

State of the Town Meeting

Town of Lincoln, MA




Massachusetts Municipal Association
2003 Innovation Award

About the Town of Lincoln

- Middlesex County; 12 miles West of Boston
- Population: 6,000
- Open Town Meeting
- 3 person Select Board (Chief Executive Officers)
- Town Administrator (Chief Administrative Officer)
- Annual Budget: \$43 million (FY21)
- Residential Tax Base: 96%
- Commuter Rail Station (Fitchburg Line)
- Conserved open space = 50% of total acreage
- 75+ miles of public walking trails
- Hanscom AFB host community
- Home to cultural, historical, & nature/ agriculture-based institutions



What is the SOTT?

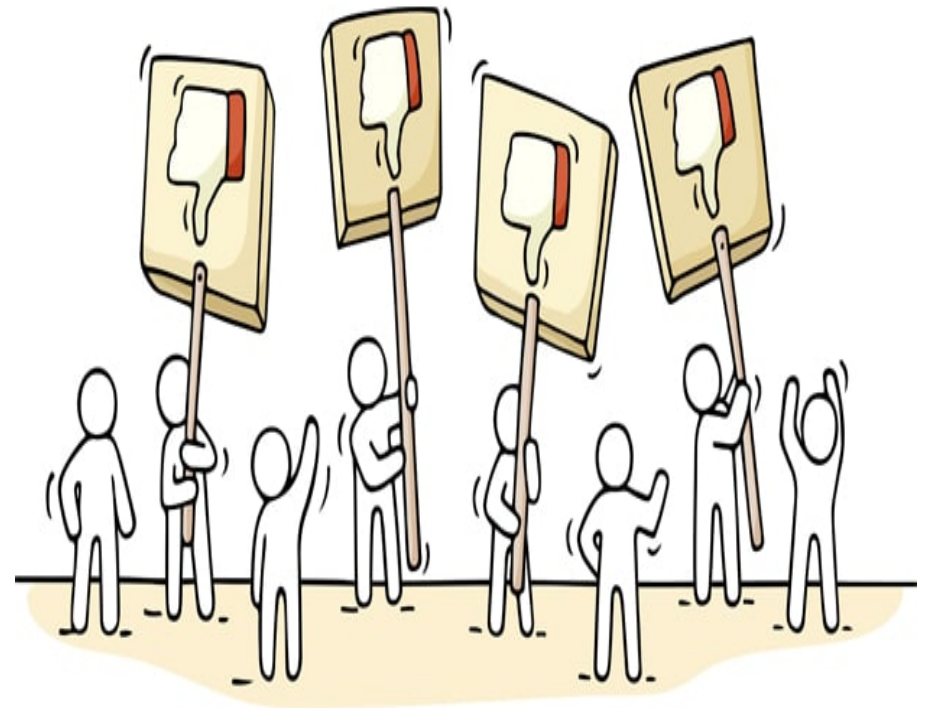
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- Annual fall meeting for town officials and residents to discuss key challenges and initiatives.
 - Opportunity to provide updates on town priorities
 - Designed for more informal discussion , feedback and consensus building.
 - No binding votes are taken; sometimes used for informal polling and “sense of the town” votes.
 - Includes an open forum for residents to raise any topic or question.

What prompted SOTT?



Resident feedback:

- Hard to follow what's happening in town government.
- Too many boards and too many meetings.
- Town Meeting too late in process for real input and influence.
- Need more concise and efficient way to learn how dots are being connected – earlier in process.
- Desire for real engagement around key policy discussions.



Who organizes and facilitates?



Select Board:

- Sets agenda – three or four top challenges or initiatives
- Chair serves as Moderator
- Members facilitate sessions
- Invites key stakeholders to participate and present

Town Administrator:

- Helps organize and coordinate
- Presents certain topics
- Facilitates sessions
- Coordinates follow-up work and activities



Sample of SOTT Agenda Topics



- COVID Response Efforts
- Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Anti-racism Initiative
- Plans for Revitalizing Commercial Center
- Going Green/Carbon Reduction Goals & Strategies
- Comprehensive Planning Process
- Long-term Capital Planning
- Tax Relief Options
- Tax Base Diversification Efforts
- Affordable Housing
- Transportation Planning
- Status Reports on Public Facility Planning Efforts
- Community Center Planning
- Town Offices
- Cost Control
- Water Conservation
- School Building Project
- Crafting Town Vision Statement
- Whether to Adopt the CPA statute



How is the SOTT Structured?



Customarily:

- Welcome, introductions & agenda review by Chair
- Presentations by relevant boards and officials
- Questions & comments
- Use of breakout groups when helpful
- Use of various polling & feedback techniques when helpful
- Summaries, conclusions and next steps
- Open Forum segment for off-agenda topics

Special Circumstances:

- Devote meeting to one topic:
 - To help narrow school building design choices.
 - To help narrow community center design choices
 - To create participation in comprehensive planning process
- Incorporate Special Town Meetings as needed
- 1st virtual SOTT held in fall of 2020:
 - COVID response efforts
 - Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Anti-racism initiative

Logistics

- *Schedule*: Typically held on a Saturday in early November; 9:30am -12:30pm
- *Venue*: School auditorium (town meeting location)
- *Registration*: none
- *Meeting Materials*: presentations, summaries and related documents
- *Notice*: Town-wide mailing of Select Board Newsletter/SOTT preview; materials posted to website
- *Day-of Logistics*:
 - ❑ Select Board moderates & facilitates
 - ❑ Power point presentations
 - ❑ Handouts
 - ❑ Cable broadcasting and recording
 - ❑ Mechanisms for capturing and reporting comments and feedback

How has the community responded to SOTT?

Staying Power:

- First SOTT – 2002
 - 2020 marked 19th consecutive SOTT
 - Strong Participation: avg. attendance of 300
- Consistently supportive resident feedback:
 - Efficient way to become informed and to share ideas
- Embraced by Town Leadership:
 - Unique forum for leadership to share and test ideas
 - Leadership places high value on input and feedback
 - Helps guide policy & build consensus and support
- Has become institutionalized:
 - Matters of consequence expected to receive vetting through SOTT





Advice for those considering a SOTT or similar approach

Commitment Level

- Significant undertaking for leadership, staff & volunteers
- Stakeholders asked to play significant role
- Budget - modest

Benefits

- Unique and highly effective form of direct engagement.
- Opportunity for leadership to share and test ideas.
- Adaptable – Can adjust approach in response to changing circumstances.
- Increases resident understanding and support
- *Reduces surprises – residents better informed and engaged when voting at town meeting!*



Questions?

