall and ask for a copy of the annual report. It will have warrants from the previous year’s Town Meetings, which you can use as samples. For further assistance, contact the Town Clerk or Selectmen’s office.

Citizens may insert an article in the warrant for a “*Special*” Town Meeting by the same procedure they may use to call a special Town Meeting; gathering by petition 100 Wrentham voter’s signatures.

**HOW TOWN MEETINGS OPERATE**

***What is the quorum for a Town Meeting?***

In an open Town Meeting, the minimum number of voters who may conduct business is established by Wrentham town by-laws. The quorum in Wrentham is zero; if only a single citizen appears, the Town Meeting may start and conduct business.

***Who may attend?***

All of Wrentham’s registered voters may attend. All Wrentham non-registered residents may also attend but not have a vote. Out-of-town visitors may attend and sit in a special section.

***Who may speak?***

All of Wrentham’s registered voters may speak at Town Meetings when recognized by the moderator.

Non-voters may speak at the discretion of the moderator or by vote of the Town Meeting.

***Who may vote?***

All Wrentham registered voters may vote.

***Is the warrant the agenda?***

Yes, the warrant generally states the things to be voted on, but the moderator may interpret the articles liberally.

Usually, the Town Meeting considers the warrant’s articles in order. However, the moderator or Town Meeting itself may change the order by vote.

***How do I know which article the Town Meeting is considering?***

The moderator will so state.

### ***How is the budget considered?***

The moderator reads each budget item, but doesn't stop for debate. If a voter wants to debate or question an item, he or she calls out, "**hold!**" the moderator will "lay aside" that item, and get back to it later when it can be discussed, amended or debated. When finished the moderator will call for a vote for the total budget. A simple majority is needed for it to pass.

### ***How do I vote?***

In Wrentham we vote four different ways:

- **Voice vote.** The moderator asks that all in favor (everyone voting "yes") say, "Yea" (which is pronounced "yay"). Then the moderator asks all opposed say no.
- **Show of hands.** The moderator asks that all in favor raise their right hand. Then the moderator asks that all opposed raised their right hand. The moderator looks at the number of hands in general and decides which side prevailed. Or, hands are counted.
- **Standing vote.** All in favor are asked to stand or rise. They are counted by tellers who the moderator appoints at the beginning of each Town Meeting. Next, all voters who are opposed are asked to stand. They are counted. This form of vote is also known as **dividing the meeting**.
- **Secret Ballot.** For capital projects that are projected to be more than \$2 million or for any vote needed which may be less than \$2 million but is linked to a capital project which the total cost is projected to be more than \$2 million. A secret ballot is also required when the King Philip Regional School District is proposing to borrow over \$2 million.

### ***Are there votes that cannot be taken by voice?***

Yes. Certain votes such as a zoning by-law change or borrowing of money require a 2/3 vote. Unless the voice vote is unanimous in favor of the article, the moderator will find it impossible to determine if more than 2/3 of the voters said "yea". A vote requiring a super-majority (more than a simple majority) is usually decided by a standing vote.

### ***What if I think the moderator did not decide correctly a voice vote or an informal show of hands?***

Per Wrentham by-law, stand and say "I question the vote". The moderator must then do a standing vote. The result of a standing vote cannot be questioned.

### ***How do I speak in a debate?***

If you wish to speak, raise your hand or come to the front where the microphones are until the moderator recognizes you. If he or she cannot see you, stand and say, "**Mr. Moderator!**" to get his/her attention. Once recognized state your name and street address.



Speak about the topic being discussed only. Don't speak about a previous or future matter. Stay within the scope of the motion or article, be to the point and brief.

Make your comments to the moderator, not to the Town Meeting or individuals.

For example, do not say, "I have something to say to the Town Meeting," or "Mr. Black, you said something I want to respond to." Instead, say something like, "Mr. Moderator, these are my thoughts on this article."

You may attack a previous speaker's **argument**, but do not attack a previous speaker. For example, do not say, "the previous speaker is dead wrong." Instead, say something like, "I disagree with the argument we just heard."

Avoid referring to previous speakers by name. For example, try not to say, "I agree with Mr. White's argument." Instead, say something like, "I agree with the argument that we can afford this budget item."

Since you make your comments to the moderator, you may not directly debate or ask questions of a previous speaker. For example, do not say, " Mr. Black, you say that we should make another exception to the zoning law. I'm asking you: when do we draw the line and stop making exceptions." However, you could ask a question of a particular person through the moderator.

Instead say something like, "Mr. Moderator, we have heard the argument that we should make just one more exception to the zoning law. But, I say it's time to stop making exceptions."

## **PROCEDURE AND MOTIONS**

### ***Do I need to know "parliamentary" procedure to attend Town Meeting?***

No. The moderator will take care of it. But this is why this primer is being provided, to help you become more familiar with routine matters at Town Meeting so you'll become more comfortable getting involved and partaking in Town Meetings.

### ***If I want to find out about Town Meeting procedure and motions, how do I do it?***

Get a copy of *Town Meeting Time: a Handbook of Parliamentary Law*. Check the Fiske Library for a copy or you can purchase your own copy through the Massachusetts Moderators Association or contact the Wrentham Town Moderator to get it for you. The cost is about \$25.00.

### ***Are Wrentham Town Meetings run according to Robert's Rules of Order?***

No. Robert's Rules of Order was never adopted by the town. We use the *Town Meeting Time: a Handbook of Parliamentary law*.

### ***Does the majority always rule?***

No. sometimes a super majority (more than a simple majority) is needed for votes on certain issues. For example, zoning by-law changes requires a 2/3 vote as does borrowing money.

***Are Wrentham by-laws the final word on how the Town Meeting runs?***

No, by-laws may be suspended in some circumstances by vote.

***Are the moderator's rulings final?***

In some areas yes. In other areas per Wrentham by-laws a motion to appeal the moderator's decision can be made, but it needs seven seconds (seven people to second the motion) before the appeal can be entertained.

***What do the following terms mean?***

<b><i>The term...</i></b>	<b><i>means...</i></b>
Adjourn.....	end the meeting
Move the previous question.....	to cut off debate and vote on the issue at hand
Lay the question on the table.....	to temporarily postpone action
To commit.....	give it to a committee to research
To recommit.....	give it back to a committee for more research
To amend.....	to change the motion
To refer.....	give it to a committee for a recommendation
To postpone to a day certain.....	postpone action until a certain date
Postpone indefinitely.....	to defeat it
Take no action.....	to defeat it

***What does a motion to take from the table mean?***

Tabling a motion or article generally means to kill it, but it does not mean to kill it finally. To take an issue from the table means to consider an issue that the Town Meeting previously tabled.

***I'm not familiar with making motions, how do I make one?***

Rather than make a motion that may require the moderator to untangle and decode, stand up and ask the moderator, when you're recognized, how to make a motion to achieve what you want to do. All main motions must be in writing and submitted to the Town Clerk's office by 12:00pm the day of the town meeting. All subsequent motions should be put in writing but is up to the moderator's discretion. Blank motion sheets are available on the stage in front of the town clerk.

***How do I call for a vote?***

Move the previous question, which means to call for a vote. When recognized, say, "I move the question." This shuts off all debate. This motion needs to be voted on first and needs a 2/3 vote to pass. If passed, then the meeting will go directly to a vote on the previous motion with no more debate.

***What is a reconsideration motion?***

Wrentham has a reconsideration motion by-law. A motion for reconsideration will only be in order if information is brought to the Moderator's attention that there is a defect either in procedure or language with an earlier motion that passed. Allowing

reconsideration will only be at the Moderator's discretion. A motion that failed shall not be reconsidered.

***What's the difference among adjourning, recessing and dissolving?***

**Dissolving** the Town Meeting means that it is over until the next Town Meeting, which must be called by a new warrant. If the Town Meeting has not dissolved, but is taking a break, and will resume on the same day, it has **recessed**.

**Adjourning** is an imprecise word. It is sometimes used to mean "dissolving"; sometimes "recessing"; and sometimes that Town Meeting has ended for the day, and that the Town Meeting will resume on a later day.

***What does it mean to adjourn "without day"?***

Adjourning "without day" means that the Town Meeting has dissolved. Adjourning "without day" is also called adjourning "sine die". In other words, the Town Meeting has adjourned without setting another day to reconvene. A new warrant is needed to reconvene. Per Wrentham by-law a motion to adjourn "sine die" is not in order until all articles on the warrant have "been duly considered and acted upon."

## FINDING OUT MORE

### *Where do I find the statutes governing Town Meetings?*

Go to the Fiske Library. Ask to see the Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 39 and 43A. Parts of other chapters apply to Town Meetings, but Chapter 39 and 43A are the major ones.

### *Where do I get a copy of Wrentham's by-laws?*

At the town clerk's office in the Municipal Building where you go to register to vote. Wrentham has extensive by-laws governing Wrentham Town Meetings.

### *Can I see a video of a previous Town Meeting?*

Yes. Wrentham Cable Access Company films each town meeting. It is taped for future viewing, however they do not keep the copies very long and the video tape is not the official record. Their studio is located at the Wrentham Developmental Center.

## CONCLUSION

Each town has a different way of running its Town Meetings. Sometimes the customs and traditions are written down; sometimes they're not. This primer is designed to make you comfortable enough to find out more. The best way to find out more is to ***ATTEND WRENTHAM TOWN MEETINGS!***

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