

# REPORT OF THE WINCHESTER TOWN MEETING COMMUNICATIONS STUDY COMMITTEE

**2022 Fall Town Meeting  
November 10, 2022**

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2021 Fall Town Meeting authorized the formation of a Communications Study Committee and charged it with 1) identifying the town's communication issues and 2) recommending ways to establish more robust and effective communications among town government, town meeting and town residents.

In the spring and summer of 2022, the committee reviewed prior reports, surveyed town meeting members and residents, interviewed town boards, talked with businesses and civic groups, researched best practices, and held public listening sessions.

We heard that:

- Our communications environment and the media landscape have changed dramatically. Local newspapers have been largely displaced by a kaleidoscope of websites and social media platforms that deliver fragmented, incomplete and often inaccurate information. The volume and immediacy of this information has diverted many residents' time and attention from local issues;
- These changes have made it increasingly difficult to hear and learn about the work of our town government and the decisions of our town meeting. Our shared news sources are fewer, and our shared narrative about town news, events and issues is weaker; and
- The town must respond to these changes because poor communications impact:
  - Town government by increasing staff workload, volunteer time and costs, and reducing the effectiveness of town services;
  - town meeting by increasing the time needed to understand and debate issues and budgets, and increasing the risk of making costly and ineffective decisions; and

- Residents by eroding trust, reducing awareness of town issues and initiatives, and discouraging participation in town government.

More specifically, we heard that —

- The town’s website needs improvement. It is difficult and often frustrating to get timely and accurate information because the website is difficult to navigate, much of the content is incomplete or out of date, and the search function does not work well. Moreover, the town’s six departmental websites—police, fire, school district, library, recreation and the Jenks—are not well integrated with the main site;
- Town information is not reaching many taxpayers, businesses and civic groups. The town does not send out enough succinct and timely information nor respond sufficiently to public inquiries. Relatively few people subscribe to town notifications or routinely visit the town website; and
- There is no town communications plan to address these shortcomings.

From town meeting members, we also heard 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;
- Articles debated at town meeting often lack context and understandable financial impact information; and
- There is no established platform and guidance on when and how town meeting members should communicate with each other and with their constituents.

This report summarizes the committee’s recommended actions to address these issues and improve town communications. The recommendations are set out in two sections: 1) town government communications; and 2) town meeting communications. The committee’s high-priority recommendations are starred (\*) but not rank ordered.

<b>TOWN GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS</b>
<b>Primary Recommendation</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish a culture of proactive town government communications. *</li> </ul>
<b>Town Communication Governance</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make town government communications a key priority for the town manager. *</li> <li>• Prepare a written communications plan that incorporates and builds on the recommendations of this report. *</li> <li>• Prepare and implement a social media policy for town staff and boards as part of the town’s communications plan.</li> </ul>
<b>Town Website</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reconfigure the town’s website to make it easier to navigate and more user friendly. *</li> <li>• Improve the capacity to search and retrieve public records through the town’s website.</li> <li>• Make the town’s budget and expenditure information more accessible.</li> </ul>
<b>Town Communications Outreach</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appoint a town communications manager (by FY2025). *</li> <li>• Better define the audiences for town government information, their main information interests, and their preferred communication channels. *</li> <li>• Proactively deliver notifications and a weekly town manager’s newsletter summarizing information about key town government issues, policies, regulations, programs, projects, hearings, events, etc. *</li> <li>• Continue to invest in hybrid meeting technology to facilitate public access to hearings, meetings, etc.</li> </ul>

<b>TOWN MEETING COMMUNICATIONS</b>
<b>Primary Recommendation</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish more robust and effective communications within town meeting and between town meeting members and residents. *</li> </ul>
<b>Town Meeting Members Association</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish an independent not-for-profit Winchester Town Meeting Members Association as an online forum for communication among town meeting members. *</li> </ul>
<b>Town Meeting Procedures</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preview major articles to town meeting members and the public at information sessions ahead of town meeting. *</li> <li>• Require budget and tax impact estimates for all major articles. *</li> <li>• Adopt and post written committee operating policies and procedures for all town meeting standing committees.</li> <li>• Provide best-practice guidelines (content, format, visuals, etc.) for presentations to town meeting.</li> <li>• Provide onboarding and communications training for town meeting members.</li> </ul>
<b>Precinct/Constituent Communications</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish precinct meeting and constituent outreach expectations and best-practices guidance for town meeting precinct chairs and town meeting members. *</li> </ul>

\* High-priority recommendation

## TOWN GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS

**Primary Recommendation:** Establish a culture of proactive town government communications.

The public expects the town to be proactive in delivering relevant information and do so in a clear, concise and timely manner. Communication with taxpayers, town meeting members, businesses and civic groups has become an essential function for credible and stable governance, just as it has become vital to the success of private and not-for-profit organizations.

Delivering on this expectation will require a shift in the culture and practices of our town government. The necessary changes are neither extensive nor expensive; they are practical and within reach. But town government and town meeting must commit leadership, policy and resources to operate successfully in the new communications environment and media landscape. If we want to have an on-going dialogue with residents about what is important to them about town government, we need to engage them where they are, not where we wish they were.

### Town Communication Governance Recommendations

- **Make town government communications a key priority for the town manager. \***
  - Make communications a part of the job description for the town manager, all key staff and the chairs of boards, commissions and committees;
  - Make basic communications training a part of on-boarding for all staff and volunteers serving on the town's boards, commissions and committees; and
  - Give all boards, commission and committees clear guidance on how to submit meeting minutes and reports so that these are available in a timely fashion through the town's website.

*The town manager's leadership will be key to the successful implementation of the town government communication recommendations. Communication is not part of anyone's formal job description today, and there are no provisions for communications training. The town manager should take the lead in working with staff to improve communications and commit to supporting effective communication with the town's many boards, commissions and committees, town meeting, and residents. The town manager's role, responsibilities and authority to improve town government communications should be part of the town manager's formal job*

*description and a key factor in the select board's annual performance review of the town manager.*

- **Prepare a written communications plan that incorporates and builds on the recommendations of this report.**
  - If needed, use \$30,000 to \$40,000 of American Recovery Plan Act (ARPA) grant or other available funds for short-term, technical consulting assistance to draft an initial plan, which should:
    - Describe very briefly:
      - Purpose and goals;
      - Audiences, information interests, and communication channels;
      - Task, roles and responsibilities;
      - Schedule (3-year);
      - Budget (3-year); and
      - Evaluation metrics.
  - Report the communications plan, including the schedule and budget, to the 2023 Fall Town Meeting.

*The town has no documented plan for communications or for improving its communication capabilities. There are no stated goals to be accomplished, no defined budget and no timeline for improvements. A written plan will provide a blueprint for staff and enable the select board, the town manager and town meeting to monitor the town's progress in improving its communications.*

- **Prepare and implement a social media policy for town staff and boards as part of the town communications plan.**
  - Define acceptable and allowable use of social media by town staff, boards, commissions and committees in their communications with the public.

*The town has an excellent written policy on the use of town-owned IT equipment, such as smartphones, computers, etc., but no formal policy on the use of social media. Model social-media policies are readily available and have been adopted by many towns. The social media policy should address:*

- *Purpose of using social media;*
- *Authorized social media platforms;*
- *Guidance on allowable information and messages;*
- *Roles and responsibilities of town boards, commissions, committees and staff posting to social media;*
- *Procedures for review and approval of platforms and messages, etc.; and*

- *Consequences for policy violations.*

### Town Website Recommendations

- **Reconfigure the town’s website to make it easier to navigate and more user friendly.**
  - Use \$30,000 to \$40,000 of the American Recovery Plan Act (ARPA) grant or other available funds for short-term, technical consulting assistance to reconfigure the website;
  - Update content and contact information and keep it current;
  - Cross-link the town’s home page with the police, fire, school district, library, recreation and Jenks websites; with WinCAM; and with emerging third-party websites such as “Town Common;” and
  - Evaluate add-on website services available from CivicPlus, our existing website-hosting vendor. Programs like CivicClerk (which facilitates the creation of agendas and the posting of board, commission and committee minutes) and the CivicMobile app could make more efficient use of limited staff and volunteer time.

*The town’s website is the primary source of town government news and information. It should be the go-to, accessible and authoritative source of town government information. But many residents report that it is difficult to navigate and search, much of the content is out-of-date and the community calendar carries relatively few postings of school, business and civic group events of interest to the community. The website must be reconfigured for use by the public—to be outward-facing, not inward-facing—and the content updated regularly. The website must be accessible to those with disabilities and serve different language communities. town staff have been working to improve the website, but the town currently budgets only 20 percent of one administrator’s time (0.2 FTE) for website maintenance. This is woefully inadequate to sustain the town’s core public information outlet. town staff can implement changes incrementally, but short-term guidance and assistance is needed to map out a more logical and transparent structure, and keep up with rapidly changing website technologies.*

- **Improve the capacity to search and retrieve public records through the town’s website.**

*The town is required by Massachusetts law to maintain records of its meetings, decisions and documents, including the rapidly growing volume of video and audio recordings. Residents, especially those actively involved in town issues, look to the town’s website to research*

*documents and view videos of meetings and hearings, but they report that it is often very time-consuming and sometimes nearly impossible to retrieve town records. A major reason for this is that the volume of material has outstripped the town's capacity to archive, index and retrieve its records. We need to keep up with our digitizing and archiving needs and our capacity to make the information accessible to the public through the town's website. This empowers people researching town issues to help inform others, including town meeting members. Failure to maintain and provide access to our records reduces public confidence in town government and puts the town at legal risk.*

- **Make the town's budget and expenditure information more accessible.**
  - Make it easier to locate the town's budget and expenditure information on the website; and
  - Provide budget overview information in a format that can be understood by taxpayers not familiar with public sector accounting.

*Detailed information about the town's budget and expenditures is posted on the town's website, but it is difficult to locate and the information can be challenging to understand if you are not familiar with public sector accounting practices. The town should develop high-level overview information, such as summary charts and trend-line data, that can be posted monthly or quarterly to the town's website.*

### Town Communications Outreach Recommendations

- **Appoint a town communications manager (by FY2025).**
  - Create and fill a senior-level position reporting to the town manager and responsible for:
    - Supporting the town's departments, boards, commissions and committees by publicizing information about their work and emerging issues and initiatives, such as overrides, pending school projects, and affordable housing developments, etc.;
    - Drafting and disseminating the newsletter, notifications and press-releases;
    - Preparing materials for hearings and town meetings;
    - Updating and maintaining the town's website and social media accounts;
    - Deploying communication-related software and equipment across departments to improve staff productivity; and

- Drafting and updating the town’s communication plan and social media policy for review and approval by the town manager and the select board.
- The position should be budgeted as soon as feasible, but no later than FY2025.
  - The reported rate for communications directors currently employed in Winchester’s peer towns is approximately \$125,000 per year (~\$75,000-\$100,000 for salary and ~\$50,000 for benefits, etc.).

*Town board members and staff are stretched thin and have very limited time for communications. However, proactive communication with taxpayers, town meeting members, businesses and civic groups has become an essential function for credible governance. While our report is not recommending a specific staffing solution, the town must reallocate or add resources to improve communications with residents. This recommendation is consistent with strategic recommendations of prior town policy studies as far back as the 2000 FACTS report. It is also consistent with the committee’s recent recommendation that the select board consider carefully the training, experience and commitment to public communications of applicants for the position of town manager.*

*A key town resource should be a communications manager. Nearly 50 Massachusetts municipalities have already added a communications manager or director position. The town should look for candidates who have a clear understanding of the changes in the media landscape; are conversant with social media; can provide information technology support for the town’s website and social media; have experience in building and managing successful public communications programs; have demonstrated leadership in working with staff to improve communications; and are willing to support effective communication among the town’s many boards, commissions and committees, town meeting and residents.*

*We are sensitive to town meeting’s desire to avoid adding staff positions that increase the town’s budget and resident’s property taxes, but failure to communicate effectively may cost the town more—in staff, consultant and board overtime; missed opportunities; additional referenda; legal challenges; erosion of public trust, etc.—than the cost of a communications manager.*



- **Better define the audiences for town government information, their main information interests, and their preferred communication channels.**

*Cost-effective delivery of town information will require a better understanding of who wants what information when and by what media. Simply posting information to the town's website and assuming that the information will reach the town's increasingly diverse population is no longer sufficient. The town must differentiate its audiences and then tailor its messages to these audiences through their preferred communication channels. The town should start by auditing its current audiences and identifying missing audiences. town meeting members should be one of the priority audiences and obtain regular updates on town government issues, hearings and decisions.*

- **Proactively deliver notifications and a weekly town-manager's newsletter summarizing information about key town government issues, policies, regulations, programs, projects, hearings, events, etc.**

- Ensure key audiences receive relevant information, especially to matters within their precinct;
- Enable people to easily subscribe to the town newsletter so that they get it in its entirety in their email in box;
- Provide clear and direct links from the notifications and newsletter articles back to the town's website for more detailed information; and
- Continue to use the full range of town and third-party communication channels (e.g., print, website, social media, community newspapers, etc.) to reach these audiences.

*Residents expect that the town will deliver relevant information to residents in a clear, concise and timely manner. Provision of this information should be ongoing and regular, including alerts before projects start, updates while underway and reports upon completion. The town has been moving in a positive direction with the town manager's newsletter, postings to social media, and the reverse-911 program. However, residents complain that much of the information is delivered after the fact, and that the town manager's newsletters are difficult to find on the town's website. We also heard frequent requests for notifications and web pages that track issues as they are debated across the town's many boards, commissions and committees, and newsletters that provide context to understand important town issues. Finally, residents say they do not have time to pull information from the town's website; rather, they want it pushed to them in concise*

*messages with the option of following up on the town's website if they want more detail.*

- **Continue to invest in hybrid meeting technology to facilitate public access to hearings, meetings, etc.**
  - Ensure that the town's information technology (IT) department has sufficient equipment (e.g., software, computers, servers and networks) and staff to deliver and maintain consistent and reliable service, especially given the increased use of hybrid meeting technologies.

*The use of Zoom and the expansion of WinCAM coverage have enabled town meeting members, residents and businesses to view and participate in more board, commission and committee meetings and hearings. The ability to follow policies and projects as they evolve means that issues can be identified and addressed earlier and at less cost to the town and residents. The use of hybrid meeting technologies should be expanded to build and maintain an informed electorate. This will require additional support for the town's currently under-staffed and under-funded IT department. We have heard from staff and residents that the IT department badly needs additional resources.*

## TOWN MEETING COMMUNICATIONS

**Primary Recommendation: Establish more robust and effective communications within town meeting and between town meeting members and residents.**

town meeting is the legislative body of the town. Its 192 members are elected to represent their neighbors in the town's eight precincts. In our survey of town meeting members, interviews with precinct chairs, and discussions with individual town meeting members, the committee heard repeatedly that town meeting members want to be better informed about town issues, have more opportunity to discuss and debate issues before voting, and need guidance and support in communicating with their constituents. Town meeting members are concerned that without better communication, town meeting will be less responsive to residents, less effective at setting town policy, and eventually less relevant as a form of local democratic governance.

Building more robust and effective communication within town meeting and between town meeting members and residents will require that town meeting and its members be part of the culture shift to more proactive communication. At stake is the credibility and effectiveness of our town meeting form of government.

### Town Meeting Members Association Recommendation

- **Establish an independent not-for-profit Winchester Town Meeting Members Association as an online forum for communication among town meeting members.**
  - Use the association as a vehicle to provide email addresses for all current town meeting members (e.g., name@WinchesterTMMA.org); and
  - Use the association as a vehicle to provide a moderated listserv platform for discussions among town meeting members.

*The Winchester Town Meeting Members Association (TMMA) could be modeled on the Lexington Town Meeting Members Association, which was established in 1936 and incorporated as a self-funding, not-for-profit association in the late 1970s.<sup>1</sup> The Lexington TMMA is independent of the Town of Lexington and the Lexington town meeting. All Lexington town meeting members in good standing are association members. Membership dues, which are voluntary, are \$5 per year.*

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<sup>1</sup> <http://lexingtontmma.org/pmwiki.php?n=Composite.HomePage>

*Only town meeting members may post to the association's moderated listserv, but members may forward signed posts to the listserv on behalf of their constituents. All postings to the listserv may be read by town meeting members, residents and the general public.*

*Once established, the Winchester TMMA could also serve as a vehicle for the town clerk and town meeting moderator to develop and deliver onboarding training for new town meeting members and as the host for information sessions on pending warrant articles.*

### Town Meeting Procedural Recommendations

- **Preview major articles to town meeting members and the public at information sessions ahead of town meeting.**
  - Hold preview sessions prior to the printing of the motion book (and preferably, closer to the issuance of the warrant); and
  - Once established, have the Winchester TMMA host the preview sessions.

*Town meeting members told us that much of the information provided to them—in reports, motion books and board presentations—is either too much or too little, and often arrives too late to support well-informed debate. Preview sessions address this issue by allowing sponsors of major articles (especially, potentially controversial articles) to outline their proposals and hear questions from town meeting members and the public in sufficient time to prepare responses before finalizing their reports and motions and making their formal presentations before town meeting.*

- **Require budget and tax impact estimates for all major articles.**
  - Require sponsors of warrant articles to provide information about the anticipated cost of their proposed action, the duration (e.g., single- or multi-year expenditure), and the proposed source of funding (e.g., free cash, override, fees, grants, etc.); and
  - Have the finance committee review the sponsor's costs and then estimate and report the budget and tax impacts using the finance committee's budget and forecasting model.

*The intent of this recommendation is to provide a standardized approach for reliably comparing the costs and impacts of proposed expenditures. Current practice expects sponsors to provide both cost information and budget and tax impact estimates, but sponsors often use widely differing assumptions about wage rates, benefits, equipment costs, construction costs, inflation rates, etc., leading to divergent*

*conclusions about budget and tax impacts. Inconsistent approaches to financial forecasts unnecessarily prolong town meeting debates and increase the risk of making costly and ineffective decisions.*

- **Adopt and post written committee operating policies and procedures for all town meeting standing committees.**

*The town's Code of Bylaws spells out the duties, composition, appointment procedures and terms of office for the town meeting standing committees—finance, personnel, government regulations, rules, and capital planning. However, publicly available information about the operating policies and procedures governing routine meeting schedules, the amount of information published in posted agendas, provision for public comment, voting and reporting recommendations to town meeting, and designation of official spokespersons for public meetings and town meeting presentations, etc., is limited. Most committees have evolved informal operating policies and procedures covering these topics. The intent of this recommendation is to document—and were possible, standardize—those operating policies and procedures and make them accessible to all town meeting members and the public.*

- **Provide best-practice guidelines (content, format, visuals, etc.) for presentations to town meeting.**
  - Issue as a moderator's guidance document.

*Presentations to town meeting vary widely in their legibility, topical coverage and completeness. The guidance document would provide suggested best practices and a check list for use by boards, commissions, committees and citizens in preparing presentations.*

- **Provide onboarding and communications training for town meeting members.**

*The moderator and the town clerk have been expanding the printed and online information available to new and veteran town meeting members. The materials describe the structure and process of town government and the role and procedures of town meeting. This effort should be supported and expanded to help ensure that our town meeting members can make well-informed decisions and communicate with their constituents. When established, the Winchester TMMA could also be used as a vehicle for delivering training to town meeting members.*

## Precinct/Constituent Communication Recommendations

- **Establish precinct meeting and constituent outreach expectations and best-practices guidance for town meeting precinct chairs and town meeting members.**
  - Issue as a moderator's guidance document.

*Town meeting has no established guidance defining the roles and responsibilities of town meeting precinct chairs and town meeting members to communicate with their precinct constituencies. The document would outline expectations and recommend best practices.*