

2022 Vermont Town Meeting Day Preview

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Compiled and written by
Heather Law and Ted Brady



Vermont League of Cities and Towns



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VLCT's 2022 Vermont Town Meeting Day Preview from VLCT Executive Director Ted Brady

SUMMARY

Town Meeting Day is changing. Since 2019, the pandemic has caused thousands of people who would normally show up to vote from the floor to vote early, by mail, or in a voting booth. According to data collected by the Secretary of State's Office, before the pandemic, more than 75 percent of Vermont cities and towns used a floor vote for at least part of their town meeting. In 2022, only about 25 percent will. But while that statistic is shocking – and concerning to some Town Meeting Day purists – we shouldn't look past the most important part of Town Meeting Day: what we are voting for or against.

To help our members get a sense of what municipal officials across the state are working on, VLCT asked its members to share their town meeting warnings. After reviewing 3,205 individual articles on 211 warnings and studying data collected by the Secretary of State's Office, we identified the most common ballot items, articles that reflect the most pressing needs of government, and a few questions that are just plain interesting.

This year, 41 communities are considering allowing retail cannabis operations in their communities. That's a record high (excuse the pun), and more than the 33 municipalities that have approved those operations in the past two years. Many of these articles are the result of citizen-led campaigns that touched off interesting selectboard debates. VLCT has been trying to convince policymakers in Montpelier that towns need a share of the tax and fee revenues from these new retail operations. So far, that request, while supported in the Senate, has been opposed in the House. This year, a bill passed in the House that caps municipal fees on cannabis operations to \$100 while capping state fees at \$100,000.

About twenty communities have local option taxes in place and so will have the authority to collect a one percent local option sales tax on the retail sale of cannabis later this year. Voters in at least four other communities – Barre City, Fair Haven, Montgomery, and Woodstock – will consider implementing local option taxes this year. That leaves more than 220 municipalities with no increase in revenue, despite the state predicting cannabis sales tax to generate tens of millions of dollars.



Voters around Vermont will find more than 40 articles on ballots across the state this year that could change the way their municipalities operate. Most of these measures relate to increasing capacity in a community, from adopting the town manager form of government, to transitioning away from elected listers and auditors, to removing policing powers from elected constables, to expanding the size of a selectboard. Running a local government just isn't as simple as it used to be.

The clearest indication of a community's priorities comes in the form of a municipal budget. Vermonters in nearly every community will be asked to support municipal budgets ranging from a few hundred thousand dollars to \$50 million or more in our larger cities. There are some big infrastructure projects on the table, most notably two infrastructure bonds in Burlington totaling \$50 million, a \$25 million wastewater upgrade in Vergennes, a \$16.7 million wastewater system in Colchester, and a package of \$25 million of wastewater, road, and land acquisition projects in Montpelier. Voters in southwestern Vermont will consider supporting a \$13.5 million fieldhouse. Some other notable ballot items include renovations to town offices, new public safety facilities, and, of course, dozens of fire truck, road grader, and dump truck purchases.

Voters in a handful of communities will have the chance to tackle complex social, economic, and environmental issues this Town Meeting Day. Two communities will consider adopting the Declaration of Inclusion in an effort to commit to diversity, equity and inclusion. Several communities in southeastern Vermont will consider questions related to immigration and law enforcement. Guilford will decide if it wants to be a "compassionate community." At least nine cities and towns will consider climate related articles – including Arlington, where they set a goal of becoming carbon neutral and propose to establish a fund to do so.

Many towns will also vote on whether to provide local nonprofit service agencies with anywhere from fifty dollars to tens of thousands of dollars to help run, for example, animal shelters, ambulance services, homeless prevention programs, and substance abuse disorder programs. Some communities ask their voters to vote on each appropriation individually, leading to ballots with as many as four dozen articles.

No Town Meeting Day would be complete without a few articles debating town and village mergers (Lyndon and Poultney), advisory items on ATVs, or the naming of a snowplow.

VLCT heard from dozens of our members leading up to Town Meeting Day. Our Municipal Assistance Center fielded questions ranging from how to properly warn meetings, to how to transition to Australian ballot, to how to word ballot items on cannabis. We even called in all-star Westford Town Moderator Ed Chase to help tune up town meeting moderators. Now our members wait for the big day. Their citizens ultimately have just two choices when they vote, whether it be from the floor or on a ballot: Yes or No. Our members will be counting the yeas and nays in the coming days, and VLCT will be ready to help turn those articles into actions in the weeks, months, and years to come.

Open [the full report](#) or the [By The Numbers infographic](#).

March 8 Update. One week ago, tens of thousands of Vermonters headed to the polls to vote on more than 3,200 articles. A super majority of those articles won voter approval – from setting budgets for the coming year to giving municipalities the authority to bond for projects. The authorizing mood of the majority of Vermont’s electorate suggests a hopeful message: Vermonters trust their municipal leaders. [[Continue reading.](#)]

Attachments

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