

# Voters Take Action

March 15, 2023

Vermont city and town leaders put thousands of questions to voters this Town Meeting Day. While each question on its own may seem routine, the cumulative decisions voters made last Tuesday will shape the future of our communities for generations. Voters made history this year when they appeared evenly split on the fate of in-person town meetings, overwhelmingly authorized nearly \$1 billion in spending, and made hundreds of governance changes – most notably electing three new mayors.

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The traditional in-person Vermont town meeting survived. Not only did more than 180 towns hold in-person town meetings last Tuesday, but **of the 18 that proposed to convert all or a portion of their voting to Australian ballot, only about half passed the measure.**

Marlboro passed the change 324 to 94, while Danville rejected the proposal 26-102. The outcomes across the state appeared similar, with decisively large margins on both sides of the issue depending on the town. The greatest attribute of a floor meeting is the ability of an impassioned Vermonter's arguments to be heard and acted on by other Vermonters, and there was no shortage of eloquent soliloquies by those on both sides last Tuesday. Could it be that Vermonters actually listened to each other and were persuaded by their neighbors instead of their ideologies?

Vermonters said Yes to budgets and to bond items. Only three of the \$711 million of municipal budgets we were tracking appear to have been voted down. Given the prominence of inflation-era double-digit budget increases I observed this year, I would have expected a few more budget defeats. The actual outcome reminds me that **Vermonters continue to trust local leaders to put together responsible, frugal, and efficient budgets.** I hope we can continue to earn that trust.

Outside of operating budgets, Vermonters also appear to have approved every single one of the \$200 million in bonding authority towns asked them for – from Killington’s \$47 million tax increment financing proposal, to Colchester’s \$16 million recreation facility, to the City of Rutland’s \$8 million in water, sewer and transportation improvements. These tangible Town Meeting Day actions will lead to significant new housing development, improved environmental outcomes, and a higher quality of life for Vermonters. If you are skeptical, just look at pictures of South Burlington’s City Center, White River Junction, and St. Albans City from just one decade ago – before municipal bonds built infrastructure to facilitate downtown development.

As I wrote in the [VLCT Town Meeting Preview](#), Town Meeting Day 2023 was filled with governance changes. Ten of 13 proposed charter changes in seven communities were approved by voters. Fifty-four articles proposing to change or eliminate certain elected positions seem to predominately pass, with some anomalies. Retail cannabis was approved in Bethel and Brighton (we missed that one in the preview) and was rejected for the third time in Castleton. Local option tax proposals were approved in five out of the six communities where considered. Royalton declined switching to a Town Manager form of government, though it appears they may soon reconsider that decision once they have more information. Randolph opted not to re-establish their municipal police department. And several towns approved municipal zoning changes – most notably Shaftsbury, where housing, guns, and the environment were addressed. The towns of Danby and Dummerston made history on Town Meeting Day 2023 by becoming the 99th and 100th towns to adopt the [Declaration of Inclusion](#), a statement affirming a community’s commitment to justice, diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging.

This year also marked an anomaly in Vermont’s mayoral delegation – with more than 25 percent of Vermont’s mayors turning over. Vermont’s mayors are often institutions known beyond their municipalities, impacting both local and statewide policy. That was certainly true for the three departing mayors: Rutland City Mayor Dave Allaire (after 6 years as mayor and 19 years as alderman), Newport City Mayor Paul Monette (14 years as mayor and 26 years as city councilor), and Montpelier Mayor Anne Watson (5 years as mayor and 6 years as city councilor). The newly elected mayors include Montpelier’s Jack McCullough, Rutland City’s Mike Doenges, and Newport City’s Beth Barnes.

In addition, Vermont's selectboards and city councils will look different next year. I notice that **of the dozens of new selectboard members and city councilors elected, there seem to be a significant number of contested selectboard seats and close elections.** While those races raise the heartbeat of the candidates, they also, like good exercise, improve the health of democracy.

Town Meeting Day 2023 is in the rearview mirror now, though dozens of other municipalities will hold their meetings throughout the spring, whether because villages typically do so later in the year or because of COVID-era delays. In the coming weeks, I'll be watching the Secretary of State's website to see if the anecdotal reports of below average voter turnout are anomalies or the norm. And, next time I'm in Peacham, I'll keep an eye out for "Robert Frost", the newly named Peacham snowplow that won the town's only paper ballot with the exact number of votes needed for a majority, 45. Gosh, I love Town Meeting Day.