

Carlisle Town Meeting Introduction and Procedures

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Each qualified inhabitant of the town has an indisputable right to vote upon every question presented, as well as to discuss it, or there is no Town Meeting. This is universally understood as the vital feature of the town system of government as practiced from a long time before the Declaration of Independence until the present.

Opinion of the Justices, 229 Mass. 601 (1918)

Town Meeting is a gathering of all people in the town who are eligible to vote, acting as the legislative branch of our local Town government. Almost uniquely in modern American public life, Town Meeting embodies direct – not representative – democracy. Welcome to Carlisle’s Town Meeting.

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I. PURPOSE OF THIS DOCUMENT

This document explains how Town Meeting works in Carlisle, including an overview of the process of how matters get brought before Town Meeting, what happens at Town Meeting, and the basic procedural rules that apply during the meeting. This is a summary document, however, and no substitute for the actual rules, which derive from several sources (described in [Section IV](#) below). These exist to facilitate an orderly, dignified, respectful and fair discussion of issues leading to informed votes and good decisions. Citizens may also wish to consult the [Quick Start Guide](#), which provides a brief summary of procedures at the meeting.

II. INTRODUCTION: TOWN MEETING BASICS

A. What Is Town Meeting and Why Is It Important?

Town Meeting is the legislative body for the Town of Carlisle. Its most fundamental responsibilities include the following:

- **Government Structure.** Deciding what elected officers the Town will have (although not the individuals who actually fill the offices; they are elected at a town-wide election), what salary it will pay these officers, and their terms of office;
- **Town Finances.** Deciding for what purposes the Town will spend money, how much may be spent for each purpose; and where the money will come from (*i.e.*, current tax receipts, borrowing, or other sources);
- **Legislation.** Adopting and amending laws (referred to as “bylaws”) that regulate matters such as:
 - The structure and operation of Town government
 - The organization and procedures for administration of Town business
 - The conduct of citizens
 - The use of land
 - How and where certain occupations may be conducted.

A variety of other matters may be taken up by Town Meeting, as authorized by state law.

Town Meeting votes typically authorize various actions to take place, while the Select Board (or others from the executive branch) implement these actions. In this way, the Town Meeting provides a check on executive power.

Most matters that come before Town Meeting are settled by the Town Meeting vote. Therefore, voters who do not attend the meeting must abide by the decision of those who do. In certain limited instances (for example, the decision to authorize issuance of a bond to borrow money), an affirmative Town Meeting vote must be confirmed by voters at a town-wide Election, typically held a week or two later.

B. Who is Eligible to Participate?

Any voter registered in the Town of Carlisle may attend and speak. Non-voters may attend and observe, but may only speak with the consent of Town Meeting.

C. Where and When Are Our Meetings Held?

Carlisle holds its Annual Town Meeting in the spring, typically late April or early May. The meeting traditionally began on Monday at 7 pm, continuing on Tuesday evening if necessary, but in 2025 will be

held on a Sunday afternoon. The meetings are held in the Corey Auditorium at Carlisle Public Schools. Families with small children may sit in the cafeteria and participate via a video and sound link. For certain meetings, a similar arrangement is set up at a conference room at Benfield Farms.

The Annual Town Meeting considers and adopts the Town Budget, as well as other matters that arise during the course of the year and can await the annual gathering. A Special Town Meeting may be called at other times of the year (though typically in the autumn) if matters arise that require a Town Meeting vote and cannot wait until the next annual meeting.

III. THE TOWN MEETING WARRANT

A. What Is the Warrant?

The agenda for a Town Meeting is called the “warrant.” The warrant is a legal document issued by the Select Board, at least seven days before an Annual Town Meeting and at least 14 days before a Special Meeting. The warrant notifies the voters of (1) the time and place of the meeting and (2) the subjects to be acted upon at the meeting. No action subsequently taken at a Town Meeting is valid unless the subject matter was contained in the warrant. While a precise description of the vote to be taken is not required, the warrant must contain a sufficient description of what is proposed so as to constitute an adequate notice to voters of the matter to be considered.

B. How Do Items Get Included in the Warrant? Can I File a Citizens’ Petition?

Each specific item to be considered at Town Meeting is identified in the warrant as an “article.” The Selectmen determine which articles to include in the warrant. As a formal matter, the Selectmen include articles either upon their own motion or upon petition submitted to them prior to the close of the warrant by ten or more registered voters (for annual meetings; 100 or more registered voters for Specials). In practice, the articles are initiated not just by the Selectmen, but also by the various other town boards or committees. In almost all cases, before proposing a warrant article, the proposing board or committee will have devoted several public meetings to debate the proposal, gather public input, and refine the idea. The Selectmen typically begin formulating the warrant in January and close it in late February or March, a month or more before the Annual Town Meeting. (At a minimum, the warrant must be closed at least seven days before Annual Town Meeting, and fourteen days before a special.)

In some towns (such as our neighbor Concord), there is a strong tradition of citizen petitions. By contrast, in Carlisle the Selectmen and other town bodies have generally encouraged citizens to bring their ideas for possible warrant articles to them well in advance of the Annual Town Meeting (ideally, by November or December), so that if the idea has merit, it can be developed and refined through the usual public channels. This has the advantages of encouraging town government to be responsive to citizens and increasing the probability that the idea comes to the floor of Town Meeting “fully baked” and with support from one or more boards or committees. On the other hand, the petitioners may want to take their idea directly to the floor of Town Meeting by submitting a Citizens’ Petition. Either approach is permissible.

If you wish to submit a Citizens’ Petition directly, please see the [Guide to Citizens' Petitions](#). The Town Clerk can help you with the filing procedures. (See [Contact Information](#) below.) The Town Moderator is also available to advise on the form and language of a possible warrant article and its accompanying motion (see [Section IV.E.2](#) below) though not on the underlying policy proposal or on the politics of adoption. **Town Meeting Time** (referenced in [Section IV.E.1](#) below) also provides helpful guidance on citizen petitions.

IV. PROCEDURES AT TOWN MEETING

A. How Do I Gain Admission to Town Meeting?

You must be a registered voter in Carlisle in order to participate. If you are not yet registered, see the Town Clerk at Town Hall. If you are not registered, you may still attend, but will not be able to vote, or to speak without consent of the meeting. Please arrive at least ten minutes in advance of the meeting start time so you can be checked in.

B. Can I bring my kids?

Yes, of course. If they can be reasonably quiet and well behaved, they may sit with you in the main auditorium. We particularly welcome middle and high school students who may be interested in witnessing democratic government in action. For those with smaller children, the Town typically sets up the school cafeteria with an audio and video feed and microphone, so that you can participate fully while your kids play in the corner. The Moderator appoints an Assistant Moderator to oversee this room.

C. What If I Need Special Accommodation to Be Able to Participate?

Carlisle welcomes the participation of all citizens at Town Meeting. We will do our best to help. If possible, please contact the Town Clerk in advance to discuss any special needs, such as access or audio enhancement. Notice in advance of the meeting increases the likelihood of satisfactory accommodations.

D. Can I participate remotely?

Yes, but only to a very limited extent. Anyone may view the proceedings on local cable access television (Channel 9) or livestream from the Minuteman Media Network [website](#).

Full remote participation (*i.e.*, viewing, speaking, and voting) in Open Town Meetings by individuals is not currently authorized under Massachusetts law, except where necessary as an accommodation under the *Americans for Disability Act*.

At certain meetings, the Town may arrange for a full remote location at a conference room at Benfield Farms, staffed with an Assistant Moderator and an appointed teller from the Town Clerk's Office. Functionally, this room operates in the same fashion as the family/extra capacity use of the cafeteria adjacent to Corey Auditorium.

E. How Many for a Quorum?

Carlisle's Town Meeting Bylaw specifies a quorum of 150 to open and conduct a Town Meeting. Back in the day (or so it is said), the local constabulary would be enlisted to gather citizens if Town Meeting was a few short of a quorum. Cell phones have made last-minute recruiting easier, but it's still best if folks show up on time! The sooner we start, the sooner we finish.

F. How is Business Conducted?

1. Authority for Rules

The meeting operates first under the Massachusetts General Laws, and then in accordance with Carlisle's [Town Meeting Bylaw](#). In situations not covered by these authorities, guidance has been provided for years by local tradition and by *Town Meeting Time*, the handbook of parliamentary procedure published by the Massachusetts Moderators Association (MMA). It is available in Gleason Public Library or can be mail-ordered from the [MMA](#). Robert's *Rules of Order* is not used, for reasons explained in *Town Meeting Time* (see page 17 in the 4th Edition).

These authorities don't cover every possible situation, and the Moderator has broad discretion to exercise his judgment about how best to proceed. However, the Moderator, being human, is not infallible. To question or challenge any procedural ruling of the Moderator, see [Sub-section E. 9](#) below on Points of Order.

2. Getting Started – Turning Articles into Motions

The Moderator presides at Town Meeting, keeps order, and makes a public declaration of all votes. He presents the articles in the order in which they appear on the Warrant, unless a procedural vote is taken to consider one or more articles out of the published order. The Moderator will either read the article in full or summarize its substance. He or she will then call for a motion, which is customarily made by the sponsor of the article.

The motion will be a more precise statement of the action to be taken by Town Meeting. Recall that the article is intended to provide notice of the topic to be considered; the motion must be specific. The motions are prepared in advance and compiled by the Town Administrator in a handout which is given to each voter as he or she enters the meeting. The person making the motion may read the motion in full if it is short; otherwise, he or she may simply "move the adoption of Article XX as printed in the handout." Citizens who have proposed an article through the petition process should contact the Moderator at least one month in advance of Town Meeting to discuss the process for submitting an appropriate motion.

3. The Opening of Debate

Following the motion, the Moderator invites the proponents to make a presentation. Following the presentation, the Moderator asks the Select Board, the Finance Committee, and any other town boards, commissions and committees if they have voted to make a recommendation on the motion. Following summary reports of these votes, the Moderator invites the Town bodies to explain their votes, if they wish. Thereafter, the Moderator opens the floor for debate.

4. Floor Debate – General Procedures

At this point, the Moderator will typically open the floor for debate. (There are a couple exceptions, explained in the next subsection.) Microphones are located in the aisles and at the back of the auditorium. If you can, please move to the microphone in advance of requesting to speak. If participating from the cafeteria or at Benfield Farms, let the assistant moderator know that you wish to speak. When the Moderator recognizes you, please state your name and address. The meeting is taped, so each time you speak you must identify yourself and your street address.

You may speak more than once, although the Moderator generally will not recognize you to speak a second time on a given motion until others have had an opportunity to speak a first time.

Comments should be addressed to the Moderator, rather than to anyone else who has spoken. If, for example, you have a question seeking to clarify something that a prior speaker has said, or a question for a Town official or committee member, you address the question to the Moderator, e.g., “Mr. Moderator, I would like to request that the Finance Committee Chairman elaborate further on his comment that the proposed expenditure will not affect the Town's bond rating.” The Moderator will then exercise discretion and decide whether to have the prior speaker respond.

Carlisle has a history of engaged, vigorous, and respectful debate. Well-reasoned and impassioned arguments on the issues are welcome; personal attacks are not.

5. Floor Debate – A Few Exceptions

The Moderator occasionally varies the procedures from those explained in the preceding section.

If on a particular article, a group or groups have organized themselves in opposition to the proposal and have made a request in advance, the Moderator will recognize them to speak first following the proponents.

If the Moderator judges that a particular motion may be so complex as to generate questions for further explanation, he may ask that questions be posed at the outset of debate. Such questions should be for genuine clarification of facts (e.g., “What is the tax impact to the average Carlisle household?”) rather than arguments disguised in the form of questions (e.g., “How can the proponents justify this brazen abridgment of our sacred property rights?”)

6. Floor Debate Time Limits

Time limits will be firmly, but gently, enforced by the Moderator. They are:

- 6 minutes for the main presentation by Proponents.
- 4 minutes for presentations from town boards or committees other than those making the main motion, as well as from organized opposition that has notified the Moderator in advance;
- 2 minutes for comments from the floor.

In rare situations, in response to a request made in advance, the Moderator may exercise his discretion to allocate additional time to a speaker. This will generally be limited to circumstances where there is an unusually large amount of complex information that needs to be explained from the floor.

7. Use of Audio-Visual Aids

The Proponents of an article and any organized opposition may use slides, video or other aids to their presentation; others may only do so at the discretion of the Moderator. The Moderator has published [Presentation Guidelines and Tips](#) that explain the procedures in more detail.

8. Amendments

Amendments are generally permissible, though there are certain limitations, as explained below. If the amendment is very simple (e.g., “I move to amend by changing the amount of the appropriation from \$100,000 to \$80,000”), you may simply state the motion. If it is more complex, you should prepare the amendment in writing. When you are recognized by the Moderator to speak, make your motion and then offer the written amendment to the Town Clerk (who sits on stage, behind the Moderator).

One important limitation on amendments is that they cannot change the motion so radically that it renders the motion “outside the scope” of the article. Recall that the purpose of the article is to give adequate notice to the voters of the matters to be considered at Town Meeting. Thus every motion – whether it is the main motion introduced at the beginning of debate, or a motion as subsequently

amended, must be broadly consistent with the issue as described in the Warrant. For example, if the Article proposed the purchase of a new fire truck for the Fire Department, it would not be “within scope” to amend the motion to purchase two fire trucks or a rescue boat.

Also, note that special, more restrictive rules pertain to amendments to motions related to zoning by-laws and to Community Preservation Act funding appropriations. If you’re contemplating such amendments, it’s best to confer with the Moderator in advance of Town Meeting.

9. Procedural Motions

Various procedural motions may be made during the course of debate. These motions are explained in detail in ***Town Meeting Time***. The [Appendix](#) to this Guide summarizes the rules around each motion. A few key ones are highlighted below.

- ***Point of Order.*** When the Moderator makes a mistake, or there is otherwise something you believe is wrong with the procedure being followed, you may rise to a Point of Order. You may do so by calling out “Point of Order!” from your seat, at which time you will be recognized by the Moderator. You may also use a Point of Order to simply ask a procedural question of the Moderator. (Don't be shy; if there's something about the procedures you don't understand, there are probably others in the same boat.)
- ***Ending Debate - “Call the Question.”*** A voter may move to end debate by making a motion to “Call the Question.” If accepted by the Moderator, the motion is put to an immediate vote, without debate, and requires a two-thirds majority for passage. However, the Moderator will exercise his discretion in determining whether to accept the motion. If, in the Moderator's judgment, the arguments have gotten repetitive and are generating little fresh insight, the motion will be accepted and put to a vote. Conversely, if voters still wish to speak and there are new arguments to be made, the motion will not be accepted. Put simply, the Moderator allows the motion as a time-management tool and disallows it as a tactic to stifle an ongoing and incomplete debate.
- ***Reconsideration.*** At any time prior to the close of the meeting, any voter may move to reconsider a motion that was previously voted upon. This motion has rarely been used in Carlisle in recent years. In general, the Moderator will not entertain a motion to reconsider unless, in the best judgment of the Moderator, a significant error or omission occurred in the language or the process of the original action on the article, or a significant change of circumstances has occurred, such that there is a clear likelihood that the outcome could change upon reconsideration or that reconsideration would be in the Town’s best interest. Such errors, omissions or changes of circumstances should be brought to the Moderator’s attention as soon as they are known, and the Moderator will determine if and when the Motion for Reconsideration will be taken up. If the Moderator determines that the Motion may be taken up, a majority vote is necessary to proceed with reconsideration.
- ***Other Procedural Questions.*** Voters may raise procedural questions during Town Meeting. While it is of course helpful when everyone understands the basic rules, voters are not expected to be expert parliamentarians. Therefore, if there is some important step you would like to take, but are unsure of the exact procedure, it is acceptable to state your purpose on the floor of Town Meeting and request the Moderator's guidance as to the appropriate procedure. If the purpose is germane and the timing appropriate, the Moderator will suggest the proper procedure. If such situations can be anticipated, it is best to request the Moderator's advice in advance of Town Meeting. (See [Contact Information](#) below).

10. Voting

The Moderator generally calls for a voice vote on any articles that require a majority for passage. If the Moderator is in doubt as to the outcome, he will call for a counted vote. On votes requiring a two-thirds majority, the Moderator will also typically call for a counted vote.

Beginning in 2023, Carlisle will use an electronic voting system for all counted votes. This system, similar to what is used by the US House of Representatives, uses hand-held devices to register each person's vote.

At the conclusion of voting by any method, the Moderator will declare the outcome. Any seven (7) voters may challenge the Moderator's call of the vote and demand a formal count (or re-count). Such a challenge must be made immediately after the Moderator declares the outcome. The challenger should immediately call out, "I question the vote!" and then the Moderator will ask whether six additional voters also wish to challenge the declared outcome.

G. What is the Consent Agenda and How Does It Work?

As explained in more detail in the Warrant Book, the Select Board typically group together a set of articles which, in the collective judgment of the Selectmen, Finance Committee, and the Moderator, are unlikely to generate controversy and can be properly voted without debate. The purpose of the Consent Agenda is to streamline Town Meeting by allowing for speedy passage of articles that require no debate.

The Warrant Book lists the articles proposed for inclusion on the Consent Agenda. If you object to any article being so included (either because you would like to see it debated, or simply voted upon separately), you may contact the Moderator in advance to register your objection. Alternatively, at the call of the Consent Agenda at Town Meeting, the Moderator will call out the Articles, one by one. Any voters who object to that article's inclusion in the Consent Agenda may simply call out "HOLD" in a loud voice when the number is called. In either case, the Article will be removed automatically from the Consent Agenda, restored to its original place in the Warrant, to be debated and voted in the usual manner.

H. How Do We Debate and Vote on the Town Operating Budget?

Among Town Meeting's most important responsibilities is the adoption of the Operating Budget. The Operating Budget is both large and complex. For fiscal year 2022-23, the Operating Budget exceed \$32 million; as presented in the Warrant Book, the Article proposed spending in nine large budget categories with spanned nearly eight pages, presenting detail on twelve large budget categories and 38 sub-categories. The Operating Budget represents the culmination of many months of effort, meetings and hearings by multiple town officers, committees, and boards. The best time to influence the budget is while it is still being formulated early in the calendar year. Citizens interested in particular budget items are strongly encouraged to attend the public meetings of the relevant board or committee requesting the budget authority, as well as meetings of the Finance Committee and Select Board when that particular budget line item is considered.

At Town Meeting, the vote is taken on the Operating Budget as a whole. However, to organize the discussion more efficiently, the Moderator will first ask voters to identify any of the line items about which they have any questions or that they wish to debate. The line items will then be taken up for discussion in the order in which they appear in the budget. Otherwise, the usual procedural rules apply. Voters may, for example, move to amend the budget. If the amendment is to increase funding for a particular line item, the amendment must specify the source of the additional funds. Voters may also request to hold a

separate vote on a particular category, sub-category, or line item by making a motion to “divide the question.”

V. CONTACT INFORMATION

For questions about this document and procedures to be followed at Town Meeting, you may contact the Town Moderator, Wayne Davis, by email to Moderator@CarlisleMA.gov.

For questions about registering to vote or about the procedures for filing a citizen petition, you may contact the Town Clerk, Ashley Cote, at her office in Town Hall; by telephone at (978) 369-6155 or by email to Clerk@CarlisleMA.gov.

VI. FURTHER INFORMATION ON TOWN MEETING

The most complete source of information about Town Meetings in Massachusetts is ***Town Meeting Time: A Handbook of Parliamentary Law***, published by the Massachusetts Moderator's Association (4th Edition, 2025). Copies of ***Town Meeting Time*** are available in Gleason Public Library or may be purchased directly from the Moderators Association [website](#).

Additional information is available at the Secretary of the Commonwealth's [website](#).

APPENDIX

Guide to Town Meeting Motions¹

Rank	Motion	Second Required	Debatable	Amendable	Vote Required	May Reconsider?	May Interrupt
Privileged Motions: Relate to Conduct of Entire Meeting							
1	Dissolve (end) the meeting	Yes	No	No	Maj.	No	No
2	Adjourn to a fixed time or recess	Yes	Yes	Yes	Maj.	No	No
3	Point of no quorum	No	No	No	None	No	No
4	Fix the time to (or at) which to adjourn	Yes	Yes	Yes	Maj.	Yes	No
5	Question of privilege	No	No	No	None	No	Yes
Subsidiary Motions: Relate to Main Motion							
6	Lay on the table (defer debate)	Yes	No	No	2/3	Yes	No
7	Call the question (end debate and vote)	Yes	No	No	2/3	No	No
8	Limit or extend debate	Yes	No	No	2/3	Yes	No
9	Postpone to a time certain	Yes	Yes	Yes	Maj.	Yes	No
10	Commit or refer	Yes	Yes	Yes	Maj.	Yes	No
11	Amend or substitute	Yes	Yes	Yes	Maj.	Yes	No
12	Postpone indefinitely	Yes	Yes	No	Maj.	Yes	No
Incidental Motions							
Same rank as motion out of which it arises	Point of order	No	No	No	None	No	Yes
	Division of a question	Yes	Yes	Yes	Maj.	No	No
	Separate consideration	Yes	Yes	Yes	Maj.	No	No
	Fix the method of voting	Yes	Yes	Yes	Maj.	Yes	No
	Nominations to committees	No	No	No	Plur.	No	No
	Withdraw or modify a motion	No	No	No	Maj.	No	No
	Suspension of rules	Yes	No	No	2/3	No	No
Main Motions							
None	Main motion	Yes	Yes	Yes	Var.	Yes	Yes
*	Reconsider or rescind	Yes	*	No	Maj.	No	No
None	Take from the table	Yes	No	No	Maj.	No	No
None	Advance an article	Yes	Yes	Yes	Maj.	Yes	No

*Same rank and debatable to same extent as motion being reconsidered.

¹ Adapted from *Town Meeting Time*, Johnson, Trustman and Wadsworth, Massachusetts Moderators Association, 3rd Edition (2001).