

“LEGISLATURE OF THE PEOPLE”

TIPS TO PREPARE FOR TOWN MEETING

Moderators, selectboard members and others heard from a wide range of distinguished speakers earlier this month at VLCT’s “Town Meeting Tune-up” workshop.

Governor **James Douglas** (who switches hats on Town Meeting Day to become Middlebury Moderator), University of Vermont Professor of Political Science **Frank Bryan**, a panel of experienced moderators, WCAX Reporter **Anson Tebbetts**, and VLCT Executive Director (and Northfield Moderator) **Steve Jeffrey** all gave attendees their best advice for a successful Town Meeting.

Frank Bryan opened the day with an entertaining and inspiring talk about his research on Town Meeting that led to the recent publication of his book, *Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How It Works*. (See review elsewhere in this issue.) Calling Town Meeting the legislature of the people, Bryan reminded his audience of the importance of the institution (even globally), while at the same time acknowledging that Town Meeting must retain authority to make meaningful decisions if it is to survive the long haul. His advice to moderators included:

• **Try to make your job more difficult than it is.** “To the extent that you have participation and conflict,” Bryan noted, “you’ve got a good meeting.” Bryan reminded his audience that putting decisionmaking in the hands of the people is risky and scary, but well worth the effort.

• **While still following Robert’s Rules of Order on participation, or an alternate set of rules, try to let voters debate until a compromise is reached.** This may require extensive back and forth debate between a proponent and opponent of a particular approach, until they reach agreement. “Treat Town Meeting as a legislature that is going to resolve conflict,” Bryan advised, noting that the process “is a lot of work.”

• **Try to be invisible.** “Be the windowpane and let the voters see the view,” Bryan said. “Remember, they trust you to be absolutely neutral.”

After running through the 15 most important state laws on Town Meeting and the 15 most important Robert’s Rules, Steve Jeffrey offered his own “Six Common Sense Rules” for Moderators to follow, based on his years as parliamentarian and Moderator in his town of Northfield:

- Be of good humor.
- Always try to appear that you know what you are doing, even if you don’t.
- Remain in control of yourself and the meeting.
- Use the same decorum with the assembly that you would require of them.
- Use scripts of common motions and procedures to keep from getting lost.
- Remember that, as moderator, you are not interested in the specific outcome of the vote, but rather in facilitating the smooth functioning of the assembly and the transaction of business, and in resolving questions of procedure that may arise.

During lunch, attendees heard from Governor Douglas about his experiences running Town Meeting, and in particular last year under the intense scrutiny of the media. He was followed, appropriately enough, by WCAX reporter Anson Tebbetts. Tebbetts offered hints to make media coverage of Town Meeting go more smoothly for both the press and municipal officials. The afternoon wound down with a roundtable of experienced moderators – **Ed Chase**, Waterford, **Sam Lloyd**, Weston (a 34-year veteran of leading Weston’s town meeting), and **Stan Amidon**, Waterbury - ably fielded questions (and even skillfully moderated debates between attendees) from the floor.

- Katherine Roe, VLCT Communications Coordinator