

Improving Town Meeting

In order to improve my performance at Wayland's annual Town Meeting next spring, I have carefully read all of the letters and columns in the Nov. 26, 2009 edition of the *Town Crier*, all the letters and e-mails that I have received, and considered the comments and advice that I have received from voters from all parts of the town.

GUEST COLUMNIST

C. PETER R. GOSSELS



I have even reviewed much of the Nov. 18 and 19, 2009, special Town Meeting broadcasts on Channel 9, the Wayland channel.

Having attended virtually every session of Wayland's town meetings since 1962, I am convinced that Wednesday night's session (Nov. 18) was the most unruly town meeting in memory. At times, some voters treated the moderator so disrespectfully and each other so rudely that the meeting threatened to get out of hand. Why did this happen?

I believe there were several contributing factors:

1. 1,642 voters attended our meeting, the fourth largest attendance on record.
2. The oblong configuration of the hall, the sound system and the spotty lighting at the podium made it difficult for me to hear and see everyone. Even the town clerk found it difficult to hear and I have never needed eyeglasses.
3. Many voters seated at the rear of the hall found it difficult to see the moderator's podium or the speakers.
4. The time required to count so many voters took much longer than usual and much longer than many voters had expected, thereby generating a certain tension and impatience with the proceedings.
5. Many voters who attended Wednesday night's session were new to our town meetings and

may not have understood the rules that allow us, as Wayland's legislature, to consider and debate the important issues before us in a thoughtful and respectful manner. Many voters came simply to vote, to cheer those who agreed with them and go home as they would at a sporting event, without participating in, or listening to, the debate on the merits of the issue with those who did not share their view.

6. And I was also to blame: (a) I neglected to correct an ambiguity in the Moderator's Rules and Regulations concerning my statutory duty to conduct a recount after seven voters have questioned my declaration of a vote, an ambiguity that I have since corrected; and (b) I failed to explain to the satisfaction of many voters that the "significant new information" on which I relied in allowing the motion to return to Article 3 (reconsideration) was not the inaccurate financial information in the warrant identified by Molly Upton and Linda Segal, which the Finance Committee acknowledged on Wednesday night, but the fact that the Board of Selectmen had admitted, for the first time, that *they* had provided inaccurate financial information to the voters in their warrant and in the arguments they had made at Town Meeting in support of their motion under Article 3. In making my ruling, I considered this admission by all of the selectmen to be significant new information.

Since the voters who attended the proceedings on Thursday night (Nov. 19) were much more respectful of our rules and each other, I hope we have all learned an important lesson – Wayland's open town meeting form of government allows every registered voter to debate and vote on many of the issues that affect our lives, property and pocketbooks, while the registered voters in Framingham, Newton, Boston or New York don't enjoy such a franchise. They have no choice but to hope their representatives will

cast a proper vote on their behalf.

Open town meetings are fragile institutions, however, by reason of the large number of voters who often attend. They must, therefore, be conducted in accord with the statutes, bylaws and rules that have been adopted from time to time by each town to make it possible for decisions to be made in an orderly manner understood and accepted by the voters with due regard to the views of everyone present, lest they dissolve into chaos and be unable to function.

That is why I have forbidden applause at town meetings, for example, and instituted a variety of rules and practices over the years to simulate a well-modulated civil conversation among voters, who appear to respect each other, even when they cannot, and do not, agree.

Such debate cannot take place when voters engage in rude behavior, insult other voters on the floor with whom they differ or repeatedly seek to "call the question" (terminate debate) while there are a number of speakers who have waited patiently in line to speak. Such voters do not realize their unruly behavior can destroy the very institution that has given them the right to vote their opinions and to question, on the floor of town meeting, the conduct of those whom we have elected to public office and those they have appointed to serve us.

If we shall continue to abuse our precious franchise, as so many did on Wednesday night, we may lose that franchise to those who would like Wayland to adopt a representative form of town meeting, as Natick did under similar circumstances, some years ago.

C. Peter R. Gossels is the moderator of the town of Wayland.