

HISTORICAL SOCIETY

# Town meeting evolution

The following is an excerpt from a talk that former Moderator C. Peter R. Gossels delivered at a Wayland Historical Society program on Oct. 2 on "Wayland's Town Meetings Through the Ages." This is the second of two parts.

By 1982, the town approved a budget of \$13,331,439. The moderator was obliged to run for office every year.

One of the first things I did when I was first elected in 1982 was to invite anyone, who wished to serve refreshments at town meetings, to apply in order to improve attendance at town meetings by making them more pleasant and convivial. The second thing I did was to invite voters to "workshops" designed to improve the workings of town meetings. These "workshops" were well attended and produced some valuable suggestions.

By 1986, I had compiled rules and regulations that I would follow in conducting our town meetings and caused them to be published in each warrant for all to see. Four years later, I authorized our cable channel to broadcast town meetings live, despite the objections of those who thought it might reduce attendance at town meetings.

There is evidence that these broadcasts have, in fact, encouraged attendance, because they have educated many residents, who had moved to Wayland from outside of New England, about our legislative process.

According to records I have kept about town meetings, attendance during the

last 25 years has averaged 349. This year's attendance was 329; in 2010, it was 465; in 2009, it was 326; but during the years 2005 through 2008, it averaged 654.

Attendance depends largely on the controversial nature of the issues before town meeting, because controversy tends to generate interest and attendance.

I have introduced other innovations to make town meeting more efficient and user friendly.

1. I imposed time limits on every voter who wishes to address the voters in town meeting assembled, including members of the School Committee and the Finance Committee, as well as limits for debate on each article. These limits have cut the time needed to dispose of the average article by nearly 50 percent.

2. Borrowing an idea from the League of Women Voters, I provided microphones for those who wish to speak in favor of the main motion, another for those who wish to speak in opposition to a motion, and a procedural mike for presenting the main motion, the position of the principal opponent and for those who wish to raise procedural issues. The objective of those three mikes was to save time as voters lined up behind the mike of their choice. The mikes also allow the moderator to create the semblance of a civilized conversation by recognizing speakers at the "pro" and "con" mikes so that both points of view, and then some, could be heard one after the other.

The only traveling mike now in use is to serve voters who are handicapped.

3. I always invited an opponent to the main motion to come forward and gave that person equal time to present that position. In the past, opponents were sometimes not recognized or given equal time.

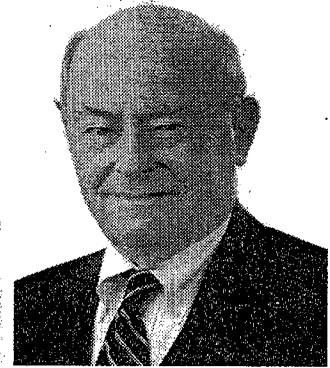
4. I also insisted that the tellers, who counted standing counted votes, announce the result of their count to the voters, not to the moderator alone.

5. In 2005, I appointed 23 volunteers to a Town Meeting Study Committee that issued a 21-page report full of suggestions to improve attendance at town meetings, many of which were implemented.

6. In 2006, I published the "Moderator's Handbook for Wayland Town Meetings," which contained a user-friendly description of Wayland's town government and town meetings. When the first edition was exhausted, I published an updated edition in 2009.

7. In 2010, I appointed Dennis J. Berry as Wayland's first assistant to the moderator in order to help the moderator count the votes, and to answer questions from voters during the course of each session of town meeting, thereby saving some time.

I also appointed a Town Meeting Advisory Committee to help the moderator carry out his or her duties, a Town Meeting Facilities Committee to help make town meetings more efficient, convenient and comfortable, as well as a Town Meeting Procedures Subcommittee to advise the moderator on how to make town meetings more efficient and user friendly. Contributions by the members



Former Moderator C. Peter R. Gossels FILE PHOTO

of those committees helped to make the 2011 annual Town Meeting more agreeable for those who attended.

8. There were other innovations for which I cannot claim credit, including the bylaw that requires those who wish to offer a main motion that differs from the article in the warrant by more than 25 words to provide a printed copy for everyone attending town meeting.

9. But the biggest innovation during my time in office, for which I cannot claim credit, was the introduction on a trial basis of electronic voting. The person who persuaded the town to try this method of counting the vote was Alan Reiss. As soon as the Town Meeting had voted to try electronic voting on an experimental basis at the expense of the manufacturer, I appointed a distinguished committee of IT experts, led by Dave Bernstein, to implement the project. I referred to the committee as the Electronic Voting Implementation Subcommittee, or ELVIS for short. The ELVIS committee worked on this project for nearly a year and brought it to the 2011 Town Meeting. By reason of their efforts, I became the first moderator in the United States to preside over a town meeting that counted the votes by using a handheld wireless device, a computer and a monitor at the front of the hall, which tallied the vote instantly for all to see.

Although the town was persuaded to adopt electronic voting to shorten town meetings by reducing the time needed to count the vote, its real importance is

that the voters were able to cast their vote without disclosing their position to their neighbors. Wayland had previously followed a procedure to shield the voters from intimidation called a "secret ballot," but it was very time-consuming and rarely approved by town meetings. During my 30 years as moderator, I can recall only two other occasions when we voted by secret ballot.

Based on my reading of the public reaction as well as that of the selectmen and our new moderator, Dennis Berry, to our experiment with electronic voting at this year's annual Town Meeting, I believe that we have entered a new era this year when standing counted votes will no longer try our patience and even the moderator and the town clerk will be able to vote privately.

#### **Precious legacy**

Our Colonial ancestors left us a precious legacy - a unique form of pure democracy practiced nowhere else in the world, where each voter in town meeting assembled can participate in making the decisions that affect their life, liberty and property. Our Colonial forefathers and mothers chose to sacrifice their lives to preserve and protect those democratic institutions as the citizen soldiers in Libya, and the citizens of Egypt, Tunisia and Syria, are doing today, in the hope that they, too, will be able to participate in their own governments.

Despite all the changes we have implemented to make our town meetings more efficient and comfort-

able for Wayland's voters, too many residents of Wayland have abdicated their precious right to attend, participate in our town meetings to vote and to question our town officials face-to-face. They will tell you that they are too busy, that babysitters cost too much money, and that town meetings are boring and take too much time. As a result, they seem content to allow our elected officials and their professional assistants to exercise their right to make decisions that affect our lives and pocketbooks.

What the residents do not appreciate is that we continue to hire high priced professionals, who constantly demand that we finance additional projects in their bailiwick, instead of relying, as we did in the past, on our vast reservoir of very talented professionals, who have volunteered to help our elected officials. The fine work of the members of the ELVIS Committee is only one recent example of how volunteers contribute to Wayland's town government.

We cannot please everyone, of course, or satisfy the needs of those who cannot, or will not, dedicate a few evenings each year to exercise their right to participate in town government; but we have tried and must continue to encourage everyone to participate in Wayland's government by running for office, by volunteering to serve on a committee or board, or by coming to our town meetings whenever they can, lest we be taxed and governed, one day, by professional politicians and their employees.