

# A Guide to Bedford's Open Town Meeting

How to be an effective participant in Town Meeting.

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## Information on how to...

Make a motion • Ask a question • Amend a motion • Stop debate • Vote • Adjourn the meeting

### A Guide To Bedford's Open Town Meeting

All Bedford registered voters are members of Town Meeting. As a registered voter, you have the opportunity to participate in decisions that determine what programs and services will be offered, how much the Town will appropriate for special projects, what the annual budget will be and other articles that impact the quality of life in our community.

### Table of Contents

Annual Town Meeting . . . . .	2
The Warrant . . . . .	2
The Role of the Moderator . . . . .	2
Debate Rules . . . . .	2
Time Limitations . . . . .	3
Speaking for or against a Motion . . . . .	3
Making a Motion . . . . .	3
Amending a Motion . . . . .	3
Voting . . . . .	4
Making Other Incidental and Subsidiary Motions . . . . .	4
Requesting a Point of Order . . . . .	4
Requesting a Point of Privilege . . . . .	5
Motion to Postpone Indefinitely . . . . .	5
Moving the Previous Question . . . . .	5
Moving for Reconsideration . . . . .	5
Point of No Quorum . . . . .	6
Adjournment . . . . .	6
Sources . . . . .	6

This publication is not intended to cover every conceivable action at Town Meeting. Occasionally the process becomes complicated and voters may become momentarily stymied. Be assured the Moderator will advise the voting body what appropriate action is needed to resolve the issue.

Additional copies are available for download at Bedford's website, [www.bedfordma.gov](http://www.bedfordma.gov).

Also available is *Know Your Town*, a comprehensive introduction to the government, services and resources. There is no charge for either publication.

For further information about Town government, programs and services, go to the town's website at [www.bedfordma.gov](http://www.bedfordma.gov).

Prepared by the League of Women Voters of Bedford in 2004 and revised 2012.

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## Annual Town Meeting

Bedford's form of government, as established by its Charter, is known as a "Selectmen-Open Town Meeting plan". Town Meeting is the legislative body of the Town. All registered voters are members.

Annual Town Meeting begins on the fourth (4th) Monday of March. Town Meeting can be adjourned for up to twenty-one (21) days, but it does not end until action on all articles is completed. Traditionally in Bedford, Town Meeting is held on Monday and Tuesday evenings. The required quorum for the transaction of business at each session of Town Meeting is one hundred (100) registered voters.

Sessions begin at 7:30 PM and are held in the Bedford High School auditorium. Registered voters must check in with Town election officials before entering the Town Meeting. The election officials will seat non-voting observers in a special section of the auditorium.

The Selectmen shall call Special Town Meeting(s) as required for the transaction of Town business.

## The Warrant

A warrant (notice) for the Annual Town Meeting must be posted at the Town Hall and at a minimum of three (3) other places at least seven (7) days prior to the meeting. In addition, as required by Bedford's Charter, each household in Bedford will be mailed a Warrant Report at least seven (7) days before the Town Meeting. The Warrant Report includes each article that will be voted on at Town Meeting, a description of the article, and recommendations from the Selectmen, the Finance Committee and other appropriate boards. Detailed reports from the Finance Committee and from the Capital Expenditure Committee are usually included. Town Meeting will vote on a motion for each article included in the warrant.

## The Role of the Moderator

At Town elections, a moderator is elected for a three year term to preside over the sessions of Town Meeting. According to Massachusetts General Laws, the Moderator regulates the proceedings at Town Meeting, decides all questions of order and makes public declaration of all votes taken. No one may address the Town Meeting without being recognized by the Moderator.

## Debate Rules

The following rules govern the conduct of the Town Meeting.

### *Article 4.1 of the Bedford General Bylaws*

1. No voter may speak without recognition by the Moderator.
2. Speakers must give their name and address before commencing.
3. No voter may speak in debate more than twice on any article without specific permission from the Moderator, except to correct a statement. Questions do not fall under this rule.
4. Speakers must keep their debate within the scope of the motion on the floor.
5. All questions must be directed through the Moderator.

## **Time Limitations on Debate**

Usually voted at each Town Meeting

1. A speaker presenting an article or amendment to an article shall be limited to ten (10) minutes.
2. Other speakers shall be limited to five (5) minutes.
3. No article shall be presented after 10:45 PM.
4. Town Meeting by majority vote may waive A, B, or C.

The following procedures are provided to help those who wish to speak or to make appropriate motions at Town Meeting:

## **Speaking for or against the Motion for an Article**

After a motion is made, seconded and Town Committee recommendations are completed

1. Be recognized by the Moderator (stand at a microphone in the aisles or raise your hand).
2. State your name and address.
3. Make a brief comment on the motion or ask a question through the Moderator. The Moderator will determine who will answer the question.
4. The Moderator may allow you to make a follow-up statement or ask another question.

## **Making a Motion**

1. Be recognized by the Moderator (stand at a microphone in the aisles or raise your hand).
2. State your name and address.
3. State the motion: "I move that ..."
4. Wait for another voter to second your motion.
5. The Moderator will allow you to make a presentation explaining the reason for the motion in accordance with the debate rules.
6. In Bedford, all motions for warrant articles are made by the Selectmen or other town board members except in the case of articles submitted by petition.

## **Amending a Motion** (To modify a motion that is being debated)

1. Be recognized by the Moderator (stand at a microphone in the aisles or raise your hand) following a motion being made.
2. State your name and address.
3. State the motion: "I move to amend the motion as follows ..."
4. The amendment must be in writing and you must give two copies to the Moderator.
5. Wait for another voter to second your motion.
6. The amendment must be within the scope of the original motion.
  - An article in the warrant may be amended if it includes the language "do anything in relation thereto" or other similar language.
  - General bylaws may not be amended except to correct an error in printing.
  - Zoning bylaws may only be amended to make them less restrictive.
7. The Moderator will allow you to make a presentation explaining the reason for the amendment to the motion in accordance with the debate rules.
8. An amendment may be amended. Only two (2) amendments may be on the floor at one time.
9. Town Meeting will vote on the amendments first. Then Town Meeting will vote on the amended main motion (if any amendments are adopted) or on the original motion.

## **Voting**

1. The Moderator will call for a vote on the motion for each article after a period of time is given to debate.
2. Most votes will be voice votes in which voters say either “aye or no”. The Moderator declares that the motion is adopted or defeated.
3. Seven voters or the Moderator may question the vote, thus requiring a counted vote.
4. To participate in a hand count of the vote, each voter must raise the colored card received upon checking in to the Town Meeting. The moderator appoints tellers to count the votes.
5. Motions to amend the Zoning Bylaws require a two-thirds (2/3) vote. Bond issues require a two-thirds (2/3) vote. State statutes require two-thirds (2/3) votes on certain other actions such as the purchase of land.
6. To participate in a secret ballot, go to the front of the auditorium to receive a ballot. You will be required to turn in your colored card and will receive a new card. Place the portion of the ballot representing your vote (yes or no) in the ballot box and throw away the unused portion.

## **Making Other Subsidiary and Incidental Motions**

These include commonly used motions such as postponing action on an article to a specific time, dividing a question into separate parts, separately considering parts of a motion, and advancing an article out of order.

1. Be recognized by the Moderator (stand at a microphone in the aisles or raise your hand).
2. State your name and address.
3. State the motion: for example, “I move to postpone Article#\_ until after Article#\_.”
4. Wait for another voter to second your motion.
5. These motions are debatable and amendable. They should be moved at a time appropriate to the circumstances, usually before the article is moved.
6. These motions require a majority vote.

## **Requesting a Point of Order**

A point of order is a question relating to the entitlement of the speaker to address the meeting or relating to the appropriateness of what the speaker is saying or of the pending action.

1. State “Mr./Madam Moderator, I rise to a Point of Order.”
2. A Point of Order may interrupt the speaker.
3. When recognized by the Moderator, state the question which may be one of the following:
  - Is the speaker entitled to the floor?
  - Is what the speaker is saying frivolous, irrelevant, illegal or contrary to proper procedure?
  - Is any pending action frivolous, irrelevant, illegal or contrary to proper procedure?
4. The Moderator will rule on the point of order and debate on the current motion will continue.

## **Requesting a Point of Privilege**

Questions of privilege relate to the rights and privileges of the meeting collectively, its safety, dignity and the integrity of the proceedings and to the rights, reputation and conduct of the voters individually in their role as voters.

1. State "Mr./Madam Moderator, I rise to a question of privilege."
2. A Point of Privilege may interrupt the speaker.
3. When recognized by the Moderator, state the question that relates to the rights and privileges of the meeting or its members. An example of a question of privilege is the inability to see or hear a presentation.
4. The Moderator will rule on the point of privilege.

## **Making a Motion to Postpone an Article Indefinitely**

A motion to postpone an article indefinitely removes the main motion from debate without a vote on the main motion.

1. Be recognized by the Moderator (stand at a microphone in the aisles or raise your hand).
2. State your name and address.
3. State the motion: "I move to postpone Article (give the number) indefinitely."
4. Wait for another person to second your motion.
5. You may give a brief explanation of the reason for your motion.
6. This motion can serve as a main motion when a new article is being considered or can be made during debate on a motion.
7. This motion ends debate and removes the main motion from discussion. It is not debatable or amendable.
8. The motion to postpone indefinitely requires a two-thirds (2/3) vote.

## **Moving the Previous Question**

Moving the previous question is a motion to end debate

1. Be recognized by the Moderator (stand at a microphone in the aisles or raise your hand).
2. State your name and address.
3. State the motion: for example, "I move the previous question."
4. Wait for another voter to second your motion.
5. This motion is not debatable. If passed, it stops debate on the motion under consideration and a vote is then taken on the main motion.
6. This motion requires a two-thirds (2/3) vote to pass.
7. It is local practice not to allow a voter to state a position on an article and then immediately move the previous question.

## **Moving for Reconsideration of a Previous Vote**

Reconsideration requests reopening debate on a motion previously voted on by the Town Meeting.

1. Be recognized by the Moderator (stand at a microphone in the aisles or raise your hand).
2. State your name and address.
3. State the motion: for example, "I move to reconsider the motion for Article # \_"
4. The person making the motion must have voted on the prevailing side.
5. Wait for another voter to second your motion.
6. This motion is debatable.

7. The Moderator will allow you to make a presentation explaining the reason for the motion to reconsider in accordance with the debate rules. Generally reconsideration is used when new information about a previous article is available or to adjust appropriations to meet Proposition 2 1/2 taxation limits.
8. The meeting will vote on the motion to reconsider. If it passes, debate on the original motion will resume.
9. When a motion to reconsider is decided, that decision shall not be reconsidered again at the same session and may only be reconsidered once thereafter.
10. Articles voted on at any meeting shall not be reconsidered at a subsequent meeting unless notice of intent is given to the Moderator prior to adjournment and is publicly announced to the meeting at which the article was voted upon.

**Point of No Quorum**

A point of No Quorum questions whether or not a quorum (100 voters) is present.

1. Be recognized by the Moderator (stand at a microphone in the aisles or raise your hand).
2. State your name and address.
3. State "I question the quorum."
4. The Moderator will direct the tellers to count the voters present.
5. Town Meeting will continue if a quorum is present or, if not, will adjourn to a specific date.
6. Lack of a quorum does not allow any further business (other than adjournment) to proceed, but it does not invalidate any prior actions taken.

**Adjournment**

Town Meeting may adjourn for up to 21 days, but may not dissolve or adjourn sine die until action on all articles is completed.

**Sources**

The rules and procedures for Town Meeting are provided for in the Charter and the Bylaws of the Town. The rules for the meeting that are not provided for by State law are in order of precedence, the Town Charter, the Bylaws, rules adopted at Town Meeting, a publication entitled Town Meeting Time, and the custom of the Town. The Town Moderator conducts the meeting and a quorum of 100 people must be present. Rules relating to main motions and all other types of motions are printed in the Warrant Report.

*About the League...*

Since 1920, the League has earned a reputation as a highly respected citizens organization that researches issues from many points of view and educates the public and decision-makers. We're comprised of men and women who want to make a difference in our communities, our country and our world.

- The League is non-partisan; we do not support or oppose candidates.
- We do support issues and legislation, after member study and agreement.
- We mobilize people to vote and to have a say in the complex decisions that affect us all.
- Membership is open to all citizens of voting age.

To receive information about joining the Bedford LWV, contact [www.lwvbedford@lwvma.org](http://www.lwvbedford@lwvma.org).