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**Notes from editor (not for publication):**



HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 A sledgehammer, not a scalpel

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

2 Without a Town Meeting, there is little recourse to  
3 reverse a Selectboard decision and no avenue for publicly  
4 debating it

####END SUBHED####

5 TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

6 A TOWN MEETING — be it open (OTM) or representative  
7 (RTM) — provides a critical opportunity for citizens to check the  
8 Selectboard.

9 Over the past several years, the Selectboard has made  
10 decisions that have had a tremendous effect on our community  
11 — adopting the Downtown Safety Action Plan, creating a town

12 emergency medical service, eliminating funding for human  
13 services, choosing a new arrangement for solid waste collection,  
14 adopting a community conduct ordinance, and allocating federal  
15 Covid funds. Not to mention, in the last two years, substantial  
16 increases in spending and related tax increases.

17         You may like or dislike some or all of these decisions but,  
18 without a Town Meeting, there is little recourse to reverse a  
19 Selectboard decision and no avenue for publicly debating it.

20         With a Town Meeting — and I am comfortable with  
21 either form, open or representative — the budget that  
22 encapsulates many of the decisions noted above is subject to a  
23 discussion by participants. A discussion in which they can  
24 express support or reservations about the budget as a whole or  
25 specific lines and one in which they can ask questions.

26         Moreover, and this is vital, a Town Meeting can propose,  
27 discuss, and vote on amendments to raise or lower the proposed  
28 budget; it also votes to approve or disapprove other articles, all of  
29 which can be amended.

30         Although it is true that the intended effect behind a  
31 budget amendment is not binding on the Selectboard, that body  
32 has traditionally respected the vote of the Town Meeting.

33         Just because it can amend the budget — upwards or  
34 downwards — it is not the case that it willy nilly tries to rewrite  
35 the entire budget.

36         Instead, there have been infrequent and strategic  
37 amendments, like adding money to push the skatepark over the  
38 goal line, boosting the Global Warming Solutions Fund, and  
39 financing the hiring of three additional firefighters, to mention a  
40 few.

41         In those instances, and others, there was robust debate  
42 and, I believe, Representative Town Meeting members made  
43 considered decisions.

44         \* \* \*

45 "ONE PERSON, ONE VOTE" is a superficially simple appeal.  
46 Even so, an Australian ballot, yes or no, is a blunt instrument in  
47 community governance. A sledgehammer, not a scalpel.

48 It limits citizen control, allowing voters only a restricted  
49 menu. Either eat whatever the Selectboard serves up or, in  
50 rejecting the budget, go hungry. There is no opportunity to offer  
51 sensible amendments or to find compromises when there are  
52 contending preferences.

53 If the budget or another article is rejected by Australian  
54 ballot, there is no clear guidance for the Selectboard as to how to  
55 move forward. In the one case in 2025, when RTM rejected the  
56 original budget article, there was enough discussion on the floor  
57 to allow the Selectboard to develop a revised budget that was  
58 subsequently passed by RTM, 110–4.

59 Even when there is an affirmative Australian ballot vote,  
60 the absence of discussion makes it difficult to assess whether  
61 there is grudging or enthusiastic support for Selectboard  
62 proposals. Moreover, a Town Meeting requires Selectboard  
63 members to explain and justify their decisions, enhancing  
64 accountability to the citizens.

65 \* \* \*

66 I HAVE SERVED as an RTM member, and as a member (and  
67 periodically chair) of RTM's Finance Committee. I will vote  
68 against rescinding RTM.

69 Allowing for the possibility that RTM may be rescinded, I  
70 will happily vote in favor of OTM with the firm conviction that it  
71 will engage the citizenry in a thoughtful and effective  
72 consideration of town affairs and will provide a useful and  
73 necessary check on the power of the Selectboard.

74 (The Charter Review Commission, after extensive and  
75 imaginative study, identified a number of reforms that will make a  
76 Town Meeting move more quickly and be more productive.)

77 Because an Australian ballot undercuts public debate,  
78 removes any chance to amend articles, and makes it impossible

79 for citizens to work towards compromises that promote  
80 community consensus, I will vote no on that question.

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

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

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