

**Town Meeting Primer
for Woodstock Residents
Prepared by Judy E. Walberg, Town Clerk
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Overview

The purest form of democracy is practiced in a Town Meeting. Here in the Woodstock Town Meeting, you can make your voice heard as you and your neighbors decide the course of the government for Woodstock Residents.

Introduction

The Woodstock Town Meeting has used "ROBERT'S RULES OF ORDER" for the running of Town Meetings, going back at least 100 years. This guide is not intended to be an all-inclusive text, but a broad overview designed to encourage you to find out more and attend a Town Meeting. If you have any questions regarding specific procedures used in Woodstock, please contact the Town Clerk.

Questions and Answers about Town Meetings

What is a Town Meeting?

A Town Meeting is an event and an entity. As an event, it is a gathering of the town's eligible voters, and is referred to as "the Town Meeting." As an entity, it is the statutory legislative body for Woodstock.

Do all towns have Town Meetings?

Most but not all towns have Town Meetings.

What does a Town Meeting decide?

Town Meeting decides three major things:

- It sets all annual spending for the General Government and the Woodstock School District at the Annual Town Meeting and Referendum vote. This is held each year on the first and second Tuesdays of May.
- It votes to appropriate any additional money that is not included in the annual budget.
- It votes on the town's local laws, which are called ordinances.

What's a moderator?

A moderator's job is to run the Town Meeting. Specifically, the moderator declares the outcome of all votes taken at a Town Meeting. Moderators in Woodstock are elected at the specific meeting which they will be moderating. Prior to the meeting, the Town Clerk will ask a resident with experience in moderating to accept a nomination from the floor. However, other nominations may be made from the floor; the person who receives the most votes becomes the moderator of the meeting.

What's a Selectman?

Selectmen are elected town officials and hold two-year terms with certain statutory responsibilities. One of which is to call Town Meetings provided they have directed the Town Clerk to publish a notice of the meeting at least five days before the meeting.

What's a Town Clerk?

Town Clerk is an elected town official and holds a 4-year term with certain statutory responsibilities. At the Town Meeting, the Town Clerk records all votes and takes minutes.

What's a board or commission?

A board or commission is permanent. Woodstock has many boards and commissions, a few are: planning and zoning, recreation, and conservation. The most important boards are the Board of Finance and the Board of Selectmen. These two boards along with the Town Meeting is our form of government in Woodstock.

What does the Board of Finance do?

The Board of Finance prepares the budget in the months before the annual Town Meeting. Members are elected to office each odd numbered year, in November, by all registered voters in town.

Annual and Special Town Meetings

What's the difference between Annual and Special Meetings?

Each town must hold an Annual Town Meeting. Additional Town Meetings are called Special Town Meetings. Special Town Meetings may be called as many times during the year as necessary.

When are Town Meetings?

The Annual Town Meeting is held on the first Tuesday of May and the combined General Government and Education Annual Budgets are voted on by Referendum on the second Tuesday of May.

How do I find out about Special Town Meetings?

Special meetings, by their very nature, are not held at the same time every year. Watch your local newspaper and the Town of Woodstock website.

Who calls Special Town Meetings?

The Selectmen call Special Town Meetings.

May voters call a Special Town Meeting?

Yes, voters may call a special Town Meeting by a petition signed by twenty registered voters who reside in Woodstock. The Special Town Meeting must be held within twenty-one days of filing their petition with the Town Clerk. You need to contact the Town Clerk for petition guidelines and the petition form.

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

Yes, a Special Town Meeting may be called for more than one reason. For example, a Special Town Meeting could be called to consider amending the vending ordinance and additional appropriations to the Highway Department.

The Notice

What's a Notice?

The Notice of Town Meeting lists the time, place, and agenda. It is also known as Warning a Town Meeting. A Town Meeting's action is not valid unless the subject was listed on the notice.

When is the Notice available?

A notice is available at least 5 days before a meeting.

How do I see the Notice?

Notices are published in a local newspaper and posted on the Town Website.

Who makes up the Notice?

The Selectmen direct the Town Clerk to prepare a notice and properly publish the notice according to State Law.

May voters place items on the Notice?

No. Connecticut law does not allow voters to place items on the Town Meeting notice. See above for how a voter calls for a special Town Meeting.

How Town Meetings Operate?**What is the quorum for a Town Meeting?**

Woodstock has no quorum requirement.

Who may attend?

Any member of the public may attend a Town Meeting.

Who may speak?

All registered voters who reside in Woodstock may speak in Town Meeting. Non-voters may speak at the discretion of the moderator or Town Meeting.

Who may vote?

In a Town Meeting, the town's voters may vote.

Is the notice the agenda?

Yes, the notice states the things to be voted on. Usually, the Town Meeting considers the items in order. However, the moderator or Town Meeting itself may change the order.

How do I know which Item the Town Meeting is considering?

The moderator summarizes each Item or reads it entirely before starting debate.

How is the budget considered?

The Selectmen or Board of Finance must print and distribute information regarding appropriations at or before the Annual Town Meeting. At the Meeting, the moderator calls for discussion from the Board of Finance regarding the budget, then opens the floor to questions from the audience regarding specific line items, which representatives from each department or the Board of Finance are prepared to answer or discuss.

Participating in Town Meetings

How do I vote?

The budget is voted on one week after the Annual Town Meeting at a Referendum vote, held usually at the Town Hall between 12 noon and 8pm. Voters in Special Town Meetings and non-budget items in the Annual Town Meeting vote by various methods including:

- **Voice vote.** Many Town Meeting votes are by voice. The moderator asks that all in favor (everyone voting "yes") say, "Yea" (which is pronounced "yay"). Then the moderator asks that all opposed (everyone voting "no") say, "Nay." The moderator listens and decides which side prevailed. Voters who are unfamiliar with the difference between "yea" and "nay" may find this reminder useful: "Yea" and "yes" both start with "y." "Nay" and "no" both start with "n."
- **Show of hands.** The moderator asks that all in favor raise their hands. Then the moderator asks that all opposed raise their hands. The moderator looks at the number of hands in general and decides which side prevailed. Or hands are counted.
- **Secret ballots.** The moderator can call for a secret ballot.

How do I speak at the meeting?

Raise your hand and wait for the moderator to acknowledge you. When the moderator acknowledges you, state your name and your address. Speak about the topic being discussed. Don't speak about a previous topic (unless there is a motion to rescind or reconsider).

Make your comments to the moderator, not to the Town Meeting or individual Town Meeting Members. For example, do not say, "I have something to say to the Town Meeting," or "Mr. Smith, you said something that I want to respond to." Instead, say something like, "Mr. Moderator, these are my thoughts on this item."

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."

Try to avoid referring to previous speakers by name. For example, try not to say, "I agree with Mr. Jones' 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. Barrett, you say we should make another exception to the zoning law. I'm asking you: When do we draw the line and stop making exceptions?" 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 a Town Meeting?

No, you do not need to know "parliamentary" procedure to attend a Town Meeting. The moderator will take care of it.

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

In Woodstock, yes, they are.

Does the majority always rule?

No, there are certain motions that may require 2/3 majority.