

PRESENTING AND SPEAKING AT TOWN MEETING

Three words describe how to make an effective presentation, including one at town meeting: preparation, preparation, preparation! With attention to the details, you will increase your chance of success and help your neighbors make informed choices.

Clear and effective presentations also make town meeting more successful and enjoyable for all. Following is a list of guidelines to follow when presenting at an Ipswich town meeting. These are based on past presentations, some but not all of which were successful, as well as practices taken from similar guidelines used by Moderators in other Massachusetts towns.

These guidelines are written for a first-time speaker, but even experienced presenters will find some food for thought. A few items go beyond “suggestions” and are requirements. To begin, it is helpful to understand how town meeting is structured, especially the difference between an Article and a Motion

I. Before the Meeting: Articles and Motions

The warrant is the agenda for any town meeting. It consists of a series of Articles, each setting forth some general subject matter. For example:

Article 18: To see if the Town will vote to raise and appropriate, transfer from available funds, or borrow pursuant to any applicable statute, the sum of thirty thousand dollars (\$30,000), or such other amount as the Town may vote, to purchase or lease a vehicle and related equipment for the Police Department, or to take any other action thereon.

The purpose of this Article is generally to inform voters of the action to be considered. Note that it does *not* specify which of the methods of raising funds will be used, whether the acquisition will be by purchase or lease, or even the type of vehicle. Although the Article suggests that \$30,000 will be the price, the amount of could change at the meeting if someone were to suggest an increase (or decrease). Any action at the meeting would be by motion, not the Article itself. That is, Articles are *not* self-starters; someone must make a motion under the Article. The first motion under an Article is called the “main motion.”

II. Preparations for the Meeting

If you are going to be the lead speaker making the main motion under an Article, you must consult with the Moderator well in advance of the meeting. If you want to use graphics, you must submit them to the Moderator a week before the meeting starts. Also, our by-law requires that the main motion be submitted to the Moderator and Clerk at least three business-days before the meeting starts (*e.g.*, by Thursday for a Tuesday meeting).

In your presentation, be sure you know and understand the strongest arguments against your proposal, so that you can address them as they come up – either in debate or in questions from your neighbors. Rehearse your material until you are comfortable. Pitch it to a group of friends or co-workers, standing up, and ask them to pose pointed questions to you. If you cannot get a practice audience, make the presentation to the bathroom mirror – you will be thankful you did as it will improve the presentation.

III. Time for Your Article at the Meeting

When your article comes up, the Moderator will say something like "Article 18 relates to the acquisition of a new vehicle for the Police Department" and recognize you as the one to make the main motion. To save time, come to the front of the auditorium right before the Moderator gets to your Article, so that you can begin speaking as soon as the Moderator recognizes you. When recognized you rise, approach the microphone, and after giving your name and address, you make your motion.

In making the motion, you have choices: If the motion is short, just go ahead and read it verbatim when called upon by the Moderator. If the motion is long, such as a lengthy zoning measure, then it is enough to say, as the main motion, "I move that the town approved Article 18 as set forth in the warrant for this town meeting." If your motion is somewhere in-between, you can choose either approach. Because you will have met, this is something you will have worked out with the Moderator well in advance of the meeting.

After making the motion, pause. The Moderator will ask for a second and the Moderator and Clerk will then verify that all is in order. The Moderator will then offer you an opportunity to make your argument to the meeting and then open the matter for general discussion.

IV. Your Presentation

A brief, well-prepared presentation is much more effective than a rambling dissertation. Unless you have asked for and received permission from the Moderator to go beyond the time limit for presentations, you will have about five minutes to present. If the topic is especially complex and you feel that you will be unable to do it justice in five minutes, ask for more time when you meet with the Moderator before the meeting. Be forewarned, however, that the Moderator's job includes making sure presentations are clear and concise, and will allow extra time only sparingly.

Naturally, you know more about your subject than you could possibly cover in five minutes. You are not there to tell people everything you know; just hit the high points, the details will come out in the debate. The voters can and will make up their minds on the strength

of far less than that, and it can actually be counterproductive to go into too much detail. Your original message might get lost and with too much detail the voters will likely find one thing or another that they don't understand or that troubles them. Don't forget, you may be able to speak a second time after you have heard some discussion; this would give you a chance to focus your comments and address whatever may have come up as troublesome.

Some people can memorize a speech; that can be effective, but is *not* required. Others write out their speech word-for-word and read it verbatim. The Moderator *strongly* discourages reading verbatim; it is very hard for anyone to read a speech and have it sound genuine, even though you mean every single word. For most of us, the following combination works best.

- A. Know exactly what you are going to say for your opening two or three sentences, rehearse them until you can say them easily, and have them written out and handy. Begin your message positively, clearly, and emphatically.
- B. Work from an outline of key phrases. Speak conversationally and explain your ideas just as you would to a group of friends. (This is, after all, is what you are doing; we are your neighbors.)
- C. Know exactly the words with which you are going to end your speech; rehearse them, and have them available. Finish with a good summary and a friendly but clear request for support.

People tend to remember most what you say first and last, so be sure you get the heart of your message into your opening statement and your conclusion. When you are done, say "Thank you" and step back from the microphone to indicate to the Moderator that you have finished.

V. Discussion, Questions, and Answers

In business meetings, presenters typically complete their remarks, ask for questions, and proceed to call on people. This is not how it works at town meetings. The Moderator recognizes all speakers and after your presentation will manage the debate and questioning.

Any questions that citizens may have will be directed to the Moderator, not to you. The Moderator has discretion in deciding whether and when to ask you to respond to a question from the floor. In general, a Moderator tries to ensure that the members understand the facts so as to make informed decisions. That may or may not include having you answer questions, as they may be argumentative or irrelevant.

Town meeting is not a court of law, and you are not under cross-examination. If the Moderator believes the question should be answered, he will ask you to speak to it. If someone else on your team is better suited to answer the question, ask that person to respond. If you need more time to think, or need to consult a reference or talk to a colleague, by all means do so. You might find that you simply say "I need a moment to think about that." If you don't know the answer to a question, say "I don't know," with or without a brief explanation as to why. While some may be disappointed, your admitting that you don't know is far better than guessing at the answer.

Finally, in terms of responding to issues and arguments, the Moderator will generally only allow you to speak one more time, on your own initiative, until others who have not spoken on the question have had an opportunity to speak. Therefore, after your initial presentation you should not count on speaking more than once. Conclude your presentation with a brief summary statement and request for support. Don't wait too long, though, because if someone moves to close debate and the motion is accepted and passes, that will end all discussions even though you may not have had a chance to speak a second time.

Good luck!

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