Letter To The Marshfield Community From Marshfield Town Moderator

I write to the Mariner to make its readers aware of the precautions and changes that are going to be implemented at the upcoming Annual Town Meeting/Special Town Meeting (ATM/STM) on June 22, 2020, at the high school auditorium. These are challenging and unprecedented times. We cannot simply conduct business as usual in the face of the pandemic. As Town Moderator, my first and foremost concern is the health, safety, and general welfare of Town Meeting members, many of whom are in the at-risk age groups most likely to be adversely impacted by the Covid-19 virus.

Here is what we already have done and will be doing to make the meeting as safe as we can:

First, we delayed the meeting as long as we realistically can without proceeding to 1/12th monthly budgets. The 2020 fiscal year ends on June 30th, and the 2021 fiscal year begins July 1st. There are certain budgetary appropriations that have to take place in a timely fashion if local government is to function in a financially responsible manner starting on the first day of the next fiscal year, which is July 1, 2020. The ATM/STM was originally scheduled for April 27, 2020, which turned out to be during the height of the pandemic. Working closely with the Board of Selectmen and other town officials, it was decided to postpone the meeting to May 26, 2020. When the infection rates, hospitalizations, and unfortunately the Covid-19 related deaths, did not show sufficient signs of relenting, the meeting was further postponed a second time to June 22, 2020. As the Governor has stated, Massachusetts is now heading in the right direction as far as testing, diagnosis, treatment, and reducing community spread of the virus. We, as a Commonwealth, still have more to do, but we are in a far better place than we were two months ago.

Second, the meeting will be held in the high school auditorium. There was some consideration given to holding the meeting outdoors on the high school football field with the same seating arrangements as graduation. However, those attending the meeting would be subject to the potential for adverse weather, and rain date(s) would have to be included, which raised several other logistical issues. At the request of the Superintendent, the meeting was originally to take place at the Furnace Brook Middle School auditorium because it was going to conflict with the high school graduation ceremonies and related senior activities. When graduation was rescheduled, the high school auditorium again became available.

Third, prior to the commencement of the meeting, the high school auditorium will be thoroughly disinfected, as will the adjacent bathrooms, hallways, check-in area, and entrance. Hand sanitizer will be available. I strongly encourage all Town Meeting attendees, officials, and presenters to wear a mask and gloves to and throughout the course of the meeting to minimize the risk of spreading the virus to others. While we anticipate that we will be able to maintain adequate social distancing as far as the citizens seated in the auditorium, there is clear scientific evidence that this virus spreads by means of droplets propelled into the air when we speak and when we breathe, cough or sneeze. Both Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation’s leading infectious disease expert, and Dr. Deborah Birx, the White House coronavirus response coordinator, have repeatedly stated that masks, while not 100% effective, do help to prevent these droplets from
reaching others. The state has also urged that face coverings be used when masks are not available. Unfortunately, wearing masks or face coverings while out in public has recently become a politically charged issue. I hope that will not be the case at our Town Meeting. If there are any persons who, as a result of a medical condition cannot wear a mask or a face covering, please know that we will try our best to accommodate you. As Dr. Birx has emphasized, the Covid-19 virus is a highly unusual respiratory disease. People infected with and spreading the virus may be totally asymptomatic. The well appearing person sitting close to you may be shedding the virus, and you and they would have no way of knowing that community spread was actually taking place. Personally, I will be wearing a mask and gloves because I want to protect myself and to protect the others in the hall. I also want to serve as an example for people to see in a community leader and official. Wearing a mask or face covering is the kind of respect that we should show for each other. I wear a mask, you wear a mask or face covering, and we protect each other.

Fourth, Town Meeting must be condensed. I intend to complete the combined ATM/STM warrants in one night. The scientific and medical evidence is clear that the longer one is exposed to the virus, the greater the risk of contracting it. In other words, the longer we are all together, the more we are at risk. Thus, I will do everything within my power and authority, including suspension of the rules, to ensure that we finish both warrants on that Monday evening. I will dispense with many of the customary preliminary matters that we usually have at the outset of the meeting. There will be no introduction of town officials. There will be no police/fire honor guard to present the colors. I will not have a veteran come to the front of the hall to lead us in the pledge of allegiance. We will recite the pledge in a quiet and respectful manner. We will not sing the national anthem. We will observe a moment of silence for the victims of the virus, rather than have clergy-led prayer and reflection. We will then turn our attention to the business at hand and get to work.

Fifth, as Moderator, I do not create the warrants. That responsibility falls to the Board of Selectmen. However, when I learned that the original Special Town Meeting Warrant consisted of 28 articles and the Annual Town Meeting Warrant consisted of 22 articles, including the operating and capital budgets for FY2021, I asked if the number of articles requiring a vote could be reduced either by moving them to the Fall Special Town Meeting or combining them with another article, thereby reducing the number of votes that had to be taken. Working together, the Town Administrator, the Treasurer-Collector, the Board of Selectmen, and other town departments, were able to reduce the number of articles down to 12 articles in the Special Town Meeting and 20 articles in the Annual Town Meeting. With respect to each warrant, I also intend to propose a consent agenda that we allow us to dispose of non-controversial articles without the need for a formal presentation and debate from the floor. Finally, rather than reading aloud each individual motion, in addition to showing the motion on the screen, I will simply move as many articles as I can as written. Taken together, all of these steps should allow us to complete our work in one night, rather than in two or even three nights, as has happened in the past.

I ask for the assistance and cooperation of all Town Meeting attendees in this regard. I need your help. There will be opportunities for debate and to be heard, but we need to be as efficient as possible in the use of our time. Please be thoughtful and considerate of your fellow citizens. Take the time to read and to study the warrant articles before the meeting begins.
When you go to the microphone simply explain why you are for or against an article or amendment. If you need to have some additional factual information before you can vote, I will try to get it for you, so long as the request is made in good faith.

I look forward to seeing you there.

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