

## Warrant deadline needs to be extended

There has been some comment on the unusually early date — January 11 (tomorrow!) — set by the Selectmen for the closing of the Warrant for this year's Annual Town Meeting. I don't know why they chose this date for a meeting that starts near the end of April, and it is ironic, as I've been complaining for years, both privately and publicly, that the more typical end-of-January date was much too early.

Whatever the motivation of the Selectmen, the appearance, and the reality, is that ordinary citizens are severely limited in their ability to submit ten-registered-voter articles, the very heart of the right of the people to directly petition their government in a form to which that government, the Town Meeting, is required to respond.

Historically, town elections took place on the first Saturday of March, and Town Meeting began on the third Monday. Thus, closing the warrant around the end of January provided about eight weeks for review of the articles before the meeting began discussing them. When elections were moved to the first Saturday in April, Town Meeting was moved to the fourth Monday (since the third Monday is Patriots Day). This meant that there were 12 weeks for review — a longer period of time, according to a survey I took a few years ago, than any town in the Commonwealth except Stoughton.

The argument I've used in the past is that people shouldn't have to decide by a few weeks after Christmas what they want to discuss in May. Now, they've got to decide, and get the signatures, pretty much before the tree is taken down.

I propose two solutions, one for the future, and the other for this year. As to the future, I have asked the Town Meeting Procedures Committee and the new Moderator, John Leone, to file an article to amend the by-laws so as to provide that the warrant will remain open until 60 days before the start of Town Meeting; if enacted, this change would take effect in 2009. As to the immediate solution, the Selectmen have reserved to themselves the right to continue inserting articles, on their own motion, after the warrant has closed; I suggest that they use this power to insert those citizens' article that may be proposed after their early closing date.

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