

# NEEDHAM TOWN MEETING

“THE CRADLE OF LIBERTY” -- A PRIMER ON LOCAL SELF-  
GOVERNANCE AT ITS FINEST

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MICHAEL K. FEE

NEEDHAM TOWN MODERATOR

# THE FOUNDATION FOR OUR DEMOCRACY

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# ANCIENT IDEAS BECOME AMERICAN IDEALS

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- The Mayflower Compact (1620)
  - “...combine ourselves into a Civil Body Politic for better ordering and preservation...[and] to enact such just and equal laws ... [which] shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general good of the Colony.”



# FREE SPEECH AND SELF-GOVERNMENT: BOSTON'S TOWN MEETING FANS THE FIRST EMBERS OF REVOLUTION



# A FORUM FOR DISCUSSION OF TAXATION, SPENDING, EDUCATION, PUBLIC SAFETY

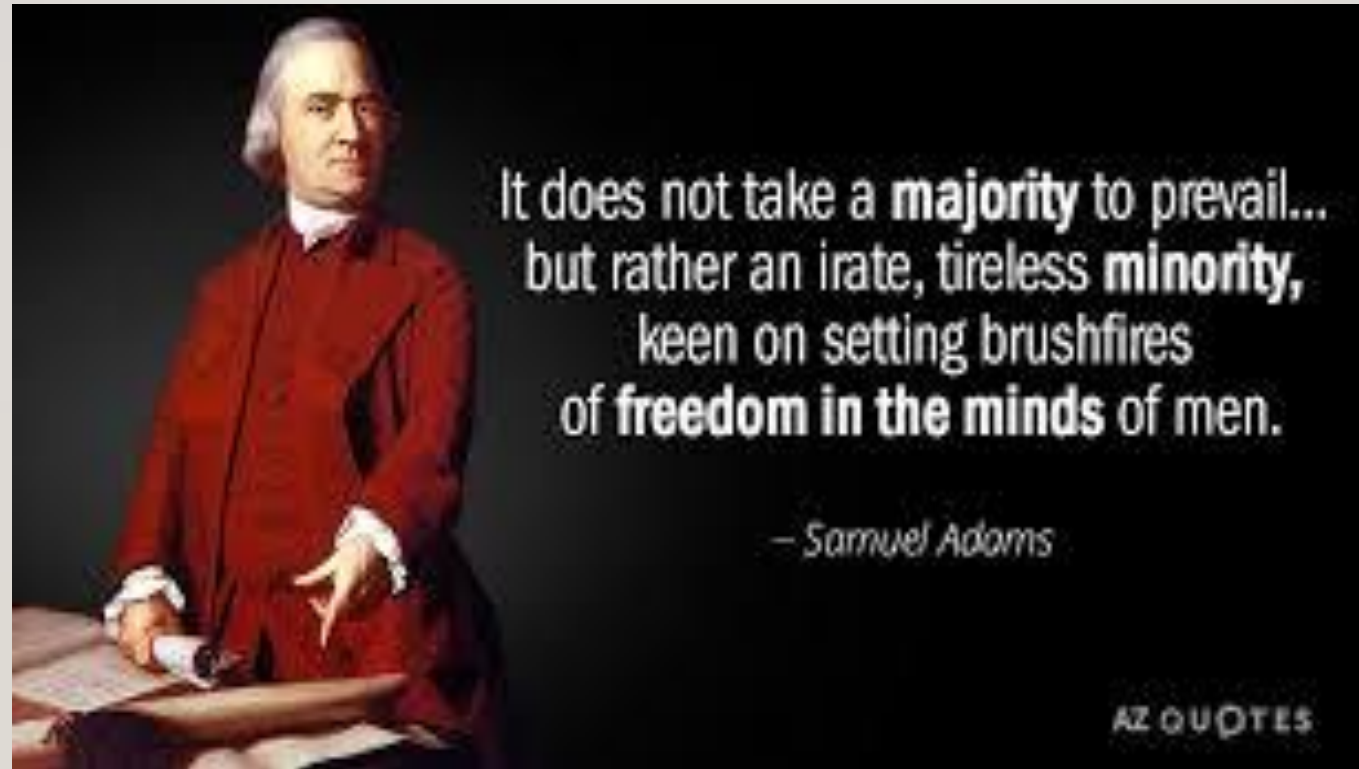
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# SAMUEL ADAMS: “THE MAN OF TOWN MEETING”

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# A MOMENT IN HISTORY TIED TO TOWN MEETING? 1773

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# LORD GEORGE S. GERMAINE: MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT (1774) SECRETARY OF STATE FOR THE COLONIES (1775)

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- “This is what becomes of their wretched town meetings – these are the proceedings of a tumultuous and riotous rabble who ought, if they had the least prudence, to follow their mercantile employment and not trouble themselves with politics and government, which they do not understand.”



# NEEDHAM TOWN MEETING

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- Needham was part of Dedham (founded 1636)
- 1710: Citizens west of the Charles River submitted an application for a Charter to the Royal Governor and Queen Anne.
- Earliest Warrant in the Town Archives: 1719.
- 1823: “Post warrant for two Sundays previous to the meeting at each Congregational Church.”
- 1935: Move from Open Town Meeting to Limited (Representative)

# SOURCES OF GUIDANCE FOR TOWN MEETING

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- Massachusetts General Laws
- Needham Town Charter
- Needham General By-Laws
- *Town Meeting Time: A Handbook of Parliamentary Law*
- Needham Town Meeting Member's Manual
- Tradition

# TOWN MEETING PARTICIPANTS

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- **Moderator:** Elected. Rules on all matters of procedure and acts as the presiding officer in the meeting hall (M.G.L. c. 39, Sections 14 and 15)
- **Town Clerk:** Elected. Keeps records, supervises admission to the hall, records all votes declared by the Moderator to be final.
- **Select Board:** Elected. Acts as the Warrant Committee and proponents for many of the Articles contained in the Warrant.
- **Finance Committee:** Appointed by the Moderator. Submits an Operating Budget and opines on all Articles with fiscal implications.



# TOWN MEETING PARTICIPANTS

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- **Other Boards and Committees:** Some elected and some appointed. *Examples* include **Planning Board** (zoning by-law amendments); **Community Preservation Act (CPA) Committee** (CPA Fund appropriations); **Permanent Public Building Committee (PPBC)** (building and maintenance projects); **School Committee** (education-related matters); **Personnel Board** and **Park and Recreation Commission**
- **Town Manager:** Responds to questions concerning operations and management

# TOWN MEETING PARTICIPANTS

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- **Members:** Once assembled, our Town Meeting Members *are* Town Meeting. Members may propose amendments, invoke parliamentary rules to make motions, speak to the merits of the Main Motions under Articles, as well as other pending motions, and most importantly, vote.
- **Registered Voters of the Town:** These are your constituents. They may attend Town Meeting and even speak to matters on the floor. They cannot, however, propose amendments, make motions or vote.

# CONDUCT AT TOWN MEETING

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- Moderator enforces rules of conduct.
- Town Meeting is a non-partisan forum for civil discussion and voting.
- Town Meeting members represent only their Precinct; not any group, faction or caucus.
- We are a Legislative Chamber: we have restrictions of where one may sit and how one may act; a speaker must be recognized to speak and then address only the Moderator; *all* in attendance must conduct themselves respectfully and observe our rules and time limits.



# TOWN MEETING IN ACTION

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- An Article is placed in the Warrant by the Warrant Committee.
- Warrant provides notice to all that certain business will occur.
- Main Affirmative Motion is filed for each Article.
- Consent Calendar: Articles that Members consider so non-controversial or fully developed that they wish to pass them unanimously and save time. Articles under which the Proponents have decided not to present the Main Motion to Town Meeting. These matters are never reached.

# TOWN MEETING IN ACTION

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- Moderator places the Main Motion on the floor of Town Meeting.
- Proponents tell Town Meeting why it should vote for the Motion.
- Finance Committee delivers its view on the Main Motion.
- Discussion and debate follows, sometimes with additional motions, such as motions to amend and motions to refer back.
- Moderator calls for the vote, tallies the vote and reports the results.

# TOWN MEETING NEEDHAM STYLE

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- A Call for Spiritual Guidance (invocation) is delivered each night.
- We start promptly at 7:30 and usually end promptly at 11:00.
- We require no “seconds.”
- We allow Members to “Move the Previous Question” (cut-off debate).
- We generally complete our business in three to four sessions.
- In our third session, we recognize the service of citizens and hold a Special Town Meeting.



# CLOSING THOUGHT

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- One foreign visitor's observation:
  - **“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 it and enjoy it.”**
- Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1823)
- Enjoy!!