

## **FAQs Regarding this Bylaw Amendment to Establish Dates for Annual Town Meeting Warrant Submissions**

### **1. What is the purpose of the bylaw amendment?**

The General Bylaw amendment establishes that the Annual Town Meeting Warrant will open the first Monday in January and remain open through the second Monday in March. Closing the warrant in March is consistent with past Belmont practice. This amendment also clarifies that the dates cover citizens petitions and town board/official submissions. It allows the Select Board to add additional items after that date where the article could not reasonably have been presented earlier. Currently, the dates are entirely at the Select Board's discretion.

### **2. What has the previous practice been for setting the warrant open/close dates?**

From 2015 through 2024, the warrant was closed in March or late February (earliest was 2/23; latest 3/21). For 2025 ATM, the Select Board set a January 13<sup>th</sup> close date and then set a January 9<sup>th</sup> close date this year.<sup>1</sup>

<b>Warrant Opened</b>	<b>Warrant Closed</b>	<b>Date of ATM</b>
2/2/2015	3/2/2015	5/4/2015
2/1/2016	2/29/2016	5/2/2016
2/6/2017	3/6/2017	5/1/2017
2/6/2018	3/5/2018	4/30/2018
2/26/2019	3/12/2019	4/29/2019
3/3/2020	3/20/2020	6/16/2020 (Covid)
2/8/2021	2/23/2021	5/3/2021
2/22/2022	3/15/2022	5/2/2022
3/6/2023	3/21/2023	5/1/2023
2/27/2024	3/11/2024	4/29/2024
12/16/2024	1/13/2025	5/5/2025
11/17/2025	1/9/2026	5/4/2026

### **3. Why is the amendment needed?**

The early January closing dates set by the Select Board for 2025 and 2026 mean that articles need to be prepared about four months in advance of Annual Town Meeting and over the holidays, causing logistical problems and making it difficult to respond to late arising issues. Additionally, there is uncertainty because the dates may fluctuate from year to year.

The Select Board has continued to add items at its own discretion after the closing date, but has also rejected citizen petitions and even some board/committee submissions after that date. For example, last year the Select Board, on the basis that they were not submitted by the January date, refused submissions from the Bylaw Review Committee that were needed to comply with State law mandates.

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<sup>1</sup> Dates provided by Town Clerk's office.

This amendment provides clarity and ensures that citizens and board/committee members can submit items for the warrant between January and March – a reasonable period in which to finalize items for a spring Annual Town Meeting.

#### **4. What is a town meeting warrant?**

State law provides that town meetings “shall be called in pursuance of a warrant,” which is issued by the select board. “The warrant lists a meeting’s time, place, and agenda.” Voters may insert articles in the warrant before the Select Board “closes” the warrant.<sup>2</sup>

#### **5. Why were the warrant open/close dates moved back?**

The Select Board first set a January closing date at its December 16, 2024 meeting.<sup>3</sup> At the meeting, the town administrator indicated that the earlier date for opening the warrant “gives us more planning time” and “there’s been a lot of robust citizens petitions that take an awful amount of work for us to kind of run down.”

The proposal is intended to be responsive to these concerns by: (1) maintaining an earlier (January) opening date and (2) providing about six weeks after close of the warrant before Annual Town Meeting. In any event, closing off the opportunity for submission of citizen petitions and board’s and committee’s articles four months before Annual Town Meeting is just too limiting to be justified by the purported convenience of having additional time to “run down” articles.

#### **6. How does this compare to other towns?**

The Massachusetts Municipal Association’s Select Board Handbook indicates that “how long the Town Meeting warrant must be open, and how long before Town Meeting it must be opened, are usually addressed in a town’s bylaws.”<sup>4</sup> Towns take many different approaches, but the proposed timeline is consistent with the practice in many towns.

In Webster, “[t]he warrant shall not close more than 45 days in advance of the Town Meeting.”<sup>5</sup> In Salisbury, “[t]he Board of Selectmen shall include ... all petitions which have been received by it thirty or more days prior to the date fixed by by-law for the Town Meeting

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<sup>2</sup> MGL, c. 39, § 10; Citizen’s Guide to Town Meetings, pgs. 5-6

[https://www.sec.state.ma.us/divisions/cis/download/Guide\\_to\\_Town\\_Meetings.pdf](https://www.sec.state.ma.us/divisions/cis/download/Guide_to_Town_Meetings.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> See Select Board meeting held December 16, 2024, beginning at 6min, 20sec, at

<https://www.belmontmedia.org/watch/select-board-town-belmont>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.mma.org/members/msa/massachusetts-select-board-handbook/chapter-5-administrative-and-regulatory-responsibilities/>

<sup>5</sup> Webster General Bylaws, §253-2.

to convene.”<sup>6</sup> In Groton, “[t]he select board shall include in the warrant the subject matter of all petitions received by the board not less than 60 days before the date fixed by by-law for the session of the spring or fall session of the town meeting to convene.”<sup>7</sup> In Rockland, “[t]he Warrant for the Annual Town Meeting shall close 50 days before the day of the Meeting[.]”<sup>8</sup> In Lunenburg, “[a]ll requests for the insertion of subjects in the warrant for the Annual Town Meeting shall be submitted on or before 4:00 p.m. on the 47th day before the date of commencement of the Annual Town Meeting.”<sup>9</sup> In Boxford, “[a]ll warrant articles are to be submitted to the Select Board 30 days prior to the Annual Town Meeting.”<sup>10</sup> In Eastham, “[t]he opening of the warrant shall be no less than 90 days prior to the date of the annual town meeting” and “[t]he warrant ... shall remain open no less than 30 days.”<sup>11</sup>

Regarding which submissions must be included, Wellesley specifies that the Select Board shall “insert in the warrant all subjects requested of them in writing by: a. Any Board; b. Any Official” or by citizen’s petition.<sup>12</sup> Harvard, Dartmouth, and Salisbury have similar requirements.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Salisbury Charter, §C-2-7(c).

<sup>7</sup> Groton Charter, §2.6.2.

<sup>8</sup> Rockland, General Bylaws, §148-2.

<sup>9</sup> Lunenburg Bylaws, §81-3.

<sup>10</sup> Boxford Bylaws, §36-2.

<sup>11</sup> Eastham Charter, §C3-5.

<sup>12</sup> Wellesley Town Bylaws, §8.12;

<sup>13</sup> Harvard Charter, §2.6(a); Dartmouth Charter, §2.9(b); Salisbury, §C-2-7(a).