

# **A Guide to Town Meetings for Sprague Residents**

## **Overview**

The purest form of democratic governing is practiced in a Town Meeting. In use for over 300 years and still today, it has proven to be a valuable means for many Connecticut taxpayers to voice their opinions and directly effect change in their communities. Here in this ancient American assembly, you can make your voice heard as you and your neighbors decide the course of the government closest to you.

## **Introduction**

Each town has a different way of running its Town Meeting, depending on its bylaws or charter. Sometimes the customs and traditions are written down; sometimes they are not. Below is a general outline of the Town Meeting Basics, some of the procedures may be used in one town and not another. This guide is not intended to be an all inclusive text, but a broad overview designed to encourage you to find out more and attend your own Town Meeting. If you have any questions regarding the specific procedures employed by your town, please contact the Town Clerk.

## **Questions and Answers about Town Meetings**

### **Town Meeting Basics**

#### **What is a Town Meeting?**

A Town Meeting is both an event and an entity. As an event, it is a gathering of a town's eligible voters, and is referred to as "the Town Meeting." As an entity, it is the legislative body for many towns in Connecticut, including Sprague, and is referred to simply as "Town Meeting." So you may say, "I went to the Town Meeting. Town Meeting approved the budget." Do cities have Town Meetings? No. A city's legislative body is called a city council or a board of aldermen. Citizens do not govern a city directly.

#### **What's the difference between cities and towns? Size?**

Municipalities decide whether to have a city or town form of government. Size is one factor in the decision. Towns with less than 12,000 inhabitants, such as Sprague, cannot adopt a city form of government.

#### **Do all towns have Town Meetings?**

Most but not all towns have Town Meetings. A few towns are governed by town councils. In sum, no cities have Town Meetings and most towns do have Town Meetings.

#### **What does Town Meeting decide?**

Town Meeting decides three major things:

- It sets the salaries for the elected officials.
- It votes to appropriate money to run the town.
- It votes on the town's local statutes, which are called ordinances.

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## **Open Town Meetings and Representative Town Meetings**

### **What's an open Town Meeting?**

Towns have two types of meetings—open, and representative. Sprague's form of Town meeting is an open Town Meeting. An open Town Meeting means that all of the town's voters may vote on all matters. Towns with fewer than 6,000 inhabitants such as Sprague must have an open Town Meeting. Towns with more than 6,000 inhabitants may adopt another form of Town Meeting, called a representative Town meeting, at their discretion.

### **What's a moderator?**

Generally, a moderator's job is to run the Town Meeting. Specifically, the moderator declares the outcome of all voice votes. Some towns have detailed by-laws governing Town Meeting procedure. Other towns leave a lot of discretion to the moderator.

Moderators in Sprague are usually elected at the specific meeting which they will be moderating. Usually, prior to the meeting, the Board of Selectmen will ask a resident with experience in moderating to accept a nomination from the floor. However, other nominations may be made from the floor; the person who receives the majority of votes becomes the moderator of the meeting.

### **What's a selectman?**

Selectmen are a town's executive officers. Voters elect them to the Board of Selectmen, which usually has three or five members. Sprague has three Selectmen. Selectmen are authorized to call a Town Meeting provided that they have posted a warrant. In small towns such as Sprague, the Board of Selectmen runs the town and supervises town workers. In larger towns, the Board of Selectmen picks and supervises a person, who, in turn, runs the town and supervises town workers. Depending on the town, that person has various authority, duties, and title. That person is known as the town manager, town administrator, executive secretary, or administrative secretary. Currently Sprague has a Charter Committee which is meeting to determine if in the future it would be more advantageous to change the executive structure of the Town's to a Town Manager form. Of governance

### **What does the town clerk do?**

At the Town Meeting, the clerk records all votes and takes minutes. Town clerks are elected in Sprague. In the event of all of the selectman/selectwomen resigning, the town clerk is authorized to call a town meeting.

### **What is a town counsel?**

The town counsel in Sprague is a private attorney who counts the town among his clients. The town counsel often helps prepare the warrant (the Town Meeting's agenda). During the Town Meeting, the town counsel answers legal questions that come up. He or she is appointed by the selectmen.

### **What are ex officio members?**

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Ex officio members of a representative Town Meeting are granted membership because of the office they hold. For example, a town's by-laws or ordinances might state that selectmen are ex officio members of the Planning and Zoning Commission. That means that selectmen do not have to run for election as PZC Members; they are already members because they have been elected to the office of selectmen.

## **What's a select committee?**

A select committee is assigned to investigate and report back to the Town Meeting on a certain subject, or to undertake a certain substantive task. Select committees are also called special committees.

## **What's a standing committee?**

A standing committee is a permanent committee. A town might have standing committees for the following areas: public works, planning and zoning, recreation, and personnel. The most important standing committee is the finance committee, which in Sprague is called the Board of Finance.

## **What does the Board of Finance do?**

The Board of Finance prepares the budget in the months before the annual Town Meeting starts. It also prepares financial articles (which are agenda items). Its recommendations are advisory. Members are elected to office by all residents in the municipal elections held every two years.

## **Annual and Special Town Meetings**

### **What's the difference between annual and special meetings?**

Each town must hold an annual Town Meeting. Additional Town Meetings are called special meetings. They may be called as many times during the year as necessary.

### **When are Town Meetings?**

Annual Town Meetings, unless otherwise provided by special law or charter, must be held in February, March, April or May. The Board of Selectman may delay the annual meeting, but it must be completed by June 30th.

### **How do I find out when the annual meeting will take place?**

Watch your local newspaper. Signs are posted around town and in and outside the Town Clerks' Office. A notice is posted in the Our Town newsletter which goes to every household in Sprague. Check the Town's website. And you may always call town hall, ask for the clerk's office, and ask when the annual meeting will take place.

### **How do I find out about special meetings?**

Special meetings, by their very nature, are not held at the same time every year. Watch your local newspaper and watch for signs posted around Town. The Sprague website will announce special meetings, and if you are signed up for e-Sprague, you will receive email notices of all meetings.

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## **Who calls special Town Meetings?**

Generally, the selectmen call special Town Meetings.

## **May voters call a special Town Meeting?**

Yes, voters may call a special Town Meeting. Two hundred registered voters or 20% of the total number of registered voters, whichever is less in number, may request a special Town Meeting. The special Town Meeting must be held no later than 45 days after the Board of Selectmen receive the request.

## **What's the procedure for voters calling a special Town Meeting?**

The requisite number of voters must sign a written request for a special Town Meeting. The format of the written request is flexible. Voters should include their addresses after their signatures.

Voters deliver the written request to the Board of Selectmen. The Board of Selectmen must then call a special meeting within 45 days.

## **May a special Town Meeting be called for more than one reason?**

Yes, a special Town Meeting may be called for more than one reason. For example, a special Town Meeting could be called to consider amending the zoning code and buying a new fire truck.

## **The Warrant**

### **What's a warrant?**

The warrant lists a meeting's time, place, and agenda. A warrant is also known as a warning. A Town Meeting's action is not valid unless the subject was listed on the warrant.

### **When is the warrant available?**

A warrant is available at least 7 days before an annual meeting, and at least 14 days before a special meeting.

### **How do I see the warrant?**

Warrants are posted in public places, published in the local newspaper, delivered to every residence, or a combination of all three. Towns with websites may publish their warrants on-line.

### **Who makes up the warrant?**

The selectmen, who "issue" it.

### **What are articles?**

Articles are items on the warrant. Appropriations for each town function or department may be in separate articles. Or one article on the warrant may propose appropriations for all necessary town expenses.

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## **May voters place articles on the warrant?**

Yes, voters may "insert" articles in the warrant. They have to do it before selectmen "close" the warrant.

To insert an article in the warrant for an annual Town Meeting, at least 10 registered voters of the town must sign a written request. The written request of registered voters for the insertion of subjects in town meeting warrants shall not be valid unless the required number of registered voters not only sign their names but also state their residence, with street and number, if any. Voters do not have to include their addresses after their signatures, but it is a good idea.

If you want a sample of an article to use to draft your article, go to town hall and ask for a copy of the annual report, or check on-line to see the annual report there. The annual report will have warrants from the previous year's Town Meeting, which you can use as samples. For further assistance, contact the town clerk.

Citizens may insert an article in the warrant for a special Town Meeting. Selectmen shall insert in the warrant for every special town meeting all subjects which shall be requested by 100 registered voters or 10% of the total number of voters, whichever is lesser.

## **How Town Meetings Operate**

### **What is the quorum for a Town Meeting?**

In an open Town Meeting, the minimum number of voters who may conduct business is established by the individual town's by-laws. The quorum in some towns is zero; if only a single citizen appears, the Town Meeting may start and conduct business.

### **Who may attend?**

Any member of the public may attend a Town Meeting.

### **Who may speak?**

All of a town's registered voters may speak in an open or representative Town Meeting. Non-voters may speak at the discretion of the moderator or Town Meeting.

### **Who may vote?**

In an open Town Meeting, the town's voters may vote.

### **Is the warrant the agenda?**

Yes, the warrant generally states the things to be voted on, but the moderator may interpret the articles liberally.

Usually, the Town Meeting considers the warrant's articles in order. However, the moderator or Town Meeting itself may change the order.

### **How do I know which article the Town Meeting is considering?**

The moderator summarizes each article or reads it entirely before starting debate.

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## How is the budget considered?

The selectmen or Board of Finance must print and distribute information regarding appropriations at or before the annual Town Meeting. At the Meeting, The moderator calls for discussion from the Board of Finance regarding the budget, then opens the floor to questions from the audience regarding specific line items, which representatives from each department or the Board of Finance are prepared to answer or discuss.

## Participating in Town Meetings

### How do I vote?

Voters in open Town Meeting vote by various methods.

*Voice vote.* Many Town Meeting votes are by voice. The moderator asks that all in favor (everyone voting "yes") say, "Yea" (which is pronounced "yay"). Then the moderator asks that all opposed (everyone voting "no") say, "Nay." The moderator listens and decides which side prevailed. Voters who are unfamiliar with the difference between "yea" and "nay" may find this reminder useful: "Yea" and "yes" both start with "y." "Nay" and "no" both start with "n."

*Show of hands.* The moderator asks that all in favor raise their hands. Then the moderator asks that all opposed raise their hands. The moderator looks at the number of hands in general and decides which side prevailed. Or hands are counted.

*Secret ballots.* When voters vote by secret ballot is determined by a town's by-laws. In some towns, the moderator can call for a secret ballot. In some towns, if a certain number of voters request it, a vote will be by secret ballot. In other towns, a vote will be by secret ballot if 25 % percent of the voters present and voting ask for it.

### Are there votes that cannot be taken by voice?

Yes, there are votes that cannot be taken by voice. Suppose that a town's by-laws require that 2/3 of the voters, not a simple majority, vote to approve the budget for it to pass. Unless the voice vote is unanimous in favor of the budget, the moderator will find it hard to determine if more than 2/3 of the voters said "yea." A vote requiring a super-majority (more than a simple majority) is usually decided by a vote other than voice vote.

What if I think that the moderator did not decide correctly a voice vote or an informal show of hands?

Stand immediately and say one of the following: "I doubt it," "I doubt the vote," or "I question it." If at least six other voters stand with you, the moderator must count votes more formally. The moderator must then verify the vote by polling the voters or by dividing the meeting or by the method provided for by the municipal by-laws.

### How do I speak at the meeting?

Raise your hand and wait for the moderator to acknowledge you. When the moderator acknowledges you, state your name and your address.

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Speak about the topic being discussed. Don't speak about a previous topic (unless there is a motion to rescind or reconsider).

Make your comments to the moderator, not to the Town Meeting or individual Town Meeting Members.

For example, do not say, "I have something to say to the Town Meeting," or "Mr. Smith, you said something as a Town Meeting Member that I want to respond to." Instead, say something like, "Mr. Moderator, these are my thoughts on this article."

You may attack a previous speaker's argument, but do not attack a previous speaker. For example, do not say, "The previous speaker is dead wrong." Instead, say something like, "I disagree with the argument we just heard."

Try to avoid referring to previous speakers by name. For example, try not to say, "I agree with Mr. Jones' argument." Instead, say something like, "I agree with the argument that we can afford this budget item."

Since you make your comments to the moderator, you may not directly debate or ask questions of a previous speaker. For example, do not say, "Mr. Johnson, you say that we should make another exception to the zoning law. I'm asking you: When do we draw the line and stop making exceptions?"

Instead, say something like, "Mr. Moderator, we have heard the argument that we should make just one more exception to the zoning law. But I say it's time to stop making exceptions."

## **Procedure and Motions**

### **Do I need to know "parliamentary" procedure to attend a Town Meeting?**

No, you do not need to know "parliamentary" procedure to attend a Town Meeting. The moderator will take care of it.

### **Are Town Meetings run according to Roberts' Rules of Order?**

In Sprague, yes they are.

### **Does the majority always rule?**

No, the majority does not always rule. Sometimes a super-majority (more than a simple majority) is needed for votes on some specific issues. For example, authorizing selectmen to purchase land requires a 2/3