

Remote participation for Concord's Town Meeting in support of Warrant Article 28 – Annual TM 2024

Frequently Asked Questions – FAQ



1. What is remote participation for Concord's Town Meeting?

With remote participation, registered voters in Concord, when Town Meeting is underway, could join deliberation of Warrant Articles from their homes, then vote from there. Its initial use at Town Meeting would be a pilot trial.

With Town Meeting already in two physical rooms, remote would be “the third room.”

Overall, Petition Article 28, which begins Concord's process toward remote participation, is in support of the Town Meeting Study Committee anticipated to be working next year. In particular, please see Q #8 below.

2. Why might Concord want to enable remote participation for Town Meeting?

A number of Concordians cannot travel to the high school, then devote several hours in a day, or evening, potentially for several days in a row, to attend Town Meeting, our town legislature. These include families with children, those who may have to rise early for work, and older citizens.

Indeed, there is discussion in town whether participation has been low historically.

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Remote participation could enable wider, possibly a good bit wider, engagement by the town's voters with this basic function of town governance. As democracy is not a spectator sport, citizens taking part in setting the town's rules, its 'legislation,' is basic to the health of our town.

To note: Making remote participation available simply *enables* engagement. Whether citizens then take up and carry forward that cudgel, once available, is in the hands of us and our neighbors.

3. Would Town Meeting change if remote participation is added?

Concord Town Meeting has what might be described as a long-established community culture. After sometimes robust debate in the deliberation of an Article, we then raise our voting slips, together, to be counted.

Disagreement, even sharp disagreement, may frame debate. Resolving these differences via the vote is the very core of democracy. After that tally, for each vote, then there necessarily is a second part. Those losing the vote must accept the outcome.

Concord's TM culture, 'open voting,' together, underpins – pivotally – that we do accept the inevitable differences, as a matter of principle so that we then do come back together.

A remote participation platform can simply expand this experience to those in their homes. Except for the separation by distance, there is no change in our Town Meeting – when enabled as described next.

4. How would remote participation – which continues our Town Meeting culture – work?

This reflects effort over the course of now not quite a decade, invested from time to time to conceive the technical arrangements that would, in fact, extend 'open voting' community culture to those participating remote.

4a. Deliberation of Warrant Articles?

With Town Meeting a legislative body, the deliberation of Articles – presentation and debate – is at its heart.

With remote participation, all, in the room as well as in their homes, would be connected by two-way video and audio; tests check that voters in the home are present. All can see and hear each other as needed (similar to the way past participants in the gymnasium and auditorium have been able to see and hear each other), and so are present together for deliberation.

When there is discussion, the Moderator can recognize both those physically present and those in their homes, if 'approaching the microphone.'

4b. Voting?

Alongside the technical connections that allow all to be present with each other, a seasoned remote voting system, Voatz, registers the remote vote. Voatz has now been used successfully in 3 Federal election seasons and 6 State/County election seasons, overall 126 elections serving

more than 2.3 million voters. Voatz can support an open vote, the default in Town Meeting, as well as a secret ballot, when one is called.

4c. Can remote voting be trusted? Would my vote be secure?

The security of remote voting has been the subject of the most intense debate, now for some years. Voatz has been a leader in the effort. The Voatz system includes the option for paper printout of the remote vote, to enable audit.

Those who would like an in-depth look will want to review the Security & Technology section at voatz.com, particularly the Security Statement and Security Audits.

Then Concord's TM community culture, 'open voting,' expands – to include all, now also those in their homes.

Specifically, how does a vote proceed, first, in the gymnasium? Displays at the front of the room show the vote in the auditorium (as they have in the past) and now also the remote vote. That complements the in-room 'open voting' experience. The auditorium likewise sees the gymnasium vote and the remote vote on their own room displays. And those remote? They see the video feed from both rooms, as well as each others' votes.

5. How many remote participants can Town Meeting accommodate? Implications?

The ability of Town Meeting to accommodate remote participants is likely to be limited by the maximum practical size of a deliberative body, not by technology. With 13,874 registered voters in Concord currently, it is not clear how many voters a Moderator can incorporate into a quality deliberation for legislative choices, either in a hybrid meeting or in a meeting held entirely at one location.

Is that as many as two or three thousand voters in a Town Meeting? Citizens who were among the 1,819 voters present at the June 2007 Special Town Meeting may be able to judge for themselves. Experience will dictate when the time may come for other options, including Representative Town Meeting or, farther off, status as a city.

6. How would we pay for remote participation?

In the conception above, the technical apparatus is likely to be funded through contributions to an effort for the purpose, in support of our direct democracy. Annual costs to operate the service are of course not yet definite, but we can expect them to be in the range of a few thousand dollars annually, that is in a range that is typical for such electronic services. There will also be standard costs for Voatz' services.

7. What are the steps to authorize remote participation for Town Meeting in Concord?

Town Meeting would vote Warrant Article 28. That in effect asks the Select Board to send a Home Rule petition to the Massachusetts legislature, to authorize remote participation for our Town Meeting.

7a. What is the law? What is the role of the Massachusetts legislature?

Massachusetts law does not presently authorize remote participation in Open Town Meeting. Citizens of Concord can legally participate and vote in Town Meeting remotely only if the Legislature passes the proposed Home Rule petition or similar legislation.

If a critical mass of Home Rule petitions pile up, so requesting, the legislature has increasing basis to act for the whole state. One interested town, Westford, has explicitly noted the need for the legislature so to act for the state as a whole.

7b. Are other towns in Massachusetts considering remote participation for Town Meeting?

Wayland has had a Home Rule petition before the Massachusetts legislature, seeking to authorize remote participation for it. Thirteen other towns, including Concord, are said to be watching how Wayland proceeds, likely then considering their own town initiative.

8. We expect to have a study committee working on Town Meeting next year, including whether remote participation. Isn't this Article premature?

The Home Rule petition process on Beacon Hill typically takes multiple years. If we start this process only after the study committee makes its recommendation on remote participation, the process could be delayed that much longer. By approving this Article now, Concord gets a year head-start.

The proposed legislation does not *require* Concord to take remote participation forward at Town Meeting. Discretion whether or not actually to proceed with remote participation, once Home Rule is granted, continues to remain entirely with Concord.

Further, by Concord's joining Wayland now in seeking Home Rule, the Legislature gets word of a potentially gathering critical mass for remote participation across the Commonwealth, thus encouraging the legislature to act for the state as a whole, as described above.

9. I see that two petitioners on Article 28 are also petitioners on Article 29. If I support Article 28, does that also suggest support for Article 29?

Article 28 and Article 29 are independent of each other.

Support for Article 28 is support for remote participation in some form. We see above a form of remote that continues Concord's open voting Town Meeting culture. Opposition to Article 28 is opposition to remote participation in any form (and not opposition to, nor support for, Article 29).