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Notes from editor (not for publication):



HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 Who governs Brattleboro — and how?

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

2 Depending on the results of three ballot questions on
3 March 3, the town could keep Representative Town Meeting,
4 open the floor to all town voters, switch decisions to Australian
5 ballot for all voters, or go down a complicated rabbit hole of
6 legislative uncertainty.

####END SUBHED####

7 TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

8 **Randolph T. Holhut, moderator:** So why are we here? For
9 those three questions on the ballot on March 3, articles that
10 could transform the system of government in Brattleboro — the
11 system that Brattleboro has used for 65 years — the

12 Representative Town Meeting (RTM). *[See sidebar for the text of*
13 *the three articles as they will appear on voters' ballots.]*

14 What will these changes accomplish? And why might
15 they be needed? So tonight we have this panel. They'll talk about
16 these changes.

17 We'll start with the head of the charter commission, Kate
18 O'Connor, who will talk about the charter process, which is the
19 at the heart of these changes.

20 **Kate O'Connor, Charter Revision Commission:** I'm
21 hoping that what I'm going to say will make some sense, because
22 there's a lot that is confusing. I'm happy to answer any questions.

23 I want to try to put some process around why we're
24 having this vote on March 3. The three questions on the ballot go
25 to whether or not we're going to change our form of government.
26 Two of those questions could, if approved, change our charter.

27 So, you ask: What is our charter?

28 Our [charter](#) outlines how our government in Brattleboro
29 functions. Very simply, it outlines the role of the Selectboard and
30 the role of the people.

31 There are a number of ways to change the charter. I'm
32 going to talk about two of them: the Charter Revision
33 Commission process, and citizen petition.

34 Every 15 years, the Selectboard has to appoint a Charter
35 Revision Commission to look at the charter and recommend any
36 changes. I was appointed, along with five other Brattleboro
37 residents. We started meeting in 2023, and we met and we met,
38 and we still haven't finished our work. You folks will see
39 [recommendations] a little bit later — we don't want to confuse
40 everybody.

41 We have talked about what to do about Representative
42 Town Meeting. For literally 2½ years, the topic had come up at
43 all of our meetings.

44 In July of 2025, a citizen petition started circulating to
45 change Representative Town Meeting form of government to an
46 Australian ballot form of government. Shortly after that, [another]

47 citizen petition came forward, one that would change
48 Representative Town Meeting to an open Town Meeting form of
49 government.

50 Petitions need signatures of 5% of registered voters in the
51 town to put a question on the ballot for a town wide vote. Once
52 that happens, the Selectboard is required to put [do so]. That's
53 what's happening in March.

54 At that point, the Charter Revision Commission said,
55 "Well, let's wait. We'll step back. We'll hold off continuing our
56 work until we figure out what's going to happen in March." So
57 the reason that we're having this vote in March is because these
58 two citizen-driven petitions came forward.

59 Regardless of what happens in March, how the vote
60 goes, changing the Charter is a significant thing to do, and the
61 process doesn't end on March 3 with our vote. This is where it
62 gets really fun for all of us.

63 We are a Dillon's Rule state, which means municipalities
64 can only [claim] powers that the state allows. So if the open Town
65 Meeting petition passes and/or the Australian ballot petition
66 passes, it has to go to the Legislature in the form of a bill for
67 approval, and then it has to go to the governor for signature.

68 So whatever we're doing is bigger than than us, in a
69 sense, because other people out there are going to be making the
70 ultimate decision. If it's going to go to the legislature, that is going
71 to be its own sort of quagmire of figuring out what happens next.

72 The Legislature doesn't have to approve what we give
73 them. They can say no, they can change it, they can do whatever
74 they want, and when it gets to the governor, he can veto it.

75 So I just want everybody here to know we're going to do
76 something in in March, and if there's an affirmative vote, or one
77 or both of those charter amendment votes, the process is just
78 beginning. So I just want you to know that the charter change is a
79 significant thing.

80 There are three questions. The first one is: Shall the town
81 of Brattleboro discontinue the Representative Town Meeting form

82 of government? That is not a charter changem so that does not
83 have to go to the Legislature. The Selectboard put that question
84 on the ballot. Per state statute, if we want to stop using our
85 Representative Town Meeting form of government, the
86 municipality has to vote on it.

87 This first question is not a charter change, which means if
88 on March 3, we as a community vote to stop using
89 Representative Town Meeting form of government, there will be
90 no Representative Town Meeting in 2026, and per state statute,
91 we will automatically default to an open Town Meeting.

92 So in the event that Representative Town Meeting is
93 continued, the town has got it on the schedule just like normal.
94 But if it's discontinued, the town is planning for an open Town
95 Meeting in April.

96 The two other questions, if passed, will have to go to the
97 Legislature. By the time we have our vote, and it gets up there, it
98 has to be put in bill form, it has to go through a House
99 committee, it has to go through the [full] Vermont house, it has to
100 go to a Senate committee, it has to go through the Senate, and
101 then it has to then has to be signed off by the governor.

102 There's absolutely no way that's going to happen by
103 March of 2026. So we're talking 2027 before an actual resolution
104 maybe would come about.

105 **Holhut:** Andy Davis has been doing the Representative
106 Town Meetings for many years — not quite as much time as he
107 has been playing music. He will speak to the ... joys? of Town
108 Meeting.

109 **Andy Davis, RTM member (District 9):** There's about 40
110 people here tonight. So imagine more than three times as many
111 people as are here right now, concerned citizens. That's what
112 RTM is like. And when I look out at this crowd, I see people of
113 many different opinions, many different backgrounds, many of
114 whom I've served on RTM with. And heard at different venues
115 around town.

116 And that's what makes RTM representative of the
117 community. It's not because one representative goes out and finds
118 out how everybody feels in their district and then puts it into an
119 algorithm and goes and votes accordingly. It's that the total body
120 — about 140 reps who were elected by Australian ballot, and the
121 10 or so ex officio members, which are people like the moderator
122 and the town treasurer and the Selectboard, are representative of
123 our community. That's why I believe it's called the Representative
124 Town Meeting.

125 I'm here to speak for this institution, so I'm not going to
126 spend time on the other options. But there is some overlap
127 between RTM and open Town Meeting, with many [common]
128 advantages.

129 Australian ballot is a very different direction to go in. We
130 already have Australian secret ballot in Brattleboro. We use it to
131 elect our Selectboard, other town officers, and our representatives
132 to Town Meeting.

133 Representative town meeting does not stand alone. It's
134 part of a system of checks and balances. RTM serves as a check
135 with the Selectboard. The people serve as a check through the
136 various referendums that are allowed (including a very liberal
137 referendum right here, according to our town charter), and the
138 people can check RTM and the Selectboard through referendums.

139 RTM is pretty good sized. It's actually larger than the
140 United States Senate and the Vermont Senate combined.

141 Somebody online said that in all the years they've lived
142 in Brattleboro, no RTM representative has called them up to get
143 their opinion before voting. And I said to them, "Well, I had spent
144 years since [U.S. Sen.] Bernie [Sanders] called me, or [U.S. Rep.]
145 Becca [Balint], or anybody, but our numbers as representatives
146 are published, our contact information can be accessed in less
147 than three minutes by anybody in town, and when people call, I
148 consider that a powerful moment in my life, and I sit down and
149 talk to them.

150 Members are committed to serving the town over a
151 three-year term.

152 Our Representative Town Meeting has the power to
153 approve, reject, or amend articles that are put before it on the
154 [floor], within the bounds of Brattleboro's charter and Vermont
155 state law.

156 RTM interrogates the town administration, goes through
157 the budget, and asks for particular information about things that
158 are on the on the warning.

159 And RTM is also subject to checks and balances. The
160 same size group of people meet, whether there is acute
161 controversy in town or the appearance of no controversy in town.
162 It's a steady, committed group of people. It revolves over the years
163 as people come in and out, but it's a consistent, fair, and face-to-
164 face, deliberative process.

165 RTM draws upon accumulated knowledge and memory.
166 Some of the issues we've tackled have gone on for several years.
167 Solid waste took a lot of our time.

168 I could mention other things we've tackled: police
169 facilities; the 1% Local-Option Sales Tax, a multi-year
170 conversation; public safety and the nature of policing in
171 Brattleboro; Fire Department facilities.

172 These [topics] sometimes take more than one year of
173 discussing and compromising and learning. Somebody once said
174 a couple times in the hearings something like: *Oh, at RTM, the*
175 *loudest voices rule the day*. But that's not really true, because
176 RTM uses the same legislative rules as other parliamentary bodies
177 in our country: Robert's Rules of Order.

178 RTM has seen somebody who talks on every issue.
179 Suddenly, their power evaporates. The people who speak
180 concisely, with good questions and some research behind them,
181 with an openness to listen to other people? Usually those are the
182 people who are listened to, and they lead the way toward
183 compromise.

184 RTM members, to sum up, are willing to serve, to
185 prepare, to listen, to learn and compromise. They're also human
186 beings. People do miss meetings for family crises, for illness, for
187 weather. But RTM does represent the people of Brattleboro, our
188 shared interests, and our varied viewpoints. The membership is
189 equally distributed across our three legislative districts, and that
190 helps ensure that there are varied points of view.

191 We are the only town in Vermont with the Representative
192 Town Meeting, and that kind of goes along with our motto, "The
193 One and Only Brattleboro."

194 One of the things that's not brought up a lot at these
195 hearings is that some people express that RTM is somehow an
196 engine for the rise of taxes in this town.

197 RTM did not create the forces that are driving our tax
198 increases. But I will say that RTM is a forum for responding to
199 these pressures, and I think the pressures over the next few years
200 are going to increase, not decrease, and simply voting a number
201 up or down is going to be a less-valuable process than 150
202 people talking about the challenges we face, listening,
203 compromising, and proposing the way forward.

204 **Holhut:** And that's a very good segue to Tom Franks' time
205 at the mic, since he's one of the people who helped get this,
206 these questions onto the ballot.

207 **Tom Franks, RTM member (District 9):** Thank you, Kate,
208 for that great explanation. It was really necessary, and that has
209 not been brought out a lot.

210 "One person, one vote" says it all. I believe that every
211 voter in town should have the opportunity to vote on the town
212 budget and other important issues.

213 I have three points I'm going to start with:

214 1. The Town Meeting format — representative or open —
215 takes the vote away from a portion of the town's registered voters.

216 2. Across the state, participation in towns with Australian
217 ballots on average is over twice as high as it is for towns using
218 Town Meeting.

219 3. Brattleboro is much worse off by economic measures
220 than comparable towns.

221 Here's some detail on each of these.

222 Town Meeting format excludes voters. In the case of
223 RTM, it excludes 98% of the voters on the checklist.

224 Both Town Meeting types exclude those voters who
225 cannot, for a host of reasons, commit to attending a meeting at a
226 certain place and time for an unspecified duration.

227 Some of the voters who might be unable to participate in
228 an open Town Meeting are people with disabilities, people in
229 hospitals and residential facilities, people for whom English is not
230 their primary language, people who spend March and April in
231 other places but who primarily live here, people who work
232 multiple jobs, people who work at night and would be too
233 exhausted to [attend] a long daytime meeting, people who have
234 young children and cannot arrange child care, people who care
235 for other household members and cannot arrange for their care,
236 business owners and professionals who work with many different
237 people in town and are concerned about the loss of business if
238 they take a public position on local matters, and people who
239 work for government and may feel they are excluded due to the
240 Hatch Act [which prohibits political activity under certain
241 circumstances from certain federal employees while on duty].

242 Point number two, some more information: Across
243 Vermont, the use of Australian ballot increases as town size
244 increases. For towns comparable to Brattleboro, both in terms of
245 level of service and [population] size, only Burlington does not
246 use Australian ballot for its budget. Their City Council approves
247 the budget.

248 For towns of comparable size, only Brattleboro and
249 Middlebury use a Town Meeting. Brattleboro and Middlebury are
250 very different towns on a host of economic issues.

251 Just to give you a sense of the turnout: Australian ballot,
252 average turnout, regardless of town size, break it into five
253 segments, it exceeds 20%. The average turnout for floor votes or

254 Town Meeting participation, it's pretty good below 750 voters
255 (19%). But as you go up in town size, it drops 8%, 6%, 4%.

256 When you get to towns over 5,000 — there's only one of
257 them, actually, and that's Middlebury — floor turnout is 1%.

258 In the last three years, 31 towns have adopted Australian
259 ballot.

260 Three: talking about comparable towns and why we're
261 worse off. Brattleboro has a paid fire and police departments. I
262 chose towns that are roughly our size, are in the same size
263 category, and have those features, because they are pretty
264 significant cost drivers.

265 Based on the data available when I started my research, I
266 found that Brattleboro had the lowest median income, the highest
267 poverty rate, the second-highest portion of household spending
268 over 30%, households spending over 50% of their income on
269 housing, and the fourth-highest town tax rate and average
270 municipal tax rate per homestead, despite a house value 20%
271 lower than average in our comparables.

272 What we are doing is not working for us in economic
273 terms. If all of the other comparable towns, with the exception of
274 Burlington (and we don't necessarily want to follow their
275 example) are using Australian ballot for their budget, maybe that's
276 something we should seriously consider.

277 One of the points has been made repeatedly is that
278 Representative Town Meeting will provide more information to
279 the Selectboard if a budget is rejected.

280 Last year, we had multiple votes of what the budget
281 should be. Just a number, not what to cut. In the end, after many
282 hours of discussion, all we sent back to the Selectboard was *No*.
283 We didn't give them any information at all.

284 And finally, in terms of everything I've told you tonight,
285 you can look it up. You can find it.

286 There are lots of reasons you can get deprived your vote.
287 With the Australian ballot and absentee ballots and mail-in

288 ballots, it's almost impossible. You have to choose not to vote.

289 Nothing can stop you. And that's really important to me.

290 Finally, on the on the topic of the value of deliberation, a
291 review of multiple academic and scholarly studies of New
292 England Town Meetings shows that the authorities are unanimous
293 in agreeing to the rosy view of Town Meeting as the perfect
294 democracy is a romantic myth.

295 Town Meetings and RTM are too large for effective
296 deliberation. There's a whole bunch of peer-reviewed articles
297 about deliberative body size. Five to nine, you can do it alone; up
298 to 25, you need a little facilitation. You get any bigger, and you
299 need to have breakouts — multi-day, multi-session work to really
300 get to a good decision where everybody gets to be heard, where
301 everybody has a chance to contribute their intelligence, their
302 perspective, their insight.

303 And finally, they did find the Town Meetings are
304 dominated by the culture of the attendees with loudest voices.
305 They found that. It's in the research.

306 Open Town Meeting and Representative Town Meeting
307 have always been dominated by privileged, powerful, and
308 entitled citizens. If you can run for that office, if you know you
309 can make it, if you know you have the ability to speak in public
310 at length and be argumentative, if you can take that on, if you're
311 comfortable with it? Hey, you can run and you can vote.

312 If you're not willing to do all that, or able to do all that,
313 you're deprived of a vote, even with an open Town Meeting
314 format.

315 I think we deserve better. We deserve one person, one
316 vote, with all votes and all voices equal with Australian secret
317 ballot.

318 **Holhut:** And then there's the person who will have to
319 deal with whatever you, the voters, decide.

320 **David Gartenstein, town moderator:** This is a really
321 important topic for us to be discussing — how our government is
322 going to function. And I want to encourage everybody who's got

323 a view about this not just to attend and not just to think about it,
324 but also to consider sharing your views with others, to write
325 letters to the paper in the hopes that everybody's views will be
326 articulated and as widely available as possible.

327 So I'm town moderator. I was on Selectboard from 2011
328 to 2017. I've served in a series of other positions. I was on the
329 Charter Revision Commission for the first couple of years and
330 there when we started talking about potential changes to how the
331 town government would function.

332 I've always been in favor of open Town Meeting. I first
333 ran for Town Meeting representative in, like, 1985 or 1986, and I
334 wasn't elected that first time.

335 And I have never, ever understood in the 40 years since
336 why it is that people who live in Brattleboro should not all be
337 allowed to attend Town Meeting if they're interested in being
338 involved.

339 That right there is the core of the reason why I'm in favor
340 of open Town Meeting, just like all the other towns in Vermont,
341 where [voters who live in] town come and [participate]. They're
342 qualified because the Town Clerk makes sure that they live there,
343 and then they get to participate.

344 Ultimately, that is something that a number of people
345 have embraced, and it's now on the ballot as an alternative to
346 Australian ballot.

347 After the [second municipal] public hearing [on the
348 ballot questions] I had a conversation with somebody about
349 public engagement in town government. I was asked if I thought
350 the involvement that people are having now in this discussion
351 might lead to an increase in citizen engagement in town
352 government. It made me think about this question that we're
353 going to be voting on on March 3 differently.

354 Probably at any given time, we have 50 or 100 people
355 who participate in Brattleboro town government. You've got five
356 Selectboard members who are involved pretty much every day,
357 certainly a couple, three, four days a week, in dealing with the

358 business of the town. You've got a whole series of other people
359 who volunteer to engage in various [boards and committees]:
360 Planning Commission, Charter Revision Commission, Zoning
361 Board, Development Review Board, Parks and Rec Board. I
362 would guess it's between 50 and 100 people who participate and
363 help to run the government, and 150 people who are employed
364 by the town.

365 The difference for me between Australian ballot and
366 Town Meeting really goes to the question of the engagement level
367 in town government.

368 You get a group of people who spend significant amount
369 of time to prepare, to review, to really understand the business of
370 town government. The level of discussion at Town Meeting is very
371 detailed. It requires people to take the time to study and
372 understand, at a fine level, how the government is functioning.

373 I've moderated this meeting now [since 2022].
374 Everybody who wants to speak gets a chance. People change
375 their minds. People engage with one another respectfully.

376 People deliberate as a group. In fact, the deliberative
377 process is how we commit some of the most important decisions
378 in our community.

379 I was a prosecutor for 21 years. Guilt or innocence is
380 decided through a deliberative process with a jury of 12. [A
381 similar process takes place at Town Meeting], which is also how
382 those really important decisions are made, with people starting
383 with views on what they heard and saw, thinking about what
384 their neighbors have to say, and then together, deliberating and
385 making a decision.

386 It is a smaller group of people than would be voting at
387 Australian ballot. You're going to have 150 to 200 people who are
388 deeply involved. Some of them will overlap with the people who
389 are already involved in town government. But you've got people
390 deeply involved and working on these issues.

391 I'm not going to say that there's no issue to be discussed,
392 right? Because there's a debate to be had about Australian ballot
393 versus Town Meeting, particularly in a town this size.

394 But what you get with Australian ballot is the opportunity
395 to vote up or down on the budget number by paper ballot. And
396 you're not going to have the same level of depth, the same level
397 of commitment and involvement and discussion about those core
398 issues.

399 So you've got much more surface-level engagement by
400 many more people. And that's a fundamental question that has to
401 be decided here. Do you want a narrower group of people who
402 are way more involved and spending way more time to
403 understand, or are we going to have participation from a way
404 broader swath of people?

405 Let's not forget: Usually at March elections, you get
406 1,800 to 2,000 people voting. That means that 80% of the people
407 in town are not voting at March elections and are self-excluded
408 from the process. They don't participate.

409 So you're going to have about 20% of the population
410 with a much more surface-level engagement, but then, who
411 would attend Town Meeting? That is the fundamental question
412 that has to be decided here.

413 I hope everybody will think about those questions and
414 vote what you think is best. Thank you.

415 Questions, answers, and

416 comments

417 **Craig Miskovich, RTM member (District 7):** I rise to
418 argue against Andy Davis and David Gartenstein at my significant
419 peril, but I will do my best — and thank you both for the
420 incredible work that you do.

421 I think that people who can barely get themselves to the
422 Legion to vote should be allowed to participate in our
423 democracy, too. I don't think we should have an elite group that

424 gets to make those decisions, even though they are better read
425 and more informed.

426 My concern about Representative Town Meeting — and
427 Andy, I'll have you know, kind-hearted people can debate this
428 question — is that I don't think it is representative.

429 Eighty-five percent of the elections in representative town
430 meeting are uncontested. Representative Town Meeting members
431 are volunteers, and that's fine, but we don't leave our democracy
432 to volunteers, and we're the only town in the state of Vermont
433 that doesn't have a direct participation in Town Meeting, either
434 through Australian ballot or through an open Town Meeting.

435 And if Representative Town Meeting was the Town
436 Meeting that David Gartenstein entered into 40 years ago when
437 David Gartenstein didn't get elected, I would be more supportive
438 of Representative Town Meeting. I have less quibble with the
439 open Town Meeting.

440 What I would recommend is that to maximize the
441 number of people who vote, have an Australian ballot, and give
442 everybody the opportunity for that civic discussion. Like many
443 communities, have a public forum [before the vote]. Thank you.

444 **Millicent Cooley, RTM member (District 9):** I'm on the
445 RTM Finance Committee.

446 We Finance Committee members are appointed every
447 year at RTM. Our role is to analyze, provide an independent
448 point of view, and help voters in the public to understand what's
449 going on with the budget.

450 The budget's now up to \$27 million, the budget
451 documents are really complex, and we spend many hours and
452 weeks preparing. So what would happen if RTM is rescinded?
453 How is this going to function?

454 **O'Connor:** The Charter Revision Commission actually
455 looked at this question. The Finance Committee is in the town
456 charter as a Representative Town Meeting committee. Speaking
457 right now as the charter revision commission chair, the
458 commission's recommendation — in our draft charter that you

459 folks will see, hopefully later this year — is that the Finance
460 Committee actually be elected by the people of the town, just as
461 the Selectboard is, because the committee began as a RTM
462 committee to advise the people of this community. That’s the
463 spirit in which it was formed decades ago in the first place.

464 Obviously, there are town committees that are appointed
465 by the Selectboard. So there is also that option: the Selectboard
466 could say, “Hey, no, we want to appoint the Finance Committee.”

467 But again, that’s a hypothetical, because that will have
468 to be worked out.

469 **Audience question via livestream:** If the open Town
470 Meeting question passes, would the meeting always be scheduled
471 on Town Meeting Day [the first Tuesday in March], or could there
472 be some flexibility in the schedule, making it on a day where
473 more people might find [themselves] available?

474 **O’Connor:** Whether it’s an open Town Meeting or a
475 Representative Town Meeting, it can be scheduled when we want
476 to, so would not have to be on that Tuesday. So it could [for
477 instance] be scheduled on a Saturday. So no one has to worry
478 about that.

479 And for full transparency, the Charter Revision
480 Commission’s version of the charter at the current time has open
481 Town Meeting. That’s a conversation we’ve had with the town
482 attorney.

483 **Spoon Agave, RTM member (District 8):** There were so
484 many questions we need about 12 forums like this.

485 I have studied democracy all my life. To say that one
486 person, one vote is democracy is like saying that a motor is a car.
487 One person, one vote is one of a list of necessary elements for a
488 democracy.

489 An informed voter is another requirement.

490 Controlling the agenda is another requirement. If the
491 people cannot talk about what they want to talk about, they have
492 no control, they have no power.

493 Another aspect is inclusiveness — that as many people
494 as possible in a society should vote. We do exclude some people,
495 even now; we used to exclude a lot more.

496 One question, however. Mr. Franks spends some time
497 talking about the poor economy of this town and says that for that
498 reason, we need to change the form of our government, implying
499 that if we change the form of our government, our economy will
500 improve. Mr. Franks, would you explain why?

501 **Franks:** I believe I said that other towns are doing it.
502 They look better. Shouldn't we try it? There is no guarantee our
503 economy will improve.

504 But I was interviewed today by somebody who was
505 asking: "So if we have Australian ballot and the budget keeps
506 going up, will you be okay with that?" My answer was: "Of
507 course." If all the people of the town vote for it, that's what we've
508 decided to do. That's how we've decided to invest our resources.

509 So I did not imply or state even that the economy will get
510 better. I listed facts, and I asked a question.

511 **Davis:** Just a quick response to Spoon Agave. I just
512 wanted to highlight one thing that you said is that democracy is a
513 multifaceted machinery. I think the other night I said that all
514 democracies should have a sign on them that says "Under
515 Construction." Democracy is a complicated, interactive way of
516 self government.

517 The interaction between Town Meeting and the
518 Selectboard is something I've highlighted before.

519 The Selectboard is our primary legislative body by state
520 law. When the Selectboard presents a budget, they work with the
521 town management and they put that forward. And all of those
522 hearings are broadcast, they're all open meetings, all of the votes
523 are recorded, there is complete transparency in that process.

524 And at the same time, we vote for all five of our
525 members of the Selectboard — a good number for group
526 decision-making — by Australian ballot.

527 So to say that having Town Meeting denies the role of
528 Australian ballot in our town is not true. We have both. And they
529 work together.

530 The Finance Committee is another view of the financial
531 situation in town, and it would definitely need to be rethought to
532 have that same dynamic relationship with the Selectboard.

533 **Chris Chapman, RTM member (District 9):** I'm a native
534 of Brattleboro, but I've lived here consistently only since 1991,
535 when I moved back here with my family. I have been a town
536 meeting rep for — like Tom and like Andy — years. I can't count
537 how many years.

538 I want to provide some wider context to the issues in
539 front of us, and that is the issue of low voter turnout. I think
540 there's an assumption being made that if we change, there
541 actually will be more people turning out to engage in the debates
542 and the votes.

543 I am not confident that that argument or that assertion is
544 valid.

545 Compared to all the state and federal elections we go
546 through, [turnout] for the town vote that we have in March is
547 really poor. It's something that makes the system that we have a
548 target for criticism. In fact, we have a voter engine, like a gasoline
549 engine, that is fueled inadequately with the octane that it needs
550 to move forward.

551 Will the voter participation improve with Australian
552 ballot or in open Town Meeting? Won't there be, if I'm correct in
553 my suspicion that we won't have good turnout, that we will
554 basically have a similar outcome created by the better informed
555 people who actually turn out to vote? Will we take the entire
556 community's best interests to heart in every vote?

557 Or are we going to be smothered by [participants] who
558 will come in with one objective on one matter? [You'll recall the]
559 last Special Representative Town Meeting about security
560 downtown.

561 Further, this is not a great time in our country. We are a
562 divided society that elected a president with, really, an
563 inadequate turnout of voters, causing the election of someone
564 who many of us think is a madman. If you think about it, there's
565 just not enough people participating.

566 So I want to just point out to these people whom I
567 respect, one and all, and to you who turned out tonight — a very
568 small minority of our town — that I think our energy really needs
569 to be spent on getting the voters out, making more room in the
570 newspapers for the commentary that's needed, because
571 newspapers are an extremely important source of democratic
572 activity.

573 And so with that said, I want to thank you for listening as
574 courteously as you have and worry with me about this particular
575 issue, because it can drastically affect how we live.

576 **Franks:** I have very much tried to tell you things that are
577 either data based or very hard to refute. I mean, if you've got a
578 broken leg and you're in the hospital, you're not going to get to a
579 meeting.

580 I am going to take Chris's comments as the opportunity
581 to speculate, which I try not to do in public, but for this case, I
582 shall.

583 In response to your question, I would speculate that part
584 of the issue with our low turnout is that for most voters, there's no
585 reason to [participate]. RTM and the Selectboard make the
586 decisions. The only decisions voters get to make right now in
587 Brattleboro is to vote for those folks.

588 So maybe if we have Australian ballot and people think
589 their vote matters — as opposed to their being excluded from
590 voting — our turnout will go up. Purely speculative. Thank you.

591 **Timothy Belknap, RTM member (District 9):** This vote
592 comes down to a single unavoidable question: Do we believe in
593 broad participation, or do we believe in gatekeeping?

594 Open Town Meeting and Representative Town meeting
595 were designed for a different time. Today, they exclude more

596 residents than they empower. Long meetings, public pressure,
597 and limited access don't strengthen democracy, they restrict it.

598 We're told that some people are more informed and
599 therefore better suited to decide for everyone else. And I'm
600 thinking about my neighbor at home, who actually watches all of
601 these Selectboard meetings, and she does not have a vote.

602 So we hear warnings about social media misinformation
603 paired with the clear implication that RTM members are
604 thoughtful and rational, while the broader public is not. That's
605 elitism, plain and simple.

606 Brattleboro residents are capable, informed, and fully
607 able to decide what is best for their own lives and their own
608 community. Democracy does not improve by shrinking who gets
609 to vote.

610 We're also told that RTM or OTM produce better
611 deliberation, but RTM cannot amend the budget, that it's an up or
612 down vote. In 2025, after hours of debate, the only guidance
613 produced was to reduce the budget. That's not deliberation, it's
614 just pure noise.

615 We're told that RTM represents the community, but in
616 May 2025, absences and abstentions meant nearly 25% of the
617 population did not get a voice [by representation]. Those
618 members have valid reasons for being absent or choosing not to
619 vote publicly, and those reasons were respected.

620 The question is obvious: Why is that same flexibility and
621 privacy denied to everyone else, all of the voters in town?

622 The Australian ballot solves this — cleanly, fairly, and
623 completely. It's private, it's accessible, it's familiar. It allows
624 people to vote without intimidation, without sacrificing an entire
625 day, and without performing democracy in public.

626 Seniors, people with disabilities, working parents, hourly
627 workers and non-English-as-first-language speakers all gain an
628 equal voice.

629 When residents understood this was simply a normal
630 vote, one they could actually participate in, they signed our
631 petition eagerly.

632 **Gartenstein:** I'd like to respond to some of the criticisms
633 of the Town Meeting forms of government that I've heard.

634 It is said that town meeting is controlled by the
635 privileged, the powerful, the entitled, and the elite. Town Meeting
636 is constituted of you and me and other people in the town.
637 Anybody in the town can put in to run for Town Meeting
638 [representative]. There are open slots; people can attend. Open
639 Town Meeting, similarly, would be populated by people who live
640 in the town.

641 I'm not aware of anything elitist or power driven or
642 privilege driven or entitled about people who choose to take the
643 time to delve deeply into the town's business, because that's what
644 people do when they participate in Town Meeting. That's not
645 elitist, that's not privilege, that's not the powerful having more of
646 a voice.

647 There's also these concerns about Town Meeting being
648 financially irresponsible and not representative. In the absence of
649 town meeting, you'll have an Australian ballot article —
650 [something like] "Shall the town expend \$27,878,000 to pay for
651 services that are being provided?" — without any explanation.
652 There may be an informational meeting, but you're not going to
653 have 1,500 people or 1,800 people take the time to go.

654 That 1,500 or 1,800 people is the number who often vote
655 at the March elections.

656 I'd also note that it's Selectboard that develops our
657 budgets, and there's been concern expressed about the level of
658 human services funding that's been approved by Town Meeting
659 over the last years. The level of human services funding pales in
660 comparison to the budget increases that the Selectboard has
661 included year in and year out in our budgets. And last year, the
662 Representative Town Meeting rejected that budget increase as
663 being too significant.

664 **Nell Mayo, RTM member (District 8):** I ran over here
665 from working at the HatchSpace. I was listening online, and I got
666 a little agitated. And so I'm here to make the point that I've made
667 at the past couple Selectboard meetings.

668 What I view as a commonality amongst all sides here is
669 that ultimately, if we want to help people participate, and if we
670 want to see broader participation in town, it does require
671 individual sacrifice.

672 Time, ultimately, is a privilege and it ultimately is linked
673 to class. It can be given to involve your fellow voters to try to get
674 them to turn out, whether to Town Meeting, open or
675 Representative, or to the ballot.

676 But whether or not you're debating it at Town Meeting or
677 you're voting on it at the ballot, the burden of informed
678 participation, I believe, still should be held.

679 And you can call me elitist for saying that. I made
680 \$23,000 this year. You know, I choose to spend my time this way,
681 and I don't have a lot of the things that would limit my time the
682 way other people do. I don't have children, absolutely, but I do
683 work to individually support myself. So the vulnerable people
684 that are proposed as being represented here? I am, I think, one of
685 them.

686 So I do think we have an obligation as people voting in a
687 democracy to try to best inform ourselves. I believe that if you
688 have the ability to help other people in your community, you
689 have that obligation as well. If something comes easier to you,
690 you should do that.

691 I was talking to [former Selectboard member] Franz
692 [Reichsman] on the radio today, and I said, "I spend a lot of time
693 when I go out to the bars. I'm bothering people my age to talk to
694 them about things, about the budget, and I'm ruining the vibe."

695 [Audience laughs.] What?

696 One thing that I feel is a misunderstanding or a false
697 equivalency is saying that people who come to RTM or who
698 would come to open Town Meeting would be better informed. It's

699 not saying these people are more capable. It's saying these people
700 either made a choice to commit more time to this. And some of
701 that could be motivated by privilege — I don't disagree. That's
702 what really, you know, grinds my gears.

703 I would just say I really strongly disagree that people
704 advocating for Town Meeting are saying that they're in any sort of
705 different class than the rest of our town. And whether or not it's
706 coming to meeting or coming to the ballot, there's still going to
707 be unpaid labor that's going to have to come from someone in
708 the town to try to educate the rest of us who don't have the ability
709 to come to all the Selectboard meetings and keep up.

710 **Gary Stroud, RTM member (District 8), via livestream:**

711 I want to ask Tom Franks about the comment he made about having people who are intelligent to vote. What did he
712 mean by that? Does one need to be intelligent to vote on town issues?

713 **Franks:** I am not sure I said you need to be intelligent to
714 vote. In fact, I can't believe I did, because one of the things that
715 I'm proposing is that if you're a registered voter, you should be
716 able to vote — period. (I kind of hope you'd be of sound mind,
717 but that I don't think that excludes you if you're not, at least in
718 our society.)

719 **Matt Wojcik:** I work here at the library, but I'm not on
720 the clock, and I'm not speaking for the town or anything, but
721 myself.

722 I attended one Representative Town Meeting. It was the
723 Covid year when I was helping tech support for folks who were
724 attending remotely.

725 It was a long day. It was painful. I would say I don't think
726 there's anybody in this room here that doesn't think there aren't
727 problems with Representative Town Meeting.

728 I have really serious concerns about either of the
729 alternatives that are proposed. Look at the ballot questions that
730 are on this year's ballot, right? Look at how hard they were to
731 understand, how many people knew that if the first one passed,
732 we would have no Representative Town Meeting this year. I didn't

733 know that. I thought all this would have to go through the charter
734 process with the state.

735 That makes me even more concerned about this ballot
736 question. How often have you seen a ballot question that was
737 worded poorly, that was hard to understand, that you were poorly
738 informed about, and it's just there and you've got to vote on it or
739 abstain and not have a voice in the matter?

740 You said a lot of facts about ballot questions as an
741 alternative. I think there were a lot of implications in there. The
742 inference I thought I was being asked to draw was that
743 Representative Town Meeting led to Brattleboro's poor economic
744 condition compared to other towns. And I think that is a very,
745 very tenuous. I think the causality there is very, very difficult to
746 establish.

747 But yeah, the ballot questions being difficult to
748 understand, poorly written — there's no opportunity to have an
749 in-person conversation about them. I think the Selectboard and
750 the town staff who were at Representative Town Meeting heard
751 all of that debate. Now, whether they did anything with that,
752 what they heard, I can't say, but at least they heard it.

753 I think that there would be opportunities, probably, to
754 expand people's ability to participate, while keeping
755 Representative Town Meeting as well.

756 I do think there are some problems with open Town
757 Meeting. I do worry about people packing it for a particular issue,
758 people not showing up many years, and then a very small
759 number of people, potentially smaller than Representative Town
760 Meeting, would decide important issues.

761 I agree that Representative Town Meeting has issues. I am
762 more worried about what might happen with either of the other
763 alternatives than I am about Representative Town Meeting at the
764 moment.

765 Davis: There is one thing I would amplify, and I think it
766 builds on what you were saying, Matt. There is a tradition in this
767 town of the Selectboard listening to the debate at RTM.

768 RTM does not have the ability to say, “We want you to
769 take \$50,000 out of the sidewalk fund and move it over into the
770 swimming pool fund.” We cannot do that. But at the end of the
771 day, when there’s a long decision, the Selectboard, more often
772 than not, tries to match the decision, the discussion, the
773 deliberation that took place at Town Meeting. They’re not
774 required to, but they make that effort.

775 A quick couple of examples from last year.

776 One of the cuts was the sustainability coordinator.. It was
777 clear at Town Meeting that nobody wanted to see that position
778 go. The Selectboard found a way to fund that position, because
779 that position brings in more money than we pay the sustainability
780 coordinator.

781 We had a huge discussion in 2025 about the merits of
782 the Acceptable Behavior Ordinance, and that was a very difficult
783 decision. The Selectboard had put in a year working on that, and
784 that was voted down. It was rescinded. That’s one of our checks
785 on the Selectboard.

786 But then RTM fully funded the police department and
787 enthusiastically endorsed the work of the BRAT team.

788 So one thing that comes out of RTM is listening,
789 compromise, prioritization, balance.

790 **Fric Spruyt, RTM member (District 9):** I’ve been an RTM
791 member for many, many years. One year I missed was when we
792 voted in the sustainability director or coordinator, which has paid
793 off handsomely for the town and will for years to come. That was
794 one situation where RTM increased the budget in a way that was
795 wise and counter to what the Selectboard had proposed.

796 There are many times, in many details, when we have
797 reduced the budget over the years. I think on average, we’ve
798 reduced the budget every year a little bit. Some people have
799 pointed out that technically we’re just voting up and down on a
800 total number, but the fact is that practically, we are surgically
801 adjusting the budget.

802 What that the “one person, one vote” — which is very
803 catchy phrase — gives us is basically like giving your mechanic a
804 sledgehammer and no other tools. I think it will reduce
805 participation and increase the budget over the long haul.

806 I think there have been a lot of false statements and false
807 equivalencies, and use of statistics in ways that are questionable.

808 I have lived in many places with different forms of
809 government — mayor, something equivalent to a Selectboard,
810 open Town Meeting — and I have seen nothing like RTM in terms
811 of the quality of the process, the community building aspect of
812 the process, and the broader number of people who are intimate
813 with the functioning of the town. And I think overall, that gains us
814 more than we can really appreciate.

815 **Trish Twining, RTM member (District 9):** Under
816 Australian ballot, if an article is voted down, then what is the
817 process to revise that article?

818 **Gartenstein:** When I was on Selectboard, we had the
819 dubious distinction of having the budget approved at Town
820 Meeting and then rejected at Australian ballot. This was the first
821 time we put the police/fire money in the budget, and we were
822 back to square one.

823 We had an Australian ballot that had not particularly
824 explained the reason for the rejection of the budget, and we were
825 tasked with trying to come up with another budget to present to
826 another Town Meeting that hopefully would get approval and that
827 wouldn't get rejected in another Australian ballot.

828 But if budget is rejected at Australian ballot, current
829 process is that it goes back to Selectboard to propose a new
830 budget.

831 **O'Connor:** I want everybody to understand this when
832 they go into the ballot box or the polls. As I said, there are three
833 questions. There's the RTM question, which is not a charter
834 change. The Australian ballot question and the open town
835 meeting question are charter changes.

836 But they're not an either/or. You're going to vote yes or no
837 on Australian ballot and you're going to vote yes or no on open
838 Town Meeting. Which means Australian ballot can pass, which
839 means open Town Meeting can pass.

840 [That means] there's a possibility that we could be
841 sending to the Legislature two charter changes that are
842 diametrically opposed to each other.

843 The legislature is just going to take what we send them,
844 and they may get two charter change votes that say two opposite
845 things. Now, what happens when it gets up there? They may look
846 at us and say, "You guys just sent us two things that are
847 diametrically opposed. We're sending it back." Or they may
848 figure out their own solution and say, "We're going to set it up for
849 you."

850 The charter commission is still in existence, and we still
851 have our charter process open. So there is an opportunity through
852 the charter revision process to do something, but I'm speaking
853 about how we could end up on March 3. I know it's really
854 confusing.

855 If the town votes to keep Representative Town Meeting,
856 we keep it, and it doesn't matter what the votes are on the open
857 Town Meeting question and the Australian ballot question, even if
858 the town overwhelmingly goes, "Yeah, we want open Town
859 Meeting" or "Yeah, we want Australian ballot."

860 If we keep Representative Town Meeting, those votes do
861 not count.

862 **Gemma Seymour, RTM member (District 8):** It's my
863 opinion that RTM works far better than the alternatives. But of
864 course, no position on this issue is really anything that anyone
865 can substantiate with direct evidence, since three systems can't
866 coexist at the same time in the same place.

867 I predict that if RTM is rescinded, it will be a detriment to
868 the town. If my prediction turns out to not be accurate, then I
869 predict that the reason for that will be because of my hard work
870 and the hard work of people like me, who will be doing

871 everything we possibly can to ensure better government,
872 regardless of its form.

873 That being said, when it comes to legal interpretation, I
874 am what is known as a textualist, or an original meaning
875 originalist. I believe the law is what the text of the law means at
876 the time of its passage to the people it binds, not whatever the
877 legislatures who passed the law intended its effect to be, or what
878 we might like it to mean.

879 I therefore dispute the idea that should RTM be voted
880 down, that this would take immediate effect, because that is not
881 what either the Brattleboro charter or the Vermont statutes say.
882 Because it does constitute charter change, it must be approved by the Legislature.

883 **Holhut:** OK, we covered an awful lot of ground tonight.
884 So now comes to the important part, which is you, your part:
885 voting.

886 Early election ballots are now available at the town
887 clerk's office. And in case you've forgotten, Election Day is
888 Tuesday, March 3 — the first Tuesday in March — from 7 a.m. to
889 7 p.m. at the American Legion Post 5 on 32 Linden St. The
890 election results will be posted on brattleboro.gov/elections.

891 If you're not registered to vote, or if you want to check
892 your status as a voter, you can visit the Vermont voter portal at
893 vote.vermont.gov/public/dashboard, or if you'd like to do it in
894 person, just stop by the Town Clerk's Office. They're open from
895 8:30 a.m. to noon and from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through
896 Friday. And you can register to vote there, as I understand that the
897 the early voting can your ballots can be cast until the end of the
898 day on Monday, March 2.

899 So all we can say is thank you for participating tonight.

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

####BEGIN BIO/COATTAIL####

900 For more than six decades, Brattleboro has been the only
901 town in Vermont that governs itself with Representative Town

902 Meeting, where all town voters elect representatives to participate
903 in what otherwise would be a traditional New England Town
904 Meeting.

905 In 2025, voters successfully petitioned the town to put
906 the question of governance to a full Australian ballot vote. The
907 Selectboard added a question of its own to create a trifecta of
908 ballot questions, staging our own twisted municipal Monty Hall
909 problem.

910 This is a big deal, and we're using our editorial
911 prerogative to devote a good deal of this week's newspaper to
912 making sure voters in our county's largest town have a good idea
913 about their choices and their consequences.

914 The combination of results could create unintended
915 consequences. With positive outcomes to either or both of two
916 questions requiring a change to the town charter, the state
917 Legislature would have to step in, bringing in a years-long
918 timetable and no guarantees of the result.

919 With the help of Brooks Memorial Library and BCTV, *The*
920 *Commons* produced a Voices Live! panel to explore the three
921 questions, weigh some pros and cons, and discuss the process.

922 "Our hope tonight is to have a little bit different format
923 than you've had through the hearings that have been incredibly
924 informative over the last couple of weeks," said Trish Twining,
925 who heads the development efforts for Vermont Independent
926 Media, the nonprofit that publishes this newspaper.

927 Twining, also a Representative Town Meeting member,
928 has been advocating for a deep dive into this topic. We deeply
929 appreciate her persistence in wanting us to play a stronger role in
930 civic education about such an consequential decision for
931 Brattleboro voters this year.

932 We assembled people who could speak to the questions:

933 • **Kate O'Connor**, chair of the Charter Revision
934 Commission.

935 • **Andy Davis**, an advocate for Representative Town
936 Meeting in its current form.

937 • **Tom Franks**, an advocate for the Australian ballot who
938 helped organize the petition drive to let voters decide the matter.

939 • **David Gartenstein**, Brattleboro town moderator and
940 former Selectboard member, a proponent of open Town Meeting.

941 Moderating the forum was Deputy Editor Randolph T.

942 Holhut.

943 Next week's paper marks the last opportunity for
944 contributions of letters and opinions about the choices facing
945 voters this March. Deadline for consideration is Friday, Feb. 20
946 for the Feb. 25 issue. Please send contributions to

947 voices@commonsnews.org.

948 As is our custom, interviews in *The Commons* are edited
949 gently for clarity, readability, and space, though we have
950 attempted to be unflinching in that regard. Words not spoken by
951 interview subjects appear in brackets, as do editorial
952 clarifications.

953 Thank you to all the forum participants — panelists and
954 audience, and our friends at the library and BCTV — for making
955 this forum provocative, yet civil.

####END BIO/COATTAIL####

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