

Remote Participation in Plymouth Town Meeting

Steve Triffletti, Moderator

In March 2020, responding to the Covid Pandemic, Massachusetts Governor Baker issued emergency orders authorizing the use of remote participation in Representative Town Meetings. The Massachusetts Legislature formalized this authorization in June 2021. To ensure that Plymouth could continue using this option beyond the emergency period, we pursued a home rule petition, which was approved in December 2022.

The Members of a Representative Town Meeting are elected. Their votes are recorded and made public in real time.

To enable hybrid access to our Representative Town Meeting – allowing some Members to participate remotely – we use Zoom for watching, listening, and speaking, and the [VVoter](#) web service from Options Technology Interactive (OTI) for voting. Each remote Town Meeting Member uses an internet-connected smartphone, tablet, or computer. Prior to the pandemic, we used OTI's handheld devices for wireless electronic voting on-premises; the shift to remote participation required advance training for Town Meeting Members, and real-time assistance from a dedicated Help Desk during each session. Initially, switching manually between Zoom and VVoter posed challenges for some remote Town Meeting Members. A fully integrated approach, as Wayland's Electronic Voting Subcommittee has been advocating, would eliminate this issue – an improvement from which we would benefit if they succeed in obtaining legislative approval.

Remote participation has allowed Town Meeting Members who were recovering from illness, those who are immunocompromised, or anyone facing unexpected scheduling conflicts to fully engage in our Town Meeting rather than ask colleagues to speak on their behalf, and continues to provide flexibility. Deliberation is vigorous and meaningful, with the only limitation cited by remote Town Meeting Members being their inability to “read the room.” Voting is crisp and accurate. Importantly, remote participation has significantly increased attendance by both Town Meeting Members and supporting staff; as a result, necessary information is always available during deliberation.

Extending the same authorization to towns that hold Open Town Meetings to permit remote participation would significantly reduce the disenfranchisement of registered voters with small children, disabilities, care-giving responsibilities, and work conflicts. It would also expand the market for software that supports hybrid Town Meetings – both Representative and Open – which in turn could attract more competition to produce low-cost, easy-to-use services.