**Winchester Town Meeting
Communications Study Committee**

**Part A: Preliminary Inventory of Perceived Communication <u>Issues</u>:
<u>Summary</u> Listing**

**Part B: Preliminary Inventory of Perceived Communication <u>Issues</u>:
<u>Full</u> Listing**

**Part C: Preliminary List of <u>Criteria</u> for Winnowing Perceived
Communication Issues**

**Part A: Preliminary Inventory of Perceived Communication <u>Issues</u>:
<u>Summary</u> Listing**

Between Town Government and Residents

- <u>Limited understanding of local government</u>
- <u>Difficulty accessing Town web page</u>
- <u>Difficulty finding information</u>
- <u>Limited dissemination of information on major issues</u>

Within Town Government

- <u>Leadership issues</u>
- <u>Lack of communication plans</u>
- <u>Insufficient staffing</u>
- <u>Multiplicity of boards</u>
- <u>Outmoded posting and reporting procedures</u>

Between Town Government and Town Meeting

- <u>Limited information ahead of TM</u>
- <u>Insufficient information in TM presentations</u>
- <u>Lack of perspective on trends/drivers</u>

Within Town Meeting

- <u>Limited understanding of local government</u>
- <u>Lack of preparation by members before debate</u>
- <u>Unnecessarily rudeness</u>
- <u>Skewed representation of town residents</u>
- <u>Limited information on impacts of major articles</u>

Between Town Meeting Members and Precinct Constituents

- Little outreach to constituents
- No information about precinct chairs and TM members
- Difficult to recruit precinct captains

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Part B: Preliminary Inventory of Perceived Communication <u>Issues</u>:
<u>Full</u> Listing

Key
__Main Communication Paths__
- *<u>Tag line summaries of issues</u>*
  - *Specific issue comments (from surveys, interviews, etc.)*

Between Town Government and Residents ...

- <u>Limited understanding of local gov't</u>
  - Break down the "they" barrier.
  - There is a communication divide between longtime residents and relative newcomers. What is the mix? Longtime residents don't feel heard
  - New residents coming from out of state may not understand our local form of government - how does your government work?
  - Dispel myths about financials – "town budget only grows by 2.5% per year."
  - Are people aware of when Town Meeting happens? What is on the warrant? Survey the community -- Best ways to communicate with the public?
  - How do we communicate with those who are not involved in Town Government - unaware, how to tap in to them and make them aware?
  - There is a lack of understanding by the general public about what is and is not allowable under open meeting law.
- <u>Difficulty accessing Town web page</u>
  - Town website was not great (better now). The calendar with alerts system was not great. Calendar seems better. Alert system seems to be mostly for emergency notifications. Should be able to choose the boards and committees that you want to be alerted about via a drop-down bar or something similar (see Belmont). This would alert residents to meetings, etc. Website should have a clear link to all projects on the menu (see Belmont). Clear link to all boards and committees on the menu. Clear link to town meeting on the menu. Calendar. All easy to use and info should be easy to find. Residents should not have to dig to find information in random/assigned spots on the website.
  - Civic Plus website software is "clunky."
  - Finding committee information on the Town website requires too many clicks.

- o It is hard to find where to sign up for the Town manager newsletter on the town website.
- Difficulty finding information
    - o Add a web page section on running for office -- what is involved, what is the process, timeline, deadlines for different types of offices. Also, for filling vacancies.
    - o How do people know where they can go to learn about the candidates for town board seats? What they stand for? Where is that info available?
    - o Can we improve transparency for financial items in the town budget and things like procurement bids, etc.? See Plymouth & Andover Town websites.
    - o Better awareness about where we plan to spend our federal infrastructure money. It is on the website but hard to find.
    - o Transparency of local campaigns, difficult to find whether campaigns for ballot questions registered.
    - o Hard to find [information about] precinct chairs, when terms end, same for committees, plus contact info for committee chairs is missing or out of date.
- Limited dissemination of information on major issues
    - o It is difficult to be informed on all the issues. There is no general forum for civic discussion that compares to what the newspaper used to provide. Facebook doesn't have an organization that allows for following an issue, it's not moderated.
    - o Once your children graduate from town public schools, you don't hear about what is happening.
    - o There is little awareness of the Town Master Plan, Housing Production plan, etc. How can we amplify?
    - o How are Town Residents made aware of what is on the Town Meeting warrant?
    - o Misinformation by outside groups, misrepresentation of town government decisions.
    - o Social media conversations that aren't accurate reflection of town decisions.

Within Town Government ...

- Lack of clear leadership in communication
    - o Divisiveness at policy and management levels over the past few years has left staff uncertain about what and when to communicate with public and town boards.
    - o Failure to communicate town policies, programs and project clearly reduces resident's interest in running for town boards and volunteering for town committees.

- Lack of communication plans
  - The Town doesn't have a Communications plan.
  - The Town Bylaws are out of date in some places -- like "Selectmen" instead of "Select Board."
- Insufficient staffing
  - Are we understaffed relative to other towns we like to compare ourselves to? Are expectations for service are out of line with what we can afford (or are willing to pay for)? We need to better understand this and also show appreciation for our staff esp. if they are doing more with less. Are we thrifty to a fault? How to assess/measure this?
  - Master Plan called for the hiring of a Communications and Engagement Coordinator-has not been done. Could this be done?
  - What is the state of our information technology structure? Are we underinvested? FACTS report said we were 20 years ago. Has it improved?
- Multiplicity of boards, etc.
  - The diagram of town boards and committees is a problem statement - too confusing, too complicated, info doesn't get to the decision makers soon enough so they have time to think about it, ask their questions early enough. 11th hour questions disrupt years of volunteer work
  - There are too many hearings to attend to be fully informed. Is there some way to create a short list of the key hearings or a digest/summary of the key meetings happening when?
- Outmoded posting and reporting procedures
  - What are the inefficiencies/opportunities in our processes? For ex, could Committee Chairs be able to update the web pages for their committees?
  - Meeting minutes are missing for a number of Town Committees - transparency/OML compliance.

Between Town Government and Town Meeting …

- Limited information ahead of TM
  - The Town Manager's hearing has become reduced in scope and meaning from what it used to be.
  - Town Manager hearing – is poorly attended. Could we have an "informal Town Meeting" before town meeting * with High level presentations of key issues & where to go for more info.
  - Some say we don't have a communication problem, we have a "listening problem." How to engage TM members in key meetings/hearings prior to TM sessions?

- o The town's 5-yr financial forecast should be better understood by Town Meeting members, as well as key drivers. Maybe make this a separate info session prior to Spring TM.
- Insufficient information in Town Meeting presentations
  - o Town Staff -- We are building a protocol – What staff need to be aware of from their elected bodies to get it ready the presentations. Staff needs education & support in order to achieve the things we are looking for from staff.
  - o Need more transparency of Water & Sewer ops. We raise rates but don't know where the money goes, how seasonality affects operations & financials. Do they keep a reserve? What is the state of the infrastructure?
  - o Town Meeting was presented large contract increases in the past few years that exceeded override assumptions. What can we do to provide guidance or facilitate communication & understanding re these key drivers of expenses?
  - o On personnel articles, we have little information and cost analyses on articles we are asked to vote on.
- Lack of perspective on trends/drivers
  - o Presentations to Town Meeting are not always sufficient - - seldom get a backwards and forwards view – 5-year average, drivers of the economics. Provide presenters with a template?

Within Town Meeting ...

- Limited understanding of local gov't
  - o There is a lack of understanding about our tax base - highly reliant on residential, no commercial base, we get minimal aid from the state given relative affluence.
  - o Lack of understanding of How state regulations & funding affect us…. Better info or tutorials from our state reps? i.e., Prop 2.5, affordable housing 40b, State aid for cities & towns, Ch. 70 and Special Ed reimbursement, other? More frequent forums with our state reps?
- Lack of preparation by members before debate
  - o Remote meetings are a challenge for communication – not seeing faces, debate cut short, cannot see who still wants to speak.
  - o How to facilitate/encourage this that is in our bylaws? "It shall be the duty of every citizen of the town seeking recognition to speak at a town meeting to have attempted in advance of the town meeting to inform himself regarding the warrant article under consideration."

- Unnecessarily rudeness
  - Rude behavior in Town Meetings, need better understanding of protocol. Town Meeting should be a place to respectfully debate differing points of view without personal attacks.
  - National climate of divisiveness is affecting tone of local discourse.
- Skewed representation of town residents
  - How do the demographics of town meeting compare to town's demographic?
  - Procedure for filling vacancies in Town Meeting (as last order of business under Article 1) is not always followed as specified in town bylaws. Should that language be modified?
- Limited information on impacts of major articles
  - We don't have a measure of service in some cases – connect communication to actual better decisions – train station & Waterfield are examples communication that went awry – issues not raised till the final stage.

Between Town Meeting Members and Precinct Constituents …

- Little outreach to constituents
  - Most precincts do not hold regular precinct meetings or meet before Town Meeting.
  - Residents don't hear from Town Meeting members – establish expectations on what is expected of them.
  - How can we do a better job of hearing from and communicating with Town businesses about government decisions that affect them?
- No information about precinct chairs and Town Meeting members
  - Hard to find [information about] precinct chairs, when terms end, same for committees, plus contact info for committee chairs is missing or out of date
  - Hard to find [information about] precinct chairs, when terms end, etc.
- Difficult to recruit precinct captains
  - It's hard to get people to commit to taking on leadership roles in Town meeting precincts for conducting research - may need support.

Part C: Preliminary List of <u>Criteria</u> for Winnowing Perceived Communication Issues

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A communication issue should be given priority for attention by Town Meeting if it —

Town Meeting
- Significantly increases the time required to understand and debate proposed articles either prior to or during Town Meetings.
- Significantly increased costs or reduces opportunities for savings or revenue.

Town Boards, Commissions, Committees and Staff
- Significantly increases the time and effort accrued by Town boards, commissions and committees.
- Significantly increases the time and costs accrued by Town staff.

Public Perception
- Has a significant negative impact on the public's perception of the effectiveness, efficiency or equity of Town government

Public Participation
- Has a significant negative impact on residents' willingness to participate in Town government.
- Has a significant negative impact on voter turnout in town elections?