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**Notes from editor (not for publication):**



HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 Brattleboro eyes multiple options for future of Town  
2 Meeting

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

3 Petitioners explain their thoughts at Jan. 27 hearing; a  
4 second hearing takes place Feb. 5

####END SUBHED####

5 TEXT BODY:

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6 The first of two public hearings about citizens' petitions  
7 addressing changes to the town charter related to Representative  
8 Town Meeting (RTM) and using the Australian ballot method of  
9 voting was held Jan. 27.

10 Both sides of the issue stood their ground.

11 The first petition was filed with the Town Clerk Aug. 4,  
12 2025 and requests the town consider discontinuing RTM and  
13 conducting certain town business — electing town officers,  
14 approving general fund budget, approving major borrowing, and  
15 all “public questions” — by Australian ballot.

16 The second petition was filed Sept. 9, 2025 and requests  
17 that if RTM is discontinued, the town instead conduct its business  
18 through open Town Meeting, with all registered voters eligible to  
19 participate.

20 A second public hearing is slated for Thursday, Feb. 5, at  
21 6:15 p.m. in the Selectboard meeting room.

22 Once the public hearings conclude, the matter will go to  
23 voters at the 2026 Annual Town Meeting, where all voters can go  
24 to the polls and vote on the question.

25 Petitioners Tom Franks and Randy Blodgett spoke to their  
26 petition at the hearing. Franks told the group the Australian or, as  
27 he termed it, “secret” ballot was adopted in that country in 1854  
28 because people were voting publicly and they were “vulnerable  
29 to intimidation and coercion,” according to the Australian  
30 Election Commission.

31 “Australian ballot offers every voter the chance to vote,”  
32 Franks said. “Other systems do not.”

## 33 **Three models of running the** 34 **town**

35 In Representative Town Meeting, registered voters in each  
36 of three districts elect peers to serve as representatives, and only  
37 elected representatives are allowed to vote on the floor.

38 In open Town Meeting, any registered voter may  
39 participate and vote; there is no in-between step of voters  
40 electing district representatives.

41 With the Australian ballot system, some or all Town  
42 Meeting decisions are made by paper ballot, and any registered  
43 voter may vote. When deciding matters by Australian Ballot, an

44 informational meeting sometimes takes place prior to the vote,  
45 but not all voters are required to participate in or even observe  
46 the pre-vote discussion. All questions to be voted on that ballot  
47 are determined in advance.

48 In the past three years, 31 towns in Vermont have  
49 adopted the Australian ballot procedure, which predominantly  
50 replaced in-person Town Meeting during the pandemic.

## 51 **Reducing barriers**

52 Franks noted that one barrier was eligibility to vote at  
53 RTM, where one must be elected to participate. Other barriers  
54 include “schedule, location, and duration,” he said.

55 “And then there’s personality. . .the loudest voices in the  
56 room often say the most, and they prevail,” he said. “Secret ballot  
57 protects people against that.”

58 He said that he’s heard predictions that there would be  
59 less participation under Australian ballot but he believes  
60 otherwise.

61 “It’s open to everybody,” Franks said.

62 Blodgett noted the Selectboard changed the RTM article  
63 to one that is on the ballot now so if approved, it will be effected  
64 immediately and the state ordinance by statute would change it  
65 to open Town Meeting.

66 “We want everyone to vote,” he said.

67 Blodgett said that “March is as important as August, as  
68 important as November,” adding that fewer than 3,000 people of  
69 the town’s 9,000 voters vote in March. In comparison, “we  
70 average about 72% in November.”

71 Millicent Cooley spoke via Zoom about the other  
72 petition, saying it’s important to debate and discuss issues before  
73 voting. Open Town Meeting is the default option if RTM is ended,  
74 due to law and because it’s widely used, she said, adding, “it  
75 should be something people choose or not choose. . . and not  
76 just feel this is an option they somehow ended up with because  
77 RTM lost.”

78 “With Australian ballot you can only vote ‘yes’ or ‘no,’  
79 you cannot amend articles,” Cooley said, adding open Town  
80 Meeting is practiced by most towns in the state.

81 “You’re looking at people in the eye when you say what  
82 you think,” she said. “And I think that with Australian ballot it,  
83 too, is vulnerable, but it’s vulnerable to social media  
84 misinformation — much more so.”

85 She called open Town Meeting “the most direct form of  
86 democracy that there is in the United States, as far as I know.”

87 West Brattleboro resident Neil Manders, a District 7 RTM  
88 representative, also spoke at the hearing.

89 “Madam Chair, I have sinned, and I would like to make a  
90 confession,” he said to a rippled giggle through the room.

91 “Last year was my first year in terms of being involved  
92 with the RTM, and I represented a whole bunch of people,  
93 apparently, in West Brattleboro that I never talked to,” he said.

94 “For the most part, I went to the meeting because I was  
95 already upset with taxes and the amount of the budget, and so I  
96 was taking my personal objectives to that meeting,” Manders  
97 said. “And maybe I agreed with some of my neighbors, but for the  
98 most part, I was doing this on my own.”

99 He went on to say he believes some representatives did  
100 make larger efforts to consult with their constituency but that he  
101 also heard from plenty who admitted they didn’t.

102 “If we want people to know and get a chance to vote, we  
103 need to go with the Australian secret ballot in order to make that  
104 happen,” Manders said.

105 Other speakers defended RTM for ensuring a quorum,  
106 allowing amendments, and fostering deliberation.

107 Concerns, however, included that RTM attracts one-issue  
108 candidates and lacks diverse viewpoints. Some noted a  
109 preference for thousands of voters deciding budgets over small,  
110 in-person meetings.

111 Counterpoints included that the Australian ballot yes/no  
112 votes reduce nuance and limit feedback about what to change,

113 risking repeat budget defeats and delays, and make for some  
114 ambiguity for voters not following detailed discussions.

115 Blodgett summed up his and Franks' reasons for  
116 submitting the petition article.

117 "There are plenty of chances for informational meetings,  
118 caucuses, district meetings, coffee with your neighbor, coming to  
119 a Selectboard, joining a committee, going over and just talking to  
120 your neighbor, and writing the Selectboard, talking to the  
121 Selectboard," he said. "I've done it. Everybody can do it. Do they  
122 want to do it?"

123 Blodgett said that there are about 9,500 voters in  
124 Brattleboro and that about 6,500 show up for a national election,  
125 but that about 2,700 come out for a March Town Meeting.

126 "They're not disenfranchised. It's their choice," he said.  
127 "So they didn't come. So they abstained, which we've had  
128 happen at Selectboard meetings and at RTM meetings."

129 That's because "It's democracy," Blodgett said. "It's  
130 messy."

131 "All we're trying to do — and the people that signed our  
132 petition want to do — is have a say, not be second-guessed, not  
133 be told, 'We're going to do this to you because you're one of  
134 them,'" he said. "They just get to vote and move on, and we do  
135 our business as a town.

136 "Please, no matter what you think, show up and vote,"  
137 Blodgett said.

## 138 **Reconsidering RTM**

139 The town Charter Review Commission is also advocating  
140 a move to open Town Meeting.

141 As required by the document, the Selectboard  
142 established a seven-member Charter Revision Commission,  
143 which is required to "review the language of the charter and the  
144 rights, powers, duties, and responsibilities specified therein. The  
145 commission may propose amendments and may redraft the  
146 charter in whole or in part."

147 Serving on the Commission are Chair Kate O'Connor,  
148 Vice Chair Maya Hasegawa, Clerk Joy Tournoux, Hannah  
149 Clarisse, Peter Elwell, and Denise Glover. The commission's  
150 proposed charter amendments were presented to the Selectboard  
151 Sept. 9, 2025.

152 If approved, RTM would be immediately discontinued  
153 and the RTM now scheduled for Saturday, March 21 would be  
154 replaced with an open Town Meeting in April.

155 Brattleboro is the only town in the state that uses RTM  
156 today. The current town charter was adopted on Feb. 16, 1984. It  
157 was last amended on June 27, 2023.

158 If neither charter amendment is approved, a town memo  
159 says, "open town meeting would continue unless and until there  
160 is a vote to switch to another form of town meeting in  
161 accordance with state law, or through a later charter  
162 amendment."

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BIO/COATTAIL:

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