

MetroWest Governance Review Summary Report

July 13, 2016

Funding provided by the District Local Technical Assistance program and MetroWest Regional Collaborative. This Review was conducted on behalf of the MetroWest Regional Collaborative (MWRC) and the nine communities within the MWRC sub-region: Ashland, Holliston, Framingham, Marlborough, Natick, Southborough, Wayland, Wellesley, and Weston.

MAPC would like to acknowledge the members of the MWRC Executive Board for commissioning this Review and co-sponsoring the project and Forum. They are:

- Jay Marsden (MWRC Chair), Holliston Board of Selectmen
- Preston Crow (MWRC Vice Chair), Ashland Planning Board
- Ellen Gibbs (MWRC Clerk), Wellesley Board of Selectman
- Yolanda Greaves, Ashland Board of Selectmen
- Lew Colten, Framingham Planning Board

MAPC staff that conducted the Review and contributed to the project include: Greg Miao, Joseph Sacchi, Karen Adelman, Hannah Casey, Hayley Oleksiak and Mark Fine.

Background

At the request of the MetroWest Regional Collaborative (MWRC), MAPC undertook a comprehensive review of the civic participation levels and governance structures of the nine MWRC communities. The Review consisted of a research and analysis phase, followed by a Forum attended by representatives from all MWRC cities and towns. The goal of the Forum was to compare civic engagement and governance levels and practices across the sub-region and identify areas for further collaboration and research on those subjects.

The Review did not seek to identify, nor did it find, a preferred governance model for all MWRC communities. There are many reasons (e.g., demographic and historic reasons) why participation levels and governance structures differ across these cities and towns in both significant and subtle ways. Nevertheless, regardless of these differences, these communities face common challenges in providing and sustaining efficient, effective and democratic forms of local governance, and each can learn from their neighbors' experiences.

Below, and attached in the associated Appendices, are summaries of the data gathered and the comments and results from the Governance Forum, which was held on June 10, 2016.

average turnout rate for the entire MWRC region (an average of the total region-wide votes cast out of the region-wide registered voter population) was 16.48%. More information is available in Appendix A at pages 2 - 6.

2) Registered Voter Population

Registered voter populations, i.e., the percent of eligible voters registered to vote, in the MWRC region ranged from 64.57% in Marlborough to 97.93% in Weston. The average MWRC community's voter registration percentage (an equally weighted average of all registered voter populations between the communities) was 84.07%, while the average registered voter percentage for the entire MWRC region (an average of the total registered voter population out of the region-wide eligible voting population) was 76.56%. One limitation on this data is that a municipality's population over the age of 18 is not a direct proxy for eligible voters as the real eligible voter population includes restrictions based upon citizenship, and thus some percentages may be a bit lower than the actual eligible voter population. More information is available in Appendix A at pages 3, 7-9.

3) Town Meeting Participation

Town Meeting participation, i.e., the number of citizens actively participating in Town Meetings, in the MWRC region differs between the communities that operate with Open Town Meetings (Ashland, Holliston, Southborough, Wayland, and Weston) and those that operate with Representative Town Meetings (Framingham, Natick, and Wellesley). As Marlborough is incorporated as a City and operates with a City Council as its legislative body, it was excluded from this portion of data processing.

For Towns with Open Town Meetings, attendance ranged from an average of 150 (1.51% of the registered voter population) in Holliston to 306 in both Southborough and Wayland (4.42% and 3.38% of the registered voter populations respectively). The lowest reported attendance for an Open Town Meeting over the six year period was 100 (where 0.96% of the registered voter population attended) in Ashland and the highest reported attendance was 467 in Wayland (where 5.16% of the registered voter population attended). The average Annual Town Meeting participation rate for communities with Open Town Meetings (an equally weighted average of all ATM participation rates between the communities) was 3.00%, while the average Annual Town Meeting participation rate for the entire MWRC region (an average of the total ATM attendees across the region to the region-wide registered voter population) was 2.87%. More information is available in Appendix A at pages 10 - 15.

For Towns with Representative Town Meetings, attendance was gauged based on the percentage of Town Meeting Members that attended Town Meetings. As a percentage, attendance ranged from an average of 68.98% in Framingham to 88.75% in Wellesley. The average attendance rate for the three communities with Representative Town Meetings (an equally weighted average of Town Meeting participation rates between the communities) was 76.84%, while the while the average Town Meeting participation rate for the three communities combined (an average of the total TM attendees across the communities to the total Town Meeting Members) was 77.52%. More information is available in Appendix A at pages 10-15.

friends, neighbors, and acquaintances. Additional impediments include lengthy and burdensome election filing requirements and fears of violating election laws. Ms. Nagle further noted that these impediments, combined with ever growing personal and work demands on citizens eligible to participate in municipal government, leads to a general lack of electoral choice in municipal elections and a skewing of municipal participation to people of retirement age. In turn, Ms. Nagle noted that when people feel they don't have an important choice to make in municipal elections, they don't feel a need to vote.

Dennis Berry (Moderator, Town of Wayland) suggested that there may be techniques to smooth the process of Town Meeting that could positively affect engagement. Citing the efforts Wayland has made in this area, Mr. Berry talked about using e-voting technology, for example, rather than relying on a voice roll call. Wayland has found this innovation has improved the efficiency of Town Meetings by eliminating the need for recounts and providing immediate voter feedback on the relative success of Town Meeting votes. Building on this, Mr. Berry discussed the need to identify other mechanisms to make Town Meetings and Town Elections less burdensome on citizens, discussing the possibility of changing the manner in which Town Meetings and Town Elections are run and exploring the concept of electronic and remote voting.

Additionally Mr. Berry discussed the need for municipalities to moderate the interactions between their various governing boards, which may have differing opinions on whether a recommended course of action is a good one. He cited the unique role some Moderators play within their Towns as appointing authorities for certain Boards and Committees. He further indicated that while such a structure may allow for more impartiality by making appointments to those Boards and Committees the role of the Moderator and not the role of the Board of Selectmen, it can also create some problems, such as when Boards and Committees adopt recommendations contrary to those of the Board of Selectmen. Mr. Berry went on to note that Moderator appointed Board and Committee members may not feel a need to report to the Board of Selectmen or may lack direction because they are not overseen by the Selectmen.

Governance Organization Poster Session

After the panel discussion, attendees were invited to leave their seats and participate in a 30 minute poster session comparing municipal governance organization across the nine communities. During this session attendees were invited to visit five posters displaying information about various aspects of governance structures within the MWRC region, including: (1) Charter Status, (2) Executive Management Form, (3) Town Meeting Form, (4) Municipal Boards and Committees, and (5) Property Tax Structures in the MWRC region. These topics were identified by MAPC and MWRC as a starting point for discussion among attendees about their experiences with, and opinions about, the ways in which municipal governments are structured and administered. As such, attendees were invited to speak with MAPC staff at each poster and provide individual feedback, both positive and negative, relating to each of the topics.

Poster Session Feedback

residents to attend can be challenging, enabling small groups mobilized around a single issue to exert an outsized influence.

Boards and Committees (Appendix B, pages 9-13)

Of the various topics on which feedback was invited, the *Boards and Committees* poster attracted the most attention. Although the benefits of boards were acknowledged – they often perform valuable work, generally without expense to the municipality – many challenges related to their performance were also included. Specifically, in terms of management, it can be hard to coordinate and keep track of the responsibilities of all the various Boards and Committees in a Town, which can result in duplicative effort. The most successful committees are generally those with a clear charge who report back to the appropriate Town department. Interpersonal challenges can arise when an individual member is a disruptive influence in the group. Therefore, Boards may benefit from having a Chair who is sure to orient members on what it's like to be on a committee, e.g., members won't always get their way.

Tax Rate Structure (Appendix B, pages 6-8)

Most respondents agreed that the best tax rate structure is contextual to the community, particularly as MWRC communities differ greatly in their proportions of land zoned for residential, commercial, and industrial uses. Some communities (including Framingham and Marlborough), have chosen to adopt a split tax rate structure, which allows property tax burdens to be shifted between residential, commercial, and industrial properties and is sometimes done in order to lessen the tax burden on residents. Other communities (including the remaining MWRC communities) have chosen to keep a single tax rate for all properties. Leaders from Framingham noted that shifting too much of the tax burden onto commercial and industrial property directly affects a Town's competitiveness as a location for commercial tenants; i.e., commercial space in Framingham costs roughly 4x more than in neighboring Natick. Another risk noted included issues surrounding the difficulties in accurately assessing commercial and industrial property values, which can complicate a Town's cost/benefit analysis of different tax rate splits.

General Discussion & Areas of Future Interest

After the poster session, attendees were invited to participate in a final general discussion on all of the information presented throughout the event and to identify topics that they would like to explore further. Topics discussed included: the issues the communities face in filling open Board positions; the reasons why citizens choose not to participate in municipal government; the issues that arise when municipal boards have differing opinions about the same topic; the issue of communities potentially having too many Boards and Committees; Board and Committee direction, oversight, and reporting; and how to improve Town Meetings.

At the conclusion of this discussion, attendees were invited to vote for eight topics identified by MAPC and MWRC for potential future research and work. These topics are listed below in the order of those receiving the most votes for future research to those receiving the least:

- 1) Benefits of elected/appointed positions: 8 votes

average number of registered voters by American Community Survey 2014 5-year estimates of the 18+ population.

- d) Town Meeting participation map: A comparison of average reported Town Meeting attendance for the years 2010-2015. Towns with Open Town Meeting are color coded by range of attendance numbers, while towns' with Representative Town Meeting numbers are reported but colored separately. In addition to the average attendance, reported high and low attendance numbers are also indicated.
- e) Town Meeting stats spreadsheets: A summary of Town Meeting attendance for the years 2010-2015. These numbers were drawn from Town Meeting minutes and Annual Town reports. Most towns report the number of members present when quorum is established, but some others report the number in attendance at the close of each session.

Appendix B – MetroWest Governance Organization

- a) Municipal organization chart: An overview of the data collected and provided in the appendices.
- b) Charter status map: Indicates which municipalities have adopted Home Rule charters, as well as dates of incorporation. Towns that have amended their structures and governance processes through “Special Acts” of the legislature are considered unchartered.
- c) Executive management map: Details the title of each community's Chief Administrative Officer and offers a brief summary of the main differences between them.
- d) Town Meeting form map: Identifies whether communities use Open or Representative Town meeting, or neither. The map also notes quorum requirements for Town Meeting, the number of members needed to be present in order to conduct business.
- e) Property Tax rate map: Lists the average property tax rate per \$1,000 of assessed value from 2010- 2015. Also identifies whether communities use a single or split property tax rates.
- f) Municipal tax info spreadsheet: Provide property tax rates for each MWRC community from 2010- 2015, as well as the calculated average rates for that time period.
- g) Boards & committees map: Groups municipalities by their total number of elected and appointed boards and committees, and highlights those unique to particular communities.
- h) Boards & committees spreadsheet: A listing of the various elected and appointed boards and committees instituted by each municipality, pulled from the municipalities' bylaws and websites.

Appendix C – MetroWest Governance Forum

- a) Poster Comments: A full listing of comments provided by attendees of the MWRC Governance Forum during the poster session.