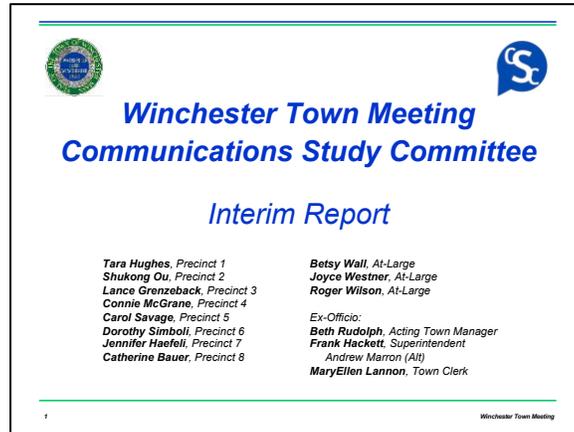


Winchester Town Meeting Communications Study Committee
Interim Report to 2022 Spring Town Meeting
April 25, 2022

Madam Moderator, Town Meeting Members: I'm Lance Grenzeback. I serve as chair of the Communications Study Committee.



Why a Communications Study Committee? Because our town meeting form of government depends on well-informed voters, but our communications environment and the media landscape have changed dramatically. The Winchester Star of old has faded away and been replaced by a kaleidoscope of internet websites and social media platforms. These changes have affected how we learn about the work of our Town Boards and the decisions of our Town Meeting. At issue is whether we are adapting our communication practices to these changes.

Last year's Fall Town Meeting authorized the formation of the Communications Study Committee. The Meeting tasked the Committee with recommending ways to establish more robust and effective communications among Town Boards, Town Meeting, and Town Residents. To do this, we have been surveying Town Meeting Members, interviewing the chairs of our elected Boards, talking with business groups, and holding public listening sessions to identify communication issues and potential solutions. Tonight, we will describe the key communications issues that we've identified to date. As Town Meeting instructed, we will bring our recommended solutions to Fall Town Meeting.

What are we hearing? Are we adapting our practices to today's communications environment? The short answer is: "No, the Town's communications need to be improved."

Residents, Board members, and Town Meeting Members alike are telling us they find it difficult and often frustrating to get timely and accurate information. They are also telling us that it is important to find solutions because poor communications impact Town Meeting by increasing the time required to understand and debate issues and budgets, and by increasing the risk of making costly and ineffective decisions.

Poor communications impact —

- **Town Meeting**
 - Increasing debate time
 - Increasing risk of costly, ineffective decisions

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They are telling us that poor communications impact Town Government by increasing staff costs and volunteer board time, and by reducing the effectiveness of town services.

Poor communications impact —

- **Town Meeting**
 - Increasing debate time
 - Increasing risk of costly, ineffective decisions
- **Town Government**
 - Increasing staff costs and volunteer time
 - Reducing effectiveness of town services

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And more important, they are telling us that poor communications impact Residents by eroding trust and discouraging participation in Town government, and by reducing voter turnout in town elections.

Poor communications impact —

- **Town Meeting**
 - Increasing debate time
 - Increasing risk of costly, ineffective decisions
- **Town Government**
 - Increasing staff costs and volunteer time
 - Reducing effectiveness of town services
- **Town Residents**
 - Eroding trust and discouraging participation in Town government
 - Reducing voter turnout in town elections

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What are the specific problems? Residents are telling us that it is hard to find Town information. The Town website is difficult to navigate. The content is incomplete—much of it is out of date—and the search function doesn't work. The recent overhaul was a positive step—and the Town Manager's report is appreciated—but more work is needed. They are telling us that the Town does not send out enough timely news blurbs on emerging issues. This makes it difficult to follow issues across our seven elected boards, seventeen departments, and some forty appointed commissions and committees. Compounding the problem, the posted meeting notices and agendas are—as a rule—uninformative. Finally, people are telling us that Town information is not reaching many residents, especially those who don't routinely use social media, visit the Town's websites, watch WinCAM, or subscribe to the local newspapers.

Residents are telling us—

- **Hard to find information**
- **Town website difficult to navigate**
- **Town does not send out succinct and timely blurbs on issues**
- **Difficult to follow issues across our nearly 70 boards and committees**
- **Town information not reaching many residents, businesses and civic groups**

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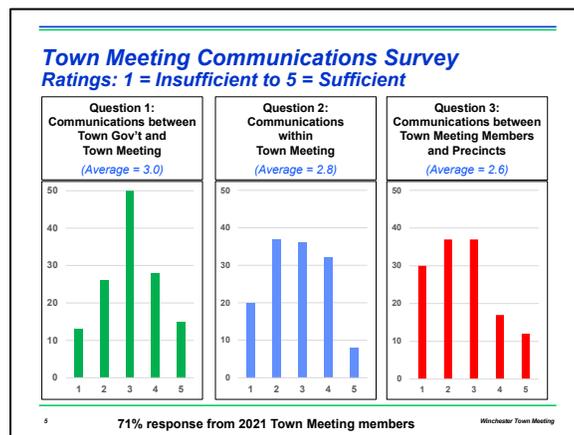
Town Meeting Members are telling us that all members, especially new Town Meeting Members, need more information on how Town Government works. That much of the information provided to Town Meeting Members—in reports, motion books and board presentations—is either too much or too little, and often arrives too late to support well-informed debate. That articles frequently lack context and understandable financial impact information. And finally, that there is no established guidance on when and how Town Meeting Members can communicate with each other and with their constituents.

Town Meeting Members are telling us —

- Need more information on how town government works
- Motion books and presentations often do not support well-informed debate
 - “Either too much or too little, and often too late”
- Articles often lack context and understandable financial impact information
- No guidance on how to communicate within Town Meeting and with constituents

Winchester Town Meeting

These issues are reflected in our survey of 2021 Town Meeting Members. We asked members to rate communications “between Town Government and Town Meeting,” “within Town Meeting,” and “between Town Meeting and Precincts.” Seventy-one percent responded. Communications “between Town Government and Town Meeting” (the green chart) got an average rating of three. Communications “within Town Meeting” (the blue chart) and “between Town Meeting Members and Precincts” (the red chart) got lower marks.



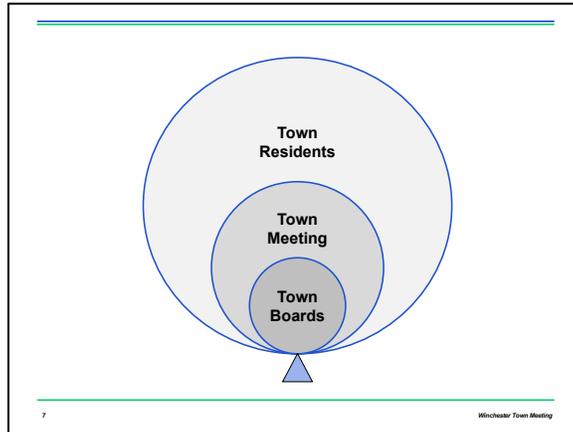
Finally, the Town Boards are telling us that most boards have no formal communication plans. That volunteer members have very limited time for meetings and even less staff time for communications. And that most board members rely on informal person-to-person discussions. As a result, each board tends to work within its own silo.

Town Boards are telling us —

- No formal communication plans
- Very limited volunteer and staff time for communications
- Informal discussions the norm
- Each works in its own silo

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Our Committee's next phase of work will focus on identifying cost-effective solutions to these issues while attempting to balance the needs of Town Boards, Town Meeting and Town Residents.



We will not be starting from scratch. We spend money now to maintain our websites, distribute email, post legal notices, and print and mail reports. We will be looking for the best use of these existing funds. The Town operates seven websites, has social media accounts on Facebook and Twitter, and has implemented a reverse-nine-one-one call system. We will be looking at opportunities to leverage these platforms to better reach our multiple town constituencies. The Town produces extensive reports on its budgets and operations. We will be looking at opportunities to repackage this information for easier access, comprehension and distribution. And, we can learn from others. Town staff, the School Department, and several committees are pro-actively expanding their outreach efforts. We will be following and supporting their initiatives and looking at best practices in comparable towns.

Building blocks —

- Current funds
- Websites
- Data, reports...
- Outreach
- Best practices

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We will be working on our recommended actions between now and Fall Town Meeting. If you have suggestions, please talk with us.

***Winchester Town Meeting
Communications Study Committee***

 TOWN BOARDS	 TOWN MEETING	 TOWN RESIDENTS
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email: WinchesterCSC@gmail.com
web page: www.tinyurl.com/WinCSC

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Madame Moderator, that concludes the Committee's report. Thank you.