

Town Meeting Day Results Suggest Vermonters Trust Municipal Leaders

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By Ted Brady, VLCT Executive Director (tbrady@vlct.org)

March 8, 2022. One week ago, tens of thousands of Vermonters headed to the polls to vote on more than 3,200 articles. A super majority of those articles won voter approval – from setting budgets for the coming year to giving municipalities the authority to bond for projects. The authorizing mood of the majority of Vermont’s electorate suggests a hopeful message: Vermonters trust their municipal leaders.

As I was reading VTDigger’s Town Meeting Day coverage, I was especially taken by Milton resident and voter Manon Tenny’s comments to a reporter from UVM’s Community News Service. She said: “Since I wasn’t part of creating the budget, I’m going to support the budget and not criticize the hard and conscientious work that people have done to create that.” Kudos to members of the Milton Selectboard and local officials across the state for instilling that kind

of confidence in so many voters.

In VLCT's Town Meeting Preview, I highlighted more than \$125 million in big ticket items on the ballot. Nearly every single item – from Vergennes's \$25 million wastewater upgrade to Colchester's \$16 million wastewater upgrade to Rutland Town's \$4 million public safety building to Guilford's \$1 million library expansion – passed. There were one or two anomalies, such as the defeat of an advisory item on several ballots in southwestern Vermont asking for support of a \$14 million regional field house. But as a whole, Vermonters said yes.

Of the 40-plus communities that were considering whether to allow retail sale of cannabis in their communities, about 80 percent, or 34 of 41 communities reporting results as of publication – gave the green light. I'd anticipate a few more approvals before the last of the 30 or so postponed town meetings occur. While some of these votes were close, especially in our smaller communities, the trend continues to be for voters to embrace the recreational sale of marijuana.

Tax increases, not surprisingly, contradicted the general trend of approval this Town Meeting Day. Only three of the five communities considering local option taxes (Barre City, Fair Haven, Montgomery, South Hero, and Woodstock) supported the idea. One prominent ballot item in Burlington asking for an increase in the general tax rate suffered defeat. But if you were hoping to get away without paying your taxes, be warned that every ballot item we were tracking to establish late penalties or publish the names of delinquent tax payers won voter approval. Tax dodgers, beware.

Of the 11 climate-related articles we were tracking before Town Meeting Day, 10 passed – including an innovative fund to make weatherization improvements to buildings in Woodstock and Duxbury's consideration of a solar array. In Arlington, voters narrowly decided to set a goal of becoming carbon neutral by 2027 and establish a fund to do so – but elected not to put money in the fund.

We were also following 46 ballot items impacting how towns operate, including 13 questions about how treasurers are seated, eight questions about the future of lister positions, four questions about eliminating auditors, and four questions about how clerks are seated. These questions were nearly universally accepted by voters, with exceptions in Bridgewater and Hyde Park. Voters also generally approved suggested future changes to when they would

hold town meetings, how to access town reports (instead of towns mailing copies to every voter), and things like changing the length of terms or number of board members.

The big question: Will the transition to Australian balloting in so many Vermont towns due to the pandemic result in higher turnout? We don't know the answer just yet, as we await data to be compiled and analyzed by the Secretary of State's Office. In 2021, the Secretary of State's data suggested an Australian ballot turnout rate of about 28 percent (including the absentee ballots that were mailed to many Vermonters). Pre-pandemic Australian ballot turnout rates were closer to 20 percent (including absentee ballots). Based on conversations the VLCT team has had with clerks and other municipal election officials, I wouldn't be surprised if turnout again exceeds pre-pandemic levels.

There's really only one question left unanswered: What did Peacham name its town plow? Ker-plow took the day by a more than two-to-one margin over second place finisher Snowflake. To the children behind the defeated names, and to every unsuccessful selectboard candidate, don't be too disheartened. Town Meeting 2023 is less than a year away.