



# A Citizen's Guide to Town Meeting

Shutesbury, Massachusetts

**The decisions made at Town Meeting affect you and your community.** This guide will help you make sense of what Town Meeting is and how the meetings are run so you can participate effectively, respectfully, and meaningfully.

**What is Town Meeting?** Town Meetings trace their origins to colonial New England, when residents gathered to collectively decide upon matters which affected their community. Today, Town Meeting is the legislative body of the Town of Shutesbury. Town Meeting provides a forum for direct democracy and self-government, where residents vote on their town government's budget for the upcoming year, changes to zoning, new bylaws and amendments to existing bylaws, and other issues that impact the quality of life in town. **Shutesbury's Annual Town Meeting occurs on the second Saturday in May every year.** Shutesbury also typically holds a second town meeting called a Special Town Meeting in the fall of each year. The town can hold other Special Town Meetings if necessary.



**Who may attend Town Meeting?** Anyone may attend Town Meeting, but only permanent residents of Shutesbury who are registered to vote in Shutesbury may vote at Town Meeting. Non-voters may come to hear the decisions that voters make and may speak about their views on an article if recognized by the Moderator.



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**Who decides what is debated at Town Meeting?** The Select Board schedules Town Meeting and sets the agenda by publishing the "Warrant." The Warrant is a combination of proposals by the Town's committees and departments as well as those brought by Citizens' Petitions. Each individual warrant item to be decided upon at Town Meeting is referred to as an "article."

**What is a Citizen's Petition?** This is the method by which individual citizens can add an article to the Town Meeting warrant. To add an article to an Annual Town Meeting Warrant by Citizen's Petition, at least 10 registered voters' signatures are required. To insert an article on a Special Town Meeting Warrant by Citizen's Petition, at least 100 registered voters' signatures are required. By law in Shutesbury, all articles for the Warrant must be submitted to the Select Board 45 days prior to Town Meeting.



For more information on how to create a Citizen's Petition, visit:

[https://shutesbury.org/sites/default/files/offices\\_committees/town\\_clerk/CitizenPetition\\_Infosheet.pdf](https://shutesbury.org/sites/default/files/offices_committees/town_clerk/CitizenPetition_Infosheet.pdf).

## **Town Meeting Process, Terms, and Common Motions**



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**What is a Town Meeting Warrant?** The Warrant is our agenda. It sets the time and place of Town Meeting and lists the articles, or separate agenda items, that voters will act upon while there. Per Massachusetts General Law, the Warrant must be made available at least seven days prior to Annual Town Meeting and at least fourteen days prior to a Special Town Meeting.

**What is an Article?** An Article is a description of a topic to be discussed and voted upon at Town Meeting.

**What is a motion?** All actions taken by Town Meeting are votes upon motions. While the Article describes the topic to be addressed, the main motion provides the specific details. The motions must be “within the scope” of the Article. This means that the

proposed action in the motion must be sufficiently close to what was stated in the Article as it was written in the Warrant. This ensures that voters were sufficiently warned about the potential action in advance of the meeting. The moderator will customarily turn to the sponsor of an Article to make the motion. The term “motion” also refers to various procedural actions that Town Meeting might take,

such as a Motion to Adjourn the meeting for that day and resume the following day. Town Meeting votes on motions, not articles themselves. All motions must be seconded.

**What is a Consent Agenda?** To facilitate efficient discussion, several articles may be acted upon collectively by a single vote. Typically, the articles in a consent agenda cover topics that are legally required, considered routine, and unlikely to be controversial. If a Town Meeting member opposes the inclusion of any proposed article on the consent agenda, the article will be removed from the list and the remaining articles will be put before Town Meeting for a single vote. The removed article will then be considered on its own.



**What is deliberation?** Following any presentation by the sponsor of an article and upon hearing the recommendations of town committees and boards, the Moderator will “open the floor” for deliberation. At this time, voters may speak to the pros and cons of a course of action, ask questions, and offer responses.

Those who wish to speak about a motion should approach the microphone facing the moderator.

- All comments must be:
  - directed to the Moderator
  - restricted to the article and motion being debated
  - limited to two minutes long
- Speakers are encouraged to conduct themselves in a civil and neighborly manner.
- Discussion of anything other than the motion is out of order and will be ended by the Moderator.
- “No person shall address a town meeting without leave of the moderator, and all persons shall, at the request of the moderator, be silent...Upon issuing a warning, the moderator may direct the removal of a person who persists in disorderly conduct.”  
[MGL, Chapter 39, Sec. 17]

There are different ways that deliberation can be conducted: with one microphone or with three.



**One microphone:** Those wishing to make a public comment, make a motion, or ask a question about the motion at hand all file into one one line at one microphone and take turns speaking as the Moderator recognizes each one.

### Three microphones:

Many towns choose to use three microphones, each labeled either “In Favor,” “Opposed,” or “Question/Motion.” The Moderator will recognize speakers in rotation among microphones. This can help ensure that equal and balanced discussion is heard and all questions are answered before the question is called and debate is ended.

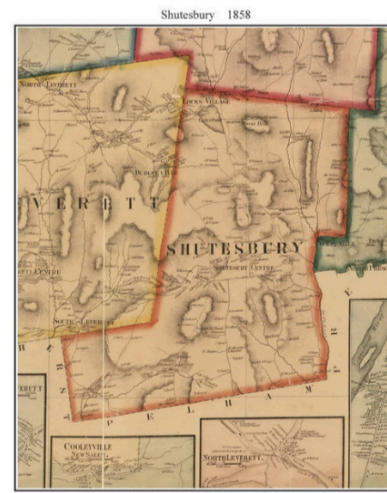


🎤 **“In Favor”:** those advocating for the motion

🎤 **“Opposed”:** those speaking against the motion

🎤 **“Question/Motion”:** those posing a question to seek more information about a motion OR for those who want to make a motion (for example, a motion to amend a motion or to call the question to end debate.

**What is an amendment and who can make one?** During deliberations, any voter can approach the Question/Motion microphone to make a motion to amend. This means that Town Meeting will consider altering the original motion being deliberated at that time by adding, deleting, or substituting words, as long as the proposed changes are “within the four corners of the article.” Subtle amendments that maintain the original intention of the motion are allowed; however, if the amendment changes the original motion to the extent that there was not fair and proper warning on the Warrant about what actions the Town Meeting would be voting on, the Moderator will consider that out of order and disallow it. The Moderator decides whether or not an amendment is allowable. All amendments must be written out on an Amendment Worksheet (which is freely available at Town Meeting) and given to the Town Clerk. Once proposed, an amendment must be seconded, may enter another round of deliberation, and then requires a majority vote in order to pass. Once the vote on an amendment has been completed, the Meeting will then either



return to the original article (if the amendment has failed) or the amended article (if the amendment has passed). No action can be taken on a main motion until any moved and seconded amendments are resolved. Motions to amend amendments are in order and must be resolved before the original



amendment can be voted upon.

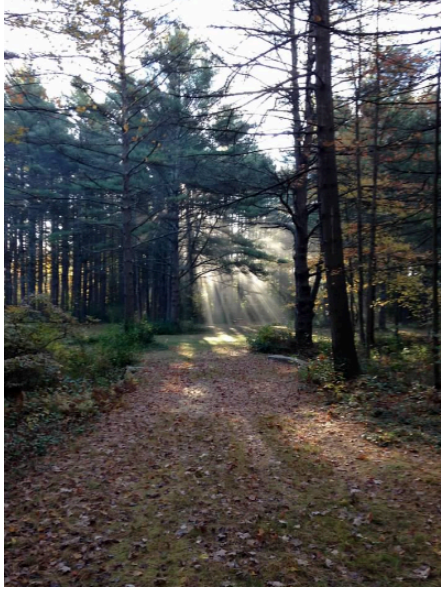
**What does it mean to “Call the Question” and who can do it?** During deliberations, any voter can approach the Question/Motion microphone to make a motion to “call the question.” This motion cannot be simply called out from the floor. When a person says, “I call the question,” this means that the person has heard all they want to hear and would like to end deliberation so the Meeting can vote on the motion. Voters tend to make this motion

when they feel debate has gotten repetitive or has ceased being productive. The Moderator will exercise their discretion to determine whether it is appropriate to put this to a vote or if further debate is necessary. If it is deemed appropriate by the Moderator, Town Meeting members will vote to determine whether to end debate and vote on the motion at hand. A two-thirds majority vote is required to call the question.

**Vote:** Once debate is concluded or a motion is passed to end debate, a vote is taken on the motion. In Shutesbury, citizens currently vote by a show of hands with the voter card issued as voters register upon entering the meeting. Many votes require a majority vote to pass, though high standards (typically two-thirds) may be required by Massachusetts law or town bylaws for certain motions.

**What is a Secret Ballot?** When a Warrant article is particularly sensitive or controversial, confidential voting may be appealing to the members of Town Meeting. In this case, a secret paper ballot placed in a ballot box will be used rather than a show of hands. The voter card issued to voters at the registration table for Town Meeting serves as the paper ballot.





**What is a “Point of Order”?** A point of order is not a motion but a question about the proceedings. For example, if a speaker seems to be discussing a different article than the one under consideration, a Town Meeting member may rise if they are able and/or raise their hand and state “Point of Order.” Once the Moderator recognizes them, they can ask the Moderator to rule on the relevancy of the speaker’s remarks. To be sure the speaker’s question is heard fully and fairly, they may not speak to state their point of order until recognized by the Moderator.

**What is a “Point of Privilege”?** Questions of privilege relate first to the rights and privileges of the meeting collectively, its safety, dignity, and the integrity of the proceedings and second to the rights, reputation, and conduct of the voters or

Town Meeting members individually, in their capacity as voters or members. For example, someone who is unable to hear the proceedings may rise if they are able and/or raise their hand and state “Point of Privilege.” Once the Moderator recognizes them, they may request that the speaker speak more loudly, or that the sound be adjusted. To be sure the speaker’s concerns are heard fully and fairly, they may not state their point of privilege until recognized by the Moderator.

**How does Town Meeting discuss and vote on the budget?** Because the Town budget is the longest and most complex article, discussion of it occurs in pieces. The Moderator will identify a specific sequence of line items, grouped by topic or department, and will ask for questions, comments, or amendments on only those specific line items; questions, comments, or amendments on other line items or general topics are out of order and will not be entertained. If an amendment is introduced during discussion of the budget, it must relate to a specific line item, propose a specific dollar amount, propose to amend accordingly any affected line items (for example, subtotals for a budget category), and be in writing on the Amendment Worksheet. Any allowed amendment must be resolved by being seconded and voted upon, or failing, before discussion proceeds to the next sequence of line items. Once discussion and amendment has been completed for all of the sequences of line items, the budget as a whole and as/if amended must be voted upon.



**Ending the Meeting: “Adjournment” vs. Dissolving”** The term “adjourn” refers to a temporary stop to a meeting with the intention to resume later. The term “dissolve” refers to the final closure of the meeting. A motion to dissolve is in order after all of the articles on the Warrant have been addressed. “[O]nce the meeting has dissolved, the action taken by it may not be reconsidered [taken up again], except pursuant to an article for that purpose in the warrant for a future meeting.” (*Town Meeting Time: A Handbook of Parliamentary Law*, Fourth Edition, p. 212)

## **Key Participants In Town Meeting**

**What is a quorum?** The minimum number of voting members who must be present at a properly called meeting in order to conduct business in the name of the group. The quorum for Town Meeting in Shutesbury is 9.

**The Moderator:** the Moderator presides over (runs) the meeting. Under state law, “The moderator shall preside and regulate the proceedings, decide all questions of order, and make public declaration of all votes.” [MGL, Chapter 39, Section 15]

**Town Clerk:** Serves as clerk of Town Meeting and creates the official record of the proceedings. The record of the Clerk is final and may not be changed or edited by the Town Meeting or anyone else but the Clerk.

**Select Board:** The executive branch of town government. As the Town’s executive, the Select Board takes an active role in presenting motions for various articles and making recommendations to the Meeting.

**Finance Committee:** The committee responsible for analyzing the fiscal impact of proposed Warrant articles and making reports and recommendations to Town Meeting. [MGL, Chapter 39, Sec. 16]

**Other Boards and Committees:** When appropriate, other committees, such as the Planning Board, Community Preservation Committee, or Board of Health, will be called upon to give recommendations on articles pertaining to their areas of responsibility.

## **Resources For More Information**

[Town of Shutesbury Bylaws](#)

[Secretary of the Commonwealth’s \*Citizen’s Guide to Town Meetings\*](#)