Report: 21st Century Government

Leveraging technology to improve committee work and public engagement in the Town of Homes

Presented to: Belmont Select Board
Presented by: IT Advisory Committee 21st Century Government Subcommittee
- Phil Lawrence, Chair
- Paul Roberts, Vice Chair
- David Goldberg, Secretary
- James Berets, Member

Date: July 8, 2019

Table of Contents

About this Report

This report represents the work of the IT Advisory Committee's Subcommittee on 21st Century Government. Over the past 18 months, we have undertaken both a survey of peer communities as well as of Belmont committees and Belmont residents.

Our goals were three-fold.

1. To identify new and innovative approaches that other communities were using to engage with residents and facilitate the work of elected and appointed bodies such as committees.
2. To assess how elected and appointed bodies in Belmont function. We wanted to understand what processes and methods they used to communicate with each other and the public about the business before them, how they transmitted and shared information with the public and whether opportunities existed to streamline, modernize or otherwise improve those processes.
3. To get a sense of Belmontonians' attitudes towards and interactions with town government and towards measures that might streamline or facilitate interaction with elected and appointed bodies in town.

About ITAC

The Information Technology Advisory Committee stood up its subcommittee on 21st Century Government in April 2017 with the goal of assessing opportunities to improve and modernize the work of town government and, in particular, the appointed and elected bodies - such as committees - that are so critical to the functioning of Belmont's town government.

As a four-person working group within the larger IT Advisory Committee, our charge has been to research innovative ideas and programs in other communities. We have also undertaken surveys of Belmont residents and town committee members concerning current practices and perceived areas for improvement. Our work has been shared with the full IT Advisory Committee and the results of our research are compiled in this report.

The subcommittee was made up of the following individuals:
● Phil Lawrence, Chair
● Paul Roberts, Vice Chair
● David Goldberg, Secretary
● James Berets, Member

The Idea of 21st Century Government

Behind this survey was an idea that has been much discussed - directly or indirectly - by the members of the IT Advisory Committee. Namely: What are the purposes and obligations of committees and other public bodies in the 21st century?

On the one hand, the answer to this question is not so much different from the purpose of committees and public bodies in the 20th century - or the 19th, for that matter. Committees and other bodies of elected and appointed members exist to do the business of the Town (Belmont in this case). We ask of our public bodies that they adhere to Federal, State and local laws. We ask that they stay within their mandate and do the work they were tasked with doing (broadly speaking). We ask that these public bodies solicit and are responsive to the needs of the public in their community. We ask that they work efficiently and effectively, bringing subject matter expertise to bear on complex issues.

Finally, we ask that committees and other public bodies operate in ways that are both accessible to the public and transparent. The musical Hamilton made a sensation around the notion of being in "The Room Where It Happens" - walking the halls of power and being party to important and consequential decisions. That notion doesn't have much currency in an age of open meeting laws, where citizens expect their representatives to involve the public in decision making, or at least to make decisions in a transparent and open fashion.

The idea of 21st Century Government, we believe, is to make use of new technologies and communication mediums to empower public bodies, streamline the work of government and engage the public. Citizens and voters who can see their government at work and feel as if they can participate in public conversations about policies and ideas are less likely to feel alienated or shut out of important decisions.

New tools for sharing information, collaborating and communicating are transforming the workplace. Towns like Belmont can and will benefit from their introduction tremendously. ITAC's 21st Century Government Subcommittee sought to determine to what extent our Town's committees and other bodies are leveraging technology to conduct their business: scheduling meetings, sharing documents and decisions, informing the public, and so on. We also wanted to understand how the public interacts with committees and the extent these interactions are being aided by modern communications tools and platforms.

Executive Summary

Via informal and formal surveys and other online research, our subcommittee arrived at a number of conclusions as a result of our research.

There is strong support for remote participation and deliberation in public meetings

By a wide margin, both the elected and appointed officials we surveyed *and* members of the public expressed support for two proposals:

- Members of the public should be free to "virtually" attend and participate in government meetings using remote meeting technologies and other tools.
- Committee members should be free to "virtually" attend committee meetings when circumstances demand and should be able to deliberate as a member of the committee.

Fully 64% of elected and appointed board and committee members "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that the public should be able to virtually attend meetings of their committee. Around 77% supported the right of fellow committee members to participate remotely in committee business.

As for the public: 73% agreed or "strongly agreed" that members of the public should be able to remotely attend town committee meetings.

Belmont's boards and committees are not taking advantage of new communication and scheduling technologies

Our survey of 39 different town committees and boards suggests that these government bodies are not making use of tools and technologies that are ubiquitous in the private sector and that make it ever easier to schedule meetings, disseminate information, solicit feedback and coordinate group activities.

Email is the primary means of communicating with and between committee members while the Town website (87%) and face to face interactions (58%) were identified by committee members as the primary ways the public learns about their committee.

To cite one example: just 7% of the committees we surveyed said they used social media to notify the public about the work of their committee, upcoming meetings and so on. This, even as most non-governmental bodies in Belmont - from the Foundation for Belmont Education to Belmont Soccer - have seen the wisdom of doing so.

Similarly, our survey suggests Belmont's government has yet to embrace technologies commonly used in the private sector like shared calendaring, digital signage, online collaboration platforms, electronic signing technology and so on. Such tools and technologies

could streamline the operation of government and committees while also making it easier for residents to stay abreast of and engage with Town government.

Our survey suggests that there are vast opportunities for improvement in the way our town committees operate and that new technologies can increase the transparency, efficiency and effectiveness of both elected and appointed boards. See our Recommendations section for some ideas.

There is no uniformity in sharing committee materials with the public

One charge of our subcommittee was to assess how committee materials were shared with the public. Our survey suggests that there is little uniformity in how documents and other materials reviewed and discussed in meetings are made available to the public both prior to and after meetings.

We found no evidence of a consistent or uniform process for making committee materials widely available for review by the public. This conclusion was supported by our poll of members of the public, who reported varying degrees of success in obtaining meeting materials from committees.

Here again there are opportunities for improvement. Belmont should articulate clear expectations and guidelines for all committees to make any and all disclosable meeting materials discussed in committee available in digital and/or hard copy format. Beyond that, the Town would benefit from adopting a common platform - such as cloud -based storage - to which committee materials can be posted and promulgated.

The public's ability to engage with committee work could be improved

We queried both residents and committee members about the level of public engagement in committee work. The responses we received suggest that the level of public engagement in committee work in Belmont is low.

For example: 39% of committee members' responding to the survey report that they typically have "zero" members of the public attend their meetings. Fully 90% said that they typically have 5 or fewer members of the public in attendance. And, despite a public survey population that skewed towards those involved in town politics, one quarter of residents who responded said they had not attended any public meetings in the last year, while 45% had attended between zero and five in the last year.

Belmont's town government and its committees have work to do to engage the public more in their business and to make the public aware of important matters that are being considered and deliberated within the town's appointed and elected bodies. Tools such as user-friendly, public

Internet calendars, digital signage in well trafficked locations throughout town and better use of social media may pay big dividends in terms of public engagement.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the two surveys conducted by ITAC and discussion within the Committee, we ask the Select Board and Town Administrator consider the following recommendations:

1. That the Select Board vote to permit elected and appointed committee members to participate and deliberate remotely in committee meetings. Remote participation would be at the discretion of the committee Chair.

2. That Board should work with the Town Administrator and the Bylaw Review Committee to assess whether any changes to town bylaws are needed to support remote committee participation.

3. That the Select Board create a working group to oversee and guide the introduction of remote participation to Belmont government meetings. This group will work in conjunction with the Town Administrator, the Town's IT Director Dave Petto, ITAC and other interested parties (e.g., Belmont Media Center). This group would devise plans for equipping public meeting rooms to allow live online streaming of public meetings, advise the Town on the selection and acquisition of technology needed to support online streaming of public meetings (e.g., flat panel displays, "Meeting Owls," etc.), consider and respond to public or committee member concerns as well as issues related to OML compliance and devise materials to assist Committee officers in learning to use these tools and platforms.

4. That the Town fund a full-time Communications Liaison whose job is to facilitate public awareness of and engagement with committee activities and the distribution of committee materials to the public via the Town's website or other platforms including social media sites.

5. That the Town Administrator evaluate ways to improve the efficiency, transparency and effectiveness of key processes related to government and committee work. These should include the process by which public documents are authorized and approved for posting (e.g., digital e-signing), the process by which public meetings are scheduled, how public meeting places are reserved and additional ways for notices of meetings is shared with the public. It should also consider the means by which committee/town materials are made available to the public before and after meetings. The goal should be to maximize transparency and remove barriers to public engagement with the work of Town bodies.

6. That the Town Administrator, working with the Town Clerk, the Superintendent of Schools and the IT Directors of both the Town and Schools evaluate the introduction and use of electronic signs in key locations such as Belmont Town Hall, Belmont public schools and other public places to better inform the public about Town and committee business.

Methodology

Our subcommittee conducted two separate surveys:

The Committee Survey

The **Committee Survey** was sent to Belmont committee Chairs, Vice Chairs and Secretaries, and limited to their participation. Committee officers were notified by the Town Clerk, who sent emails to those three roles for each committee. Multiple responses from each committee from different individuals were permitted, as was if an individual responded more than once because of their positions on multiple committees.

Committee Survey responses were collected from 5/12/2018 through 12/3/2018.

The Resident Survey

The **Resident Survey** was open to all who wished to participate, and it was publicized through multiple mechanisms including:
- Facebook groups
  - "Belmont Parents" group (2,600+ members)
  - "Belmont MA - What's going on?" group (900+ members)
  - "Sustainable Belmont" page (300+ followers)
- Nextdoor, a neighborhood-oriented social network (about 500 members in the area)
- Belmont_MA Yahoo! group / mailing list (850+ members)
  - http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Belmont_MA
- The Belmontonian
  - http://belmontonian.com/news/is-town-government-accessible-take-the-it-committees-survey-to-be-heard/

In all, 181 total and 175 unique Resident Survey responses were collected from 10/25/2018 through 4/30/2019.

For both surveys, after survey responses were received, the data was cleansed before analysis in the following manner:

- Duplicate responses from the same individual were deleted (unless they were representing information about different committees as noted above). This occurred on a number of occasions, presumably because notification about the survey's availability was pushed through multiple channels and participants did not recall responding. Often, multiple responses from the same individual were separated in time by a month.

- Most of the questions were multiple choice. Some of these included an "Other" option allowing the respondent to answer in their own way. In some cases these write-in answers were deemed to be similar enough to one of the provided choices that we counted the result as if the provided choice had been selected.

Committee Survey Response Section [1]

Demographics of Respondents

We sent our committee survey to the officers of all Belmont Town committees and received 39 responses representing 32 committees.

We received responses from:

- Belmont Cultural Council
- Belmont High School Building Committee
- Belmont Housing Trust
- Belmont Library Board of Trustees
- Board of Assessors
- Board of Health
- Board of Registrars
- Bylaw Review
- Cable TV Advisory Committee
- Capital Budget Committee
- Capital Endowment
- Cemetery Commission
- Council on Aging
- Community Preservation Committee
- DPW/BPD Building Committee
- Energy Committee
- Historic District Commission
- Human Rights Commission
- Information Technology Advisory Committee
- Land Management Committee for Lone Tree Hill
- Library Building committee
- Light Board Advisory Committee
- Permanent Audit Committee
- Planning Board
- Recreation Commission
- School Committee
- Select Board
- Shade Tree Committee
- Town of Belmont Scholarship
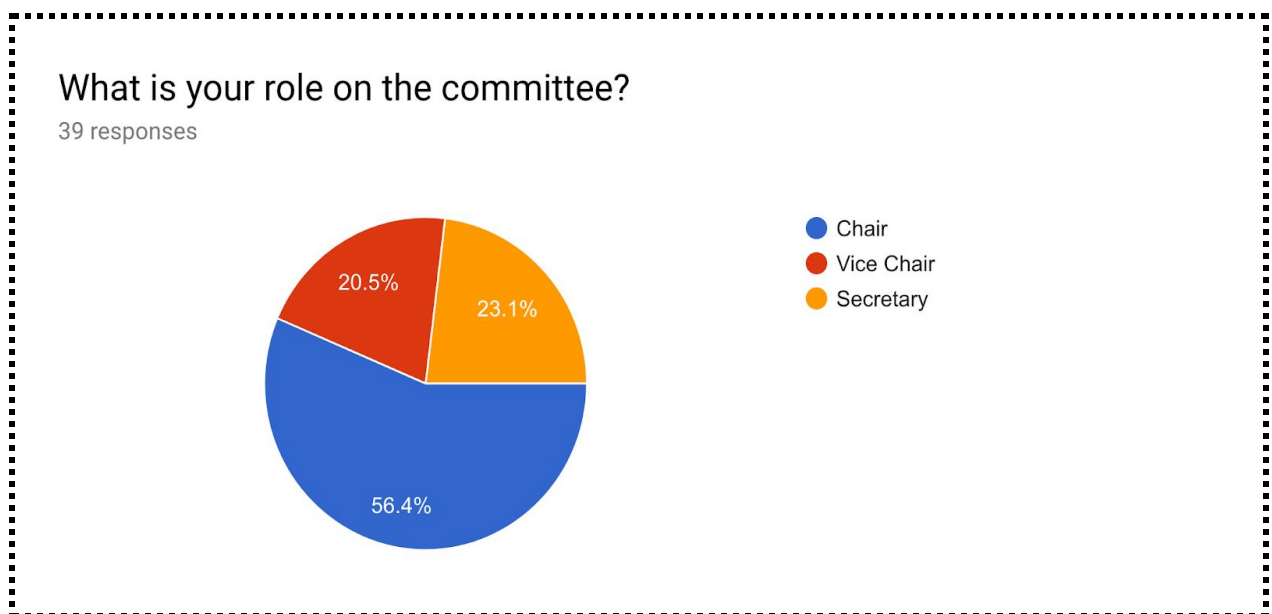- Traffic Advisory Committee
- Warrant Committee

---

[1] https://docs.google.com/forms/d/17F9GHH4n9YepecAzXrldSkycrUwYvF8Fh_AJw-1TODg
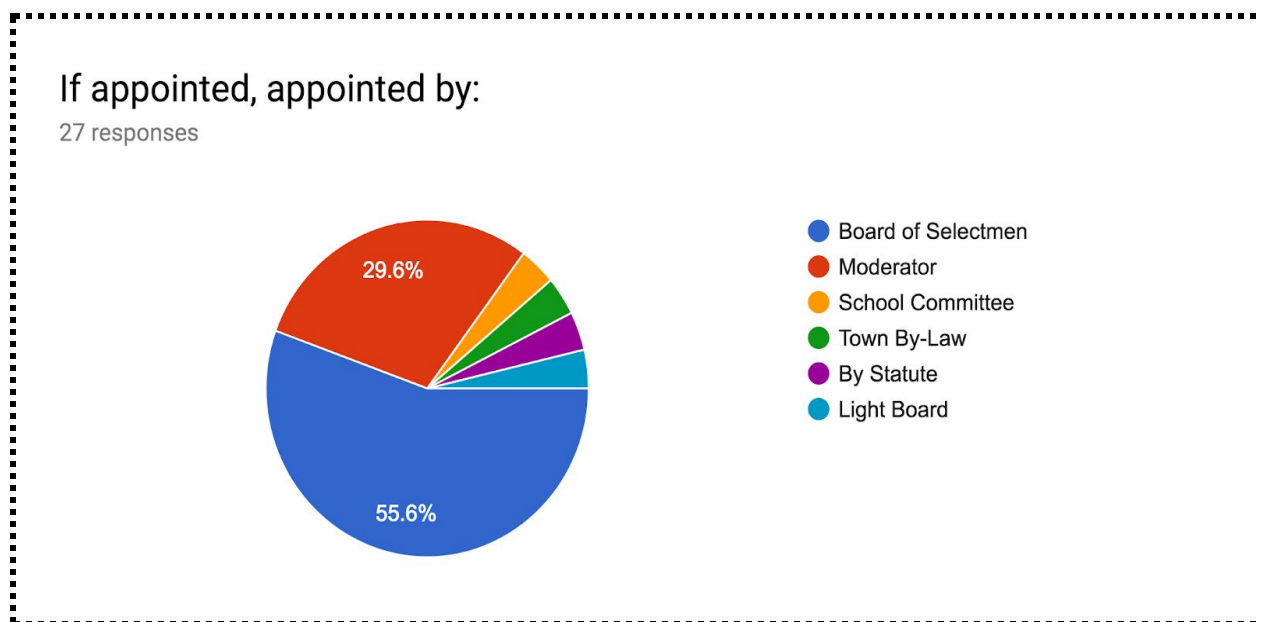
● Wellington Building Committee

Role on Committee and Appointment

We asked committee officers, namely chairs, vice chairs or secretaries to respond to the survey. In most cases we received one response per committee. However, in a couple cases we had multiple officers respond (thus 39 responses for 32 committees).

The majority of respondents (56%) were the chairs of their committees. Vice chairs (20.5%) and secretaries (23%) responded in about equal proportion.

If appointed, appointed by:
27 responses

Legend:
- Board of Selectmen
- Moderator
- School Committee
- Town By-Law
- By Statute
- Light Board

(Pie chart values: 55.6%, 29.6%)

The vast majority of committee respondents (74%) were appointed rather than elected by voters (26%). Of those who were appointed, most (56%) were appointed by the Select Board. Around 30% were appointed by the Moderator with the balance of positions appointed by the School Committee, Light Board or by statute.

Committee Scheduling

As a technology advisory committee, we were anxious to determine whether Belmont's elected and appointed bodies were making full use of technology to carry out the charge of their committee. To our thinking, that question encompasses the high level work of committees: research, discussion and deliberation, consensus building and then sharing ideas and recommendations with other parts of government and the public. But it also (importantly) includes the low level work of committees: scheduling meetings, publishing agendas and meeting minutes, conducting public forums, and so on.

To that end, we asked committee members a variety of questions to understand the ease or difficulty that they had in managing the business of holding meetings, including such things as setting a meeting time and place, determining member availability and officially scheduling the meeting in keeping with state open meeting laws, the frequency of meetings and so on.
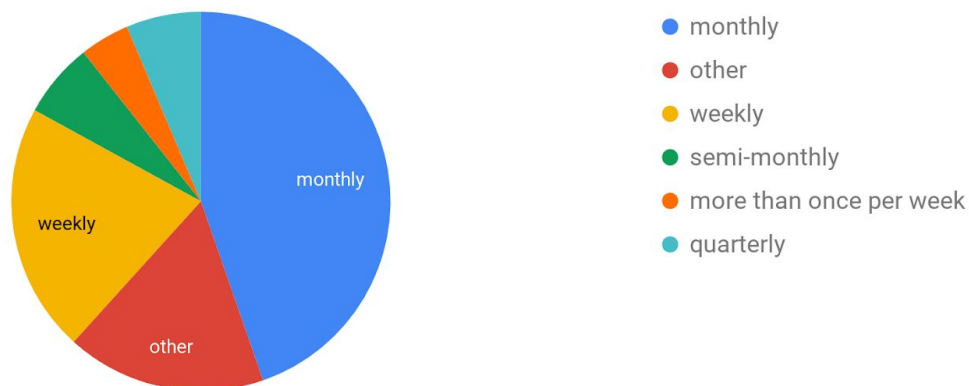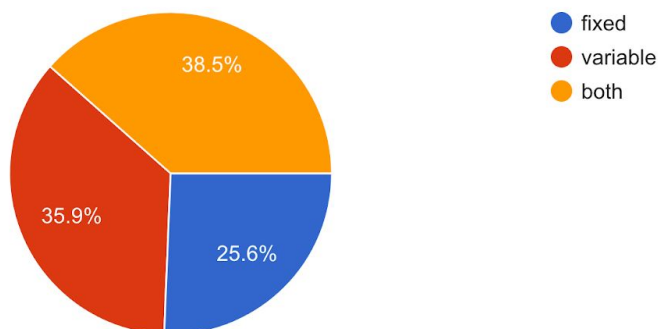
Meeting Frequency

For a large plurality of our respondents, meetings were a monthly affair. Forty six percent of those who responded reporting meeting once a month, while around 13% reported more frequent, weekly meetings.


On this question, we left responses to this question open to interpretation. Generally, by "fixed" we intended to capture meetings that were scheduled far in advance or operated on a regular cadence (first X of the month) like the School Committee or Select Board.

By "variable" we intended to capture meetings that were scheduled as needed or irregularly. The data shows there to be an approximately equal number of committees operating on fixed or variable schedules, and about one-quarter of committees do both.

Scheduling and Rescheduling Meetings

The reason we asked this question is that operating on a variable or combined fixed/variable approach to meeting scheduling increases the scheduling work for both the committee (leadership and members) and Town staff.

Aggregating the responses, almost 70% of meetings are scheduled one month or more in advance, and 30% two weeks or fewer in advance. In order to satisfy Open Meeting Law requirements, meetings must be scheduled and posted 48 business hours in advance.
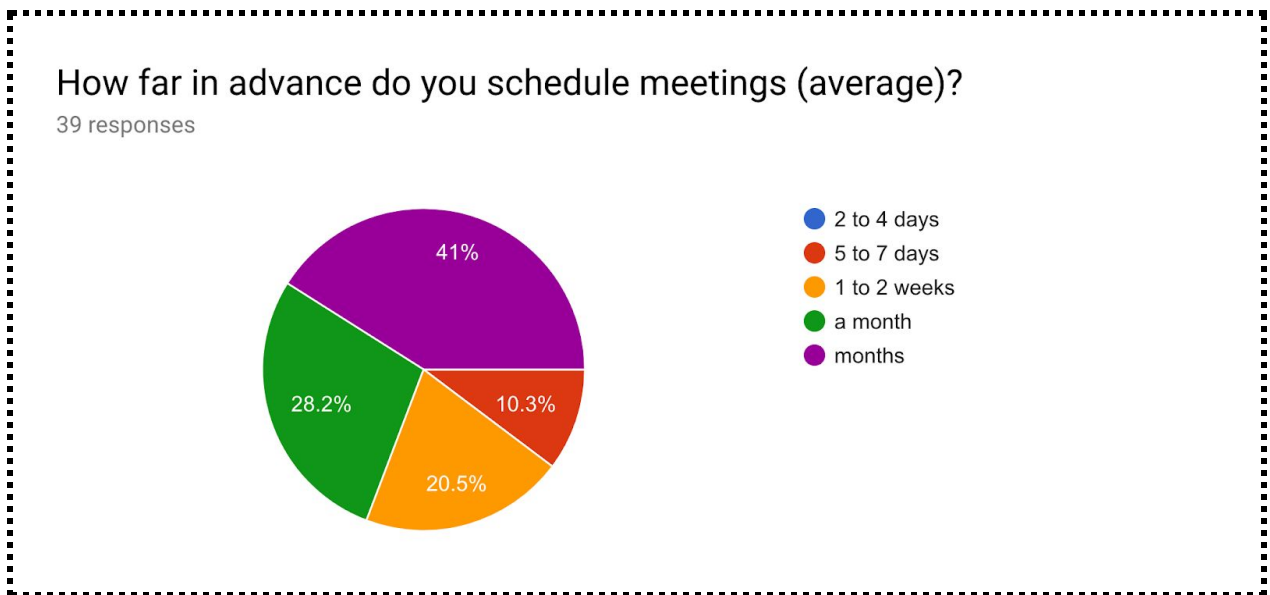
If the meeting is scheduled in the earlier part of the week, an intervening weekend extends the amount of time in advance a committee member must contact the Town Clerk.
We attempted to measure how often committees needed to rearrange or reschedule meetings. Our survey of committee members suggests that while a sizeable minority of committees (26%) say they "never" reschedule meetings, the vast majority of committees do have occasion to reschedule meetings. Around three quarters of respondents (74%) said they rescheduled meetings infrequently (64%) or frequently (10%).

Coordinating amongst Members

When assessing the logistics of meeting scheduling, we wanted to understand how committee members typically communicated and coordinated with each other. As our survey results suggest: the vast majority of committees communicate using email to agree on meeting times.

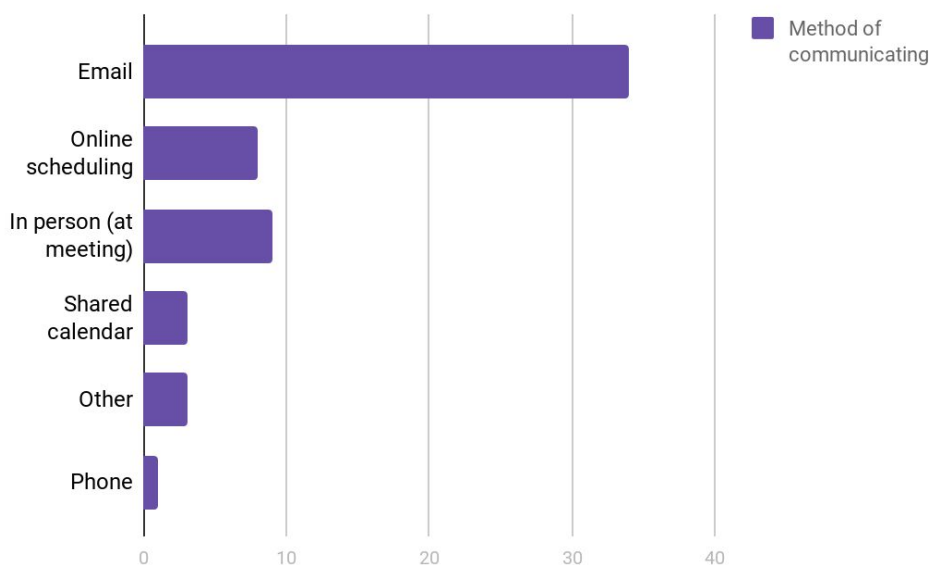## How often is your committee required to reschedule a meeting?
39 responses

- frequently (more than 25% of the time)
- infrequently (less than 25% of the time)
- never

25.6%

64.1%

10.3%
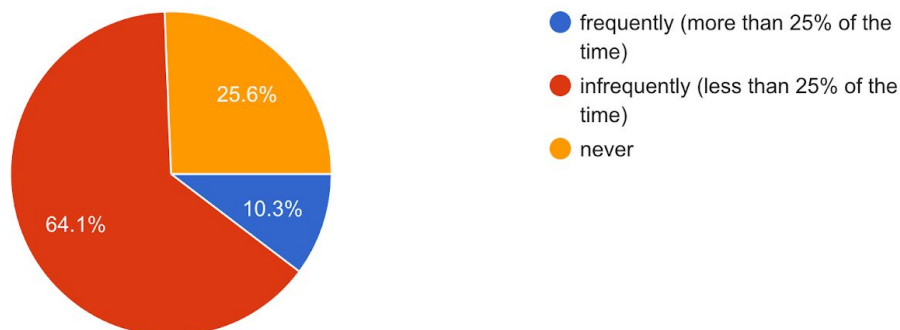
While understandable (email is still the dominant form of business communications), email is a generally inefficient means of coordinating numerous participants around a shared goal such as setting a meeting time.

Belmont committees' heavy reliance on email is potentially inefficient if it results in a lot of back and forth to find acceptable meeting dates for meetings. Additionally, email doesn't scale as a scheduling system as the number of meeting participants grows. In other words a lot more emails are required to schedule a group of 8 people than 3.

To coordinate with committee members, I/we use... (39 responses)

- Method of communicating

Method	
Email	~34
Online scheduling	~8
In person (at meeting)	~9
Shared calendar	~3
Other	~3
Phone	~1

A few of the surveyed committee members indicated that they used a free meeting scheduling tool like Doodle or NeedToMeet. Both of these tools are similar: they allow a meeting organizer to create a meeting, specify a number of alternate times, distribute those possible times to a list of attendees, gather information from the attendees as to their availability, and decide when the meeting can be held to accommodate the most participants. Generally approving - but 25% neutral 5% inefficient. If the 70% has no variability.
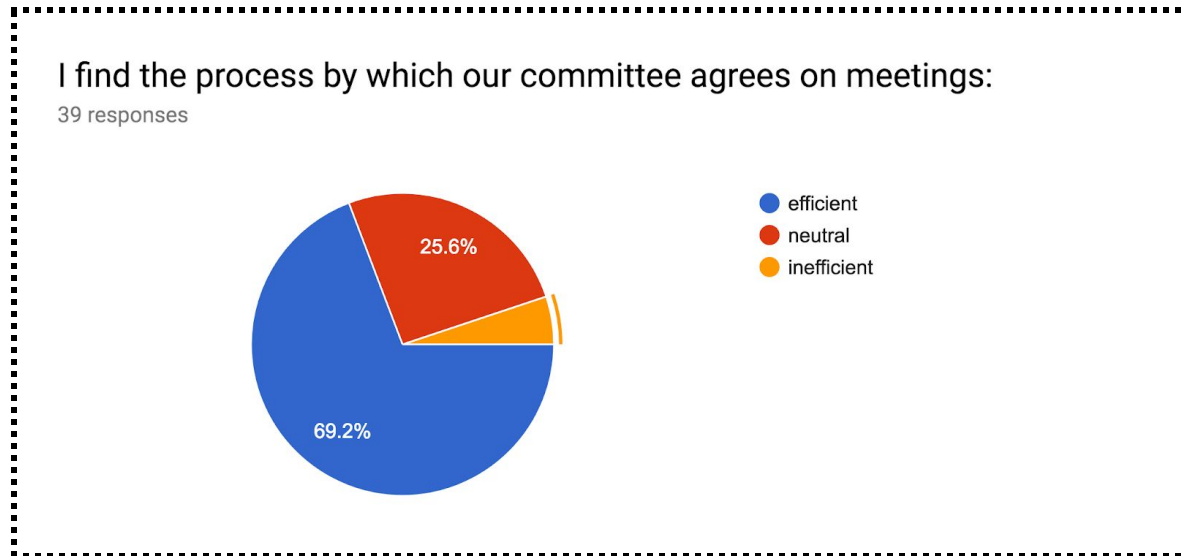

While committees were only lukewarm on assistance with meeting logistics, it's easy to see that the system could be improved with the many technologies that have come along for room scheduling, reducing back and forth, etc.

Sharing Committee Materials

Agendas and Minutes

The first two of the previous three questions show that the most common method of communicating agendas and minutes to Town Clerk is via email. The third shows most committees find this satisfactory. We suggest that there is room for improvement. The current method requires staff in the Town Clerk's and Select Board's offices to spend time manually moving agendas and minutes from email inboxes to specific areas of the web site. In addition it appears that minutes are printed and stamped to indicate receipt by Town Clerk and then sent back to the committee. We recommend that the Town take a close look at this workflow and determine how much time it is spending and decide if it is really a good use of Town employee's time.

To post our meeting minutes, I/we use... (39 responses)
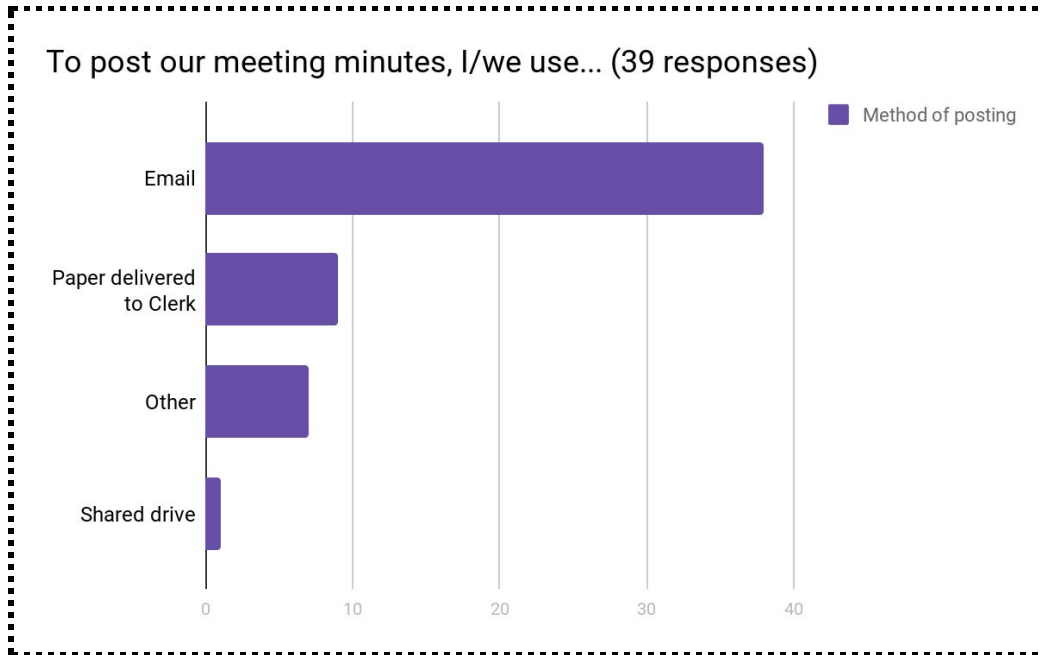
An example alternative workflow could be to provide a fillable form providing committees a standard template for posting agendas. The form could then be automatically posted, with perhaps some checks to ensure the meeting is properly scheduled. In fact, this process could be built into an automatic scheduling system.

For minutes a similar workflow could be set up with a place for the secretary to upload the minutes in whatever form they take, though requiring a standard would not necessarily be a bad thing. The process could include a digital signature with some staff intervention if necessary and then automatically post the minutes for public consumption.

Meeting Materials

The first and second questions in this section show that most committee meetings involve review of a number of documents, most fairly small (2-10 pages). Very few have nothing more than the agenda and previous meeting's minutes.

How many distinct documents does your committee review in a typical meeting (not counting the agenda or minutes from prior meetings)?

39 responses

- 0
- 1 to 5
- 6 to 10
- 11 to 20
- more than 20

15.4%

7.7%

71.8%
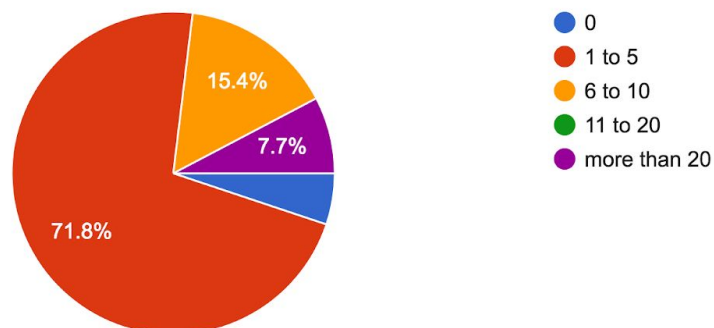
What is the average number of pages for each document that you review?

39 responses

- 1
- 2 to 3
- 4 to 10
- 11 to 20
- more than 20

33.3%

12.8%

33.3%

15.4%
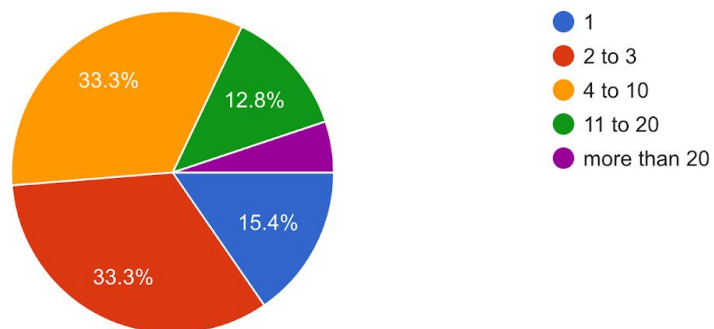
The third question shows that a majority of those documents are not made available to the public prior to the meeting.

We make digital copies of the following available to the public online prior to each meeting…

39 responses

- just an agenda
- an agenda and some documents
- an agenda and all documents we are permitted to make available to the public
- we only make hard copy documents available at the meeting

25.6%
17.9%
51.3%

We make digital copies of the following available to the public online after each meeting…

39 responses

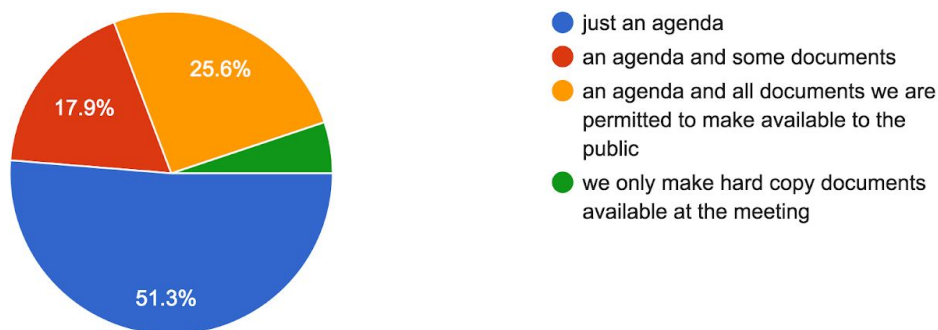- just an agenda and minutes
- agenda, minutes, and some documents
- agenda, minutes, and all documents we are permitted to make available to the public
- we only make hard copy documents available following the meeting

48.7%
12.8%
38.5%
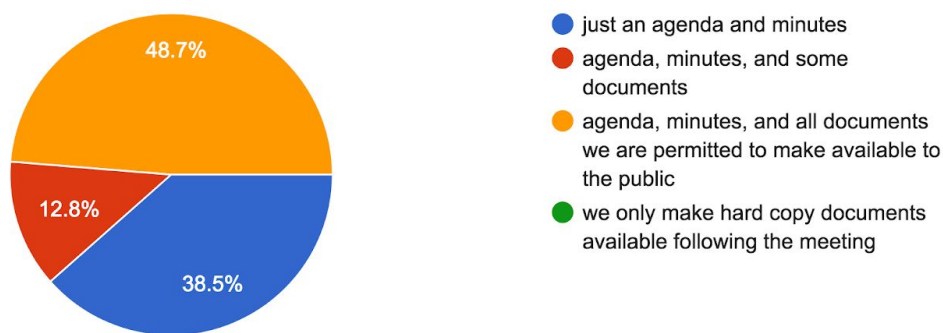
The last question show that some documents are not made available even after the meeting.

Our understanding of the Open Meeting Law is that most documents discussed in the meeting, with few exceptions for certain sensitivities, are supposed to be published. In retrospect the

survey question could have been written to gain a better understanding of whether all required documents are published.

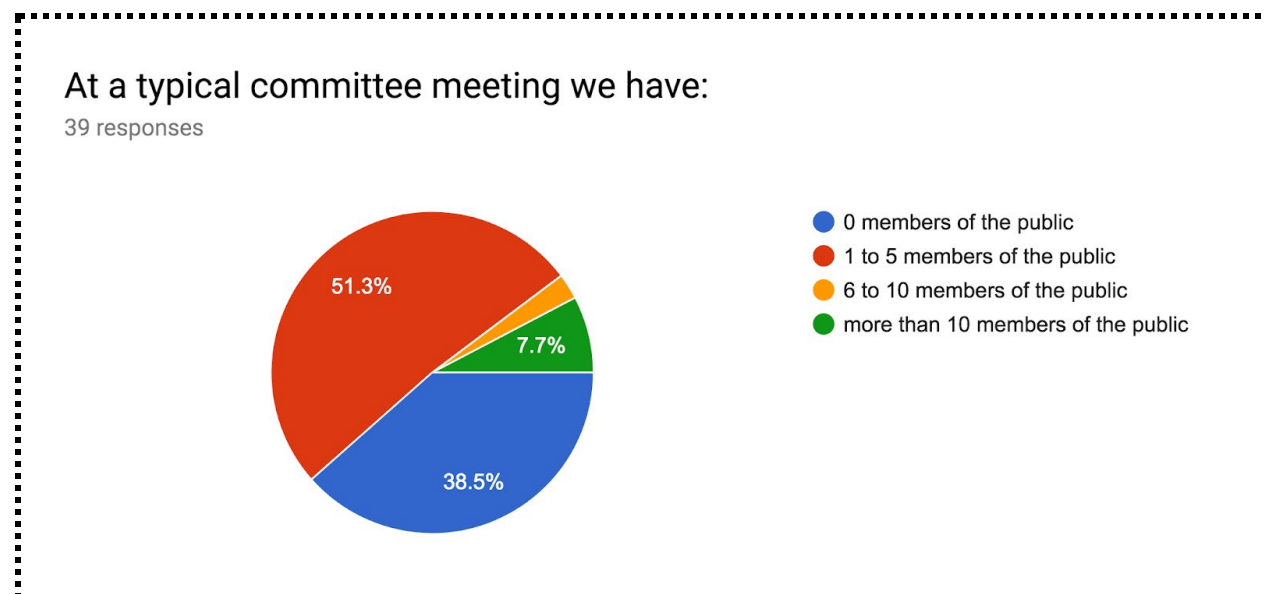We recommend that Town Clerk send a reminder to committee officers to ensure that all required documents are published after a meeting, perhaps including guidance from Town Counsel about the Open Meeting Law.

To increase transparency and perhaps increase public engagement, we also recommend that committees provide access to any documents to be reviewed at the time the meeting agenda is posted, if not earlier. We further recommend that the Town provide a platform to make it easy for committees to manage the posting of agendas, minutes and any other documents reviewed at the meeting, along with a policy requiring the use of the platform.

Public Engagement

At a typical committee meeting we have:
39 responses

- 0 members of the public
- 1 to 5 members of the public
- 6 to 10 members of the public
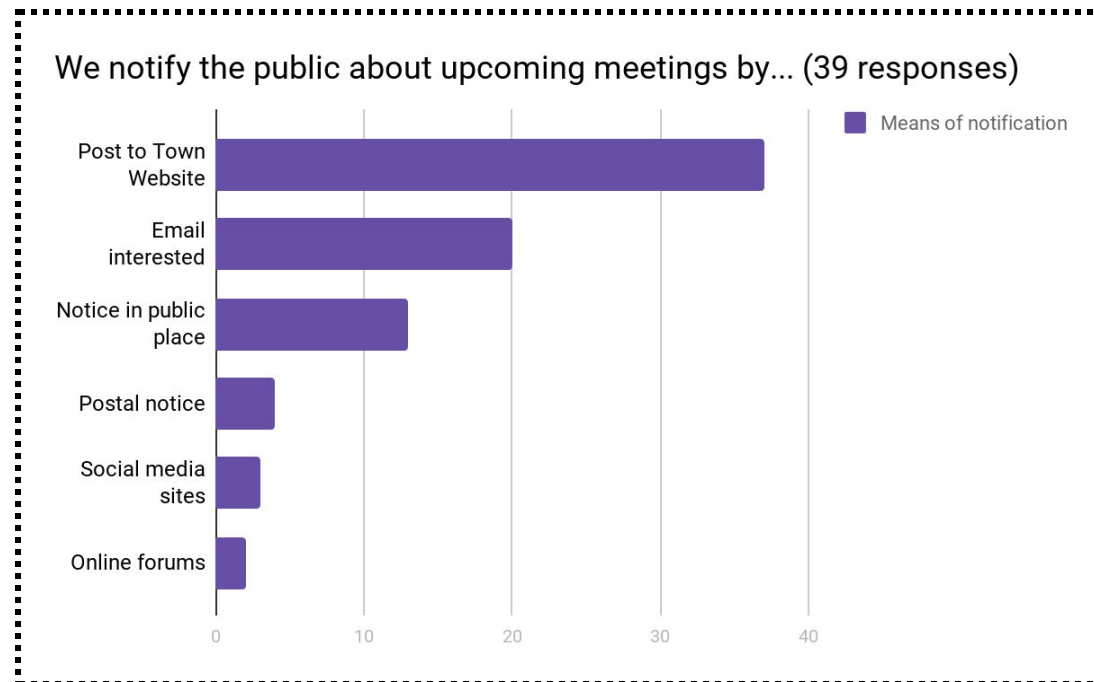- more than 10 members of the public

51.3%
38.5%
7.7%

Barely 10% public participation. It would be interesting to see how that compares with other communities.

The first three questions in this section show limited public engagement and not much effort to increase it. The Town website, the one place required for posting of a meeting schedule, requires citizens to look for it or opt in to a notification. We have evidence that a large number of citizens follow Belmont related content on social media (e.g. Facebook pages such as Belmontonian and others, use of Nextdoor throughout the town etc).

Meeting announcements could easily be posted on such. Other options might include electronic signage in key locations throughout town. One good application of that would be a replacement for the whiteboard with the meeting schedules/room assignments near the Town Clerk's office.

Publicizing Meetings

Government works best when the public is aware of and engaged with the doings of both elected and appointed bodies. With that in mind, we were interested in how the various committees in town made residents aware of their doings. In particular: we were interested in learning how much effort went into notifying the public and whether committees and the town were taking advantage of all the communications channels at their disposal to reach the public. on.

We notify the public about upcoming meetings by... (39 responses)

■ Means of notification

Post to Town Website	
Email interested	
Notice in public place	
Postal notice	
Social media sites	
Online forums	

0   10   20   30   40

To attempt to gauge how different committees were engaging the public we asked two questions. The first inquired about the various means that committees used to notify the public about upcoming meetings, and provided a number of different options for doing so: from posting on the Town's website to posting notices to social media platforms like Facebook.

Town website and email most common methods of committee outreach

The committee members who responded indicated that posting their meeting agenda to the Town's website was by far the most common method of notifying the public about an upcoming meeting, with every respondent indicating they used this (as they should, as its required by the Commonwealth's Open Meeting Law).

The next most common method of notifying the public was email, with close to half of respondents (46%) reporting that they had used that medium to notify the public. Posting notices around town was the next most favored option with just over 30% of respondents reporting that they had used that method to notify the public.
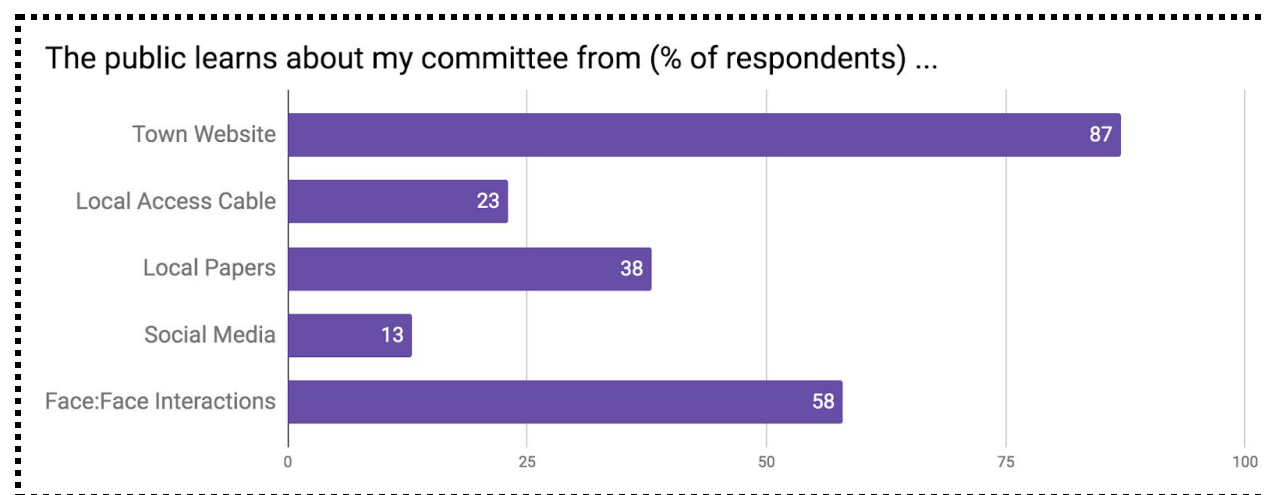
Low levels of committee engagement online

Notably lower on the list of outreach was the use of traditional media (newspapers, online news sites and blogs) as well as social media platforms like Facebook, NextDoor or Twitter. This seems to be an opportunity lost to engage Belmont residents. While posting a notice on the town website is *de rigueur*, it also is passive: requiring Belmont residents to navigate to and then within the Town's website. Social media adopts a "push" vs "pull" approach: putting information about committee doings in front of Belmontonians where they are.

More than ever, Belmontonians receive information about goings on in town online via these platforms. Yet, in our survey, just 10% of respondents from town committees said they posted notices in local papers while just shy of 8% said they used social media to notify the public about meetings.

Town website and face:face interactions rank highly

Beyond committee efforts to inform the public about meetings and other business, we were curious to learn how committee members felt the public learned about goings on within their committee.

Unsurprisingly, committee members were confident that the community mostly learned of their doings via the channels they most often communicated through. Here again, responses indicated that the town's website was the main conduit for information about committee meetings and other happenings.

The public learns about my committee from (% of respondents) ...

Channel	%
Town Website	87
Local Access Cable	23
Local Papers	38
Social Media	13
Face:Face Interactions	58

Almost three quarters of respondents (74%) said that the public learned about their committee via the Town website. Old fashioned face to face interactions were the next most popular response (48%). Local papers like the Belmont Citizen Herald and Belmontonian were the next most common conduit for information about committee activity (33%) followed closely by

Belmont community access cable (26%), according to committee members who responded to our survey.

Online media take a back seat

As we saw in responses to our previous question about meeting notices, there was a wide range of responses to this question, with committee members citing options, from the Library website to reports out to other committees or the Select Board. Here again: online communications and information sharing platforms like community news groups or social media were under-represented.

Around 13% of respondents said they believed that the public learned about the activity of their committee from social media. Just over 2% said the public heard about their committee from online news and discussion groups. Other respondents noted that the public could sign up for email notifications about committee business. Currently, the town sends out close to 13,000 automated email alerts to an (estimated) 1,500 residents.[2]

# Remote Attendance and Participation in Committee Meetings

ITAC asked questions having to do with their support of having committee members as well as the public attend and participate remotely in committee meetings. Our survey revealed strong support for remote attendance by the public, with **close to two-thirds of committee respondents (64%) agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement that "the public (be) allowed to attend meetings and participate virtually."**

"I believe people can choose to attend or participate more spontaneously (at the last minute)." - Committee survey respondent

---

[2] Estimate per Town Administrator's Office

I support members of the public being allowed to attend meetings and participate virtually using an online m... WebEx, Google Hangouts, Zoom, etc.):

39 responses
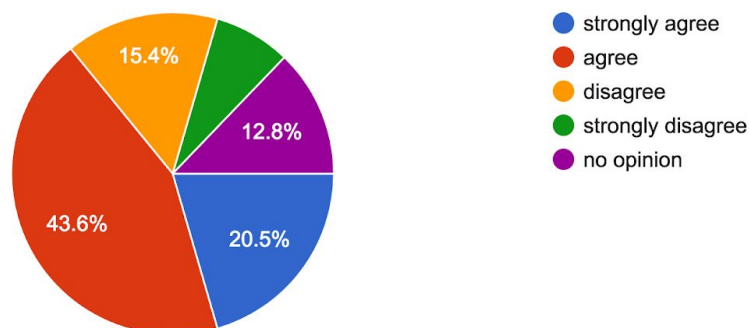
We received very similar responses when we asked committee members about their support remote participation by fellow committee members. There also, support for remote participation and deliberation was overwhelming, with more than three quarters (76%) said they "agree" or "strongly agree" (40%) with the statement "I support committee members attending meetings and deliberating virtually using an online meeting technology."

I support committee members attending meetings and deliberating virtually
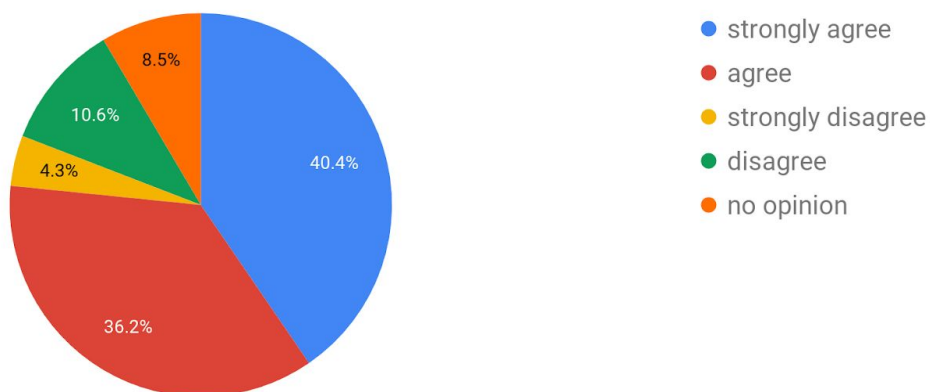
Strong committee support for remote attendance and participation

Among committee members who agreed or strongly agreed that the public should be able to participate remotely in committee meetings, the most oft-cited reasons for supporting that policy was that it would increase public engagement and participation in the work of committees, enable participation by older residents or those with physical disabilities,I encourage

participation despite travel, sickness, or other temporary conditions and that remote participation is in keeping with the spirit of the State's Open Meeting Law.

Committee members should be allowed to attend meetings virtually...

- in case of business or personal conflict only
- for any reason
- only when a quorum would otherwise be impossible
- in case of business or personal conflict only, only when a quorum would otherwise be impossible
- Other

23.7%
13.2%
23.7%
21.1%
18.4%
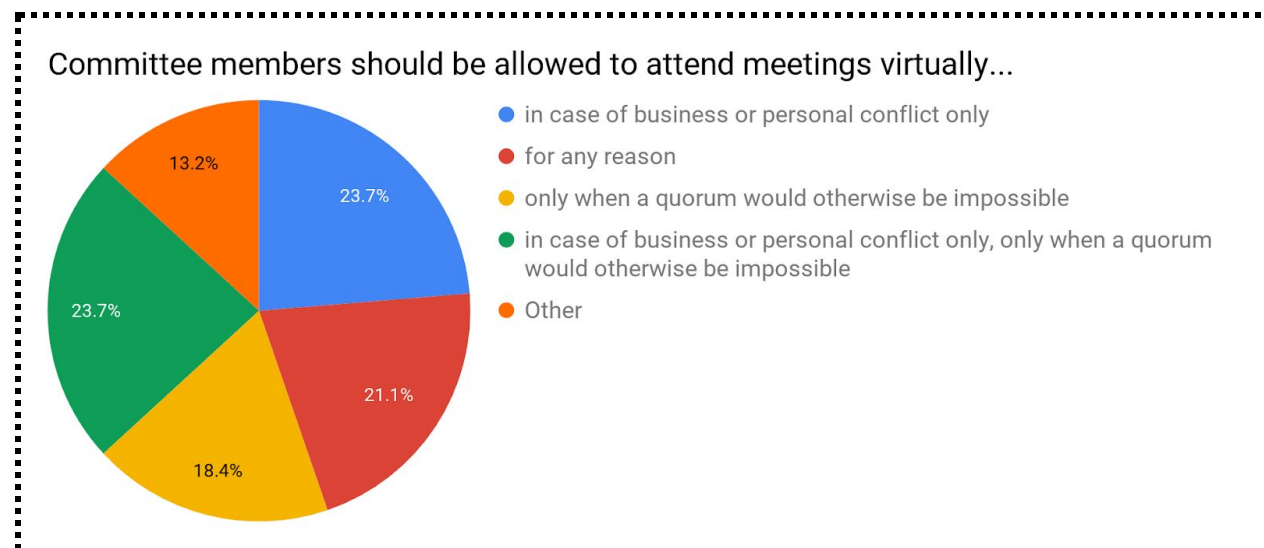
Among those committee members who support or strongly support remote deliberation and attendance, one fifth (21%) supported it "for any reason." A large majority (~65%) supported remote participation and deliberation by fellow committee members when certain conditions were met, such as "business or personal conflict" by a committee member (24%) or when a committee quorum would otherwise be impossible (18%).
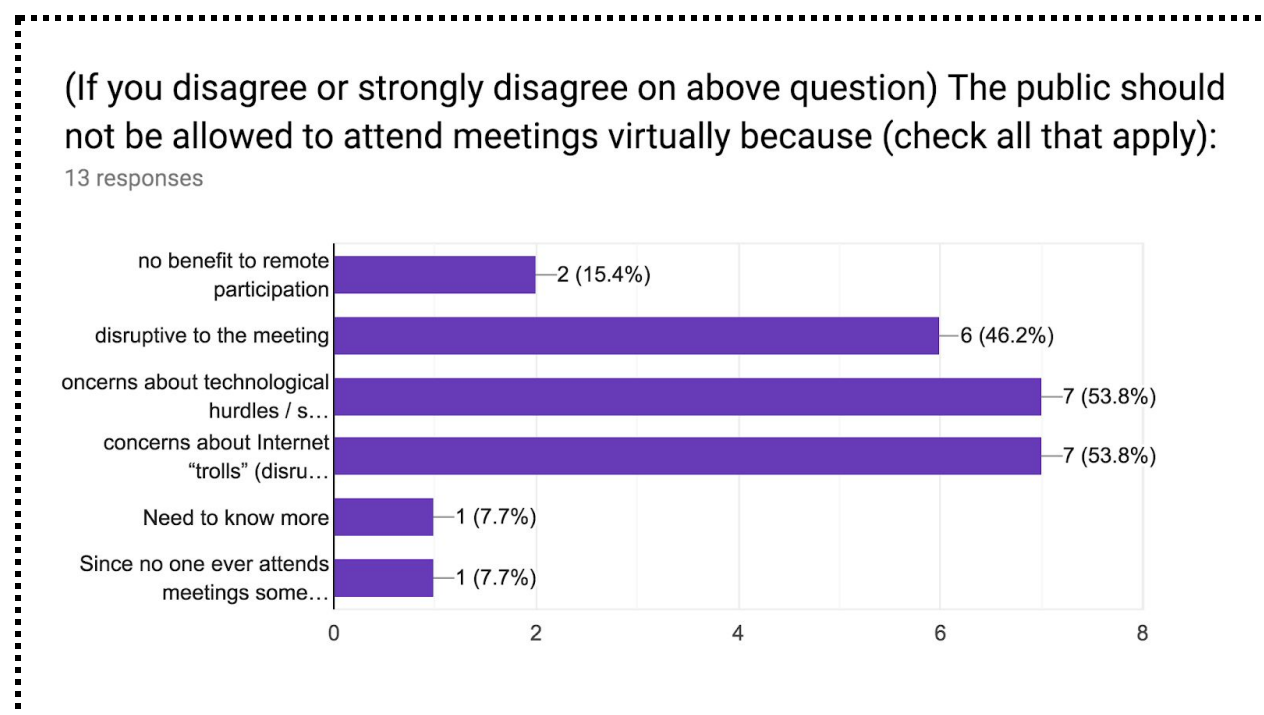
"We lost several meetings this year due to snow. Then we had difficulty rescheduling due to the members' work conflicts and availability of dept. heads. Being able to participate remotely would have helped us meet our deadlines without the heartburn we experienced this year." - Committee survey respondent

While committee support for remote participation by the public and committee members was strong, it was not universal nor was it unqualified. Respondents noted concerns about the need for a reliable process for managing remote participation and handling the video archives of committee meetings.

Internet trolls, control a concern for skeptics of public participation

Among the minority (24%) of respondents who were opposed or strongly opposed to remote public participation in committee meetings, a majority listed concerns about technology hurdles and concerns about Internet "trolls" as reasons for their opposition. A sizable group also felt that online participants would be disruptive to committee proceedings.

While our survey did not ask respondents about their level of experience with or knowledge of online meeting platforms, it is worth pointing out that all commonly used remote meeting platforms allow meeting organizers to control member participation including who is seen and heard and when, whether questions are allowed and so on. We believe that many of the concerns expressed by online participation skeptics could be allayed with a better understanding of the capabilities of online meeting platforms.

(If you disagree or strongly disagree on above question) The public should not be allowed to attend meetings virtually because (check all that apply):

13 responses

| Category	Value
no benefit to remote participation	2 (15.4%)
disruptive to the meeting	6 (46.2%)
oncerns about technological hurdles / s…	7 (53.8%)
concerns about Internet "trolls" (disru…	7 (53.8%)
Need to know more	1 (7.7%)
Since no one ever attends meetings some…	1 (7.7%)

OML a concern for remote committee participation

Concerns about Internet trolls were a top reason a small (15%) minority of committee members cited for disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the notion of fellow committee members being able to participate or deliberate remotely. Of those who disagreed or strongly disagreed with that statement, more than 60% cited interference from Internet trolls as a reason. A similar percentage cited concerns about compliance with the state's open meeting law should fellow committee members be allowed to participate remotely. Still others expressed concerns about the technological hurdle that remote participation technology would pose to less tech-savvy committees.

Again, proper education about the features of online meeting and collaboration platforms like WebEx, Google Hangouts, GoToMeeting and others might go a long way to assuaging some of these concerns.

(If you disagree or strongly disagree on above question) Committee members should not be allowed to atten...lly because of (check all that apply):
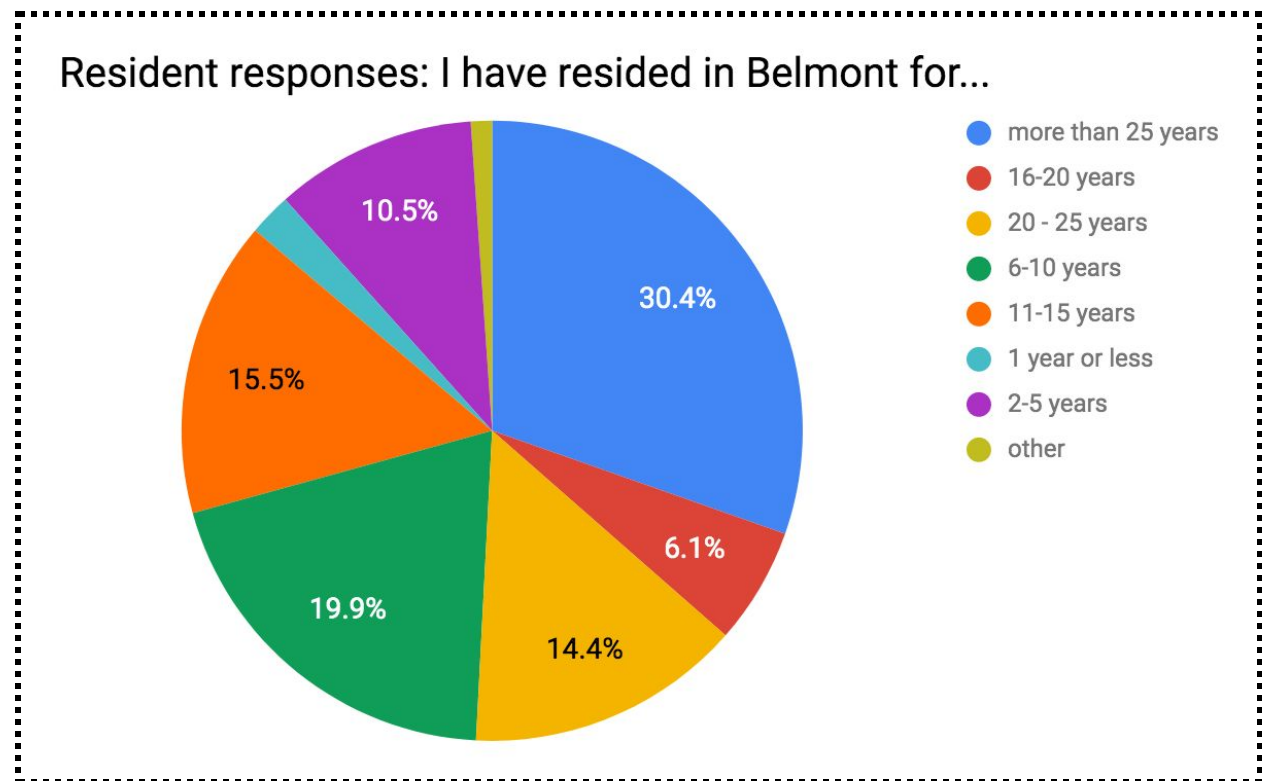
8 responses
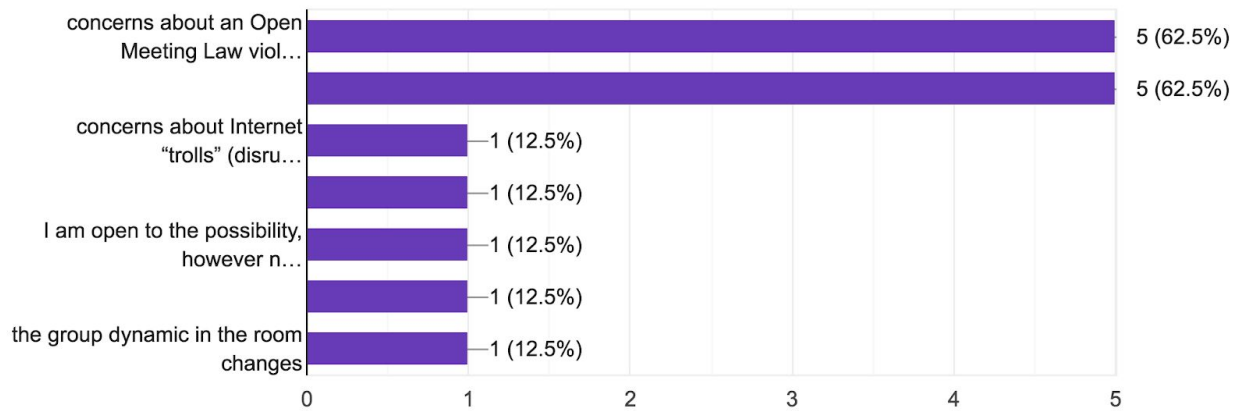
Resident Survey Response Section[3]

The [Resident Survey](#) was distributed in the form of a Google Poll and was designed by the ITAC 21st Century Government subcommittee to measure the public's. In all, 181 total and 175 unique Resident Survey responses were collected from 10/25/2018 through 4/30/2019. For a description of the approach to the Resident Survey, please see the [Methodology](#) section of this report.

Demographics of Respondents

Of the 180 residents who answered this question on our survey there was a healthy mix of long time and newer residents. A plurality (35%) of survey takers have resided in Belmont between 6 and 15 years. Almost a third (30%) have lived in town more than 25 years.

Respondents time living in Belmont

Resident responses: I have resided in Belmont for...

- more than 25 years
- 16-20 years
- 20 - 25 years
- 6-10 years
- 11-15 years
- 1 year or less
- 2-5 years
- other

---

[3]

Respondents by age

We received a good sampling of Belmont residents when considering the age of the respondent as well. The median and average age of respondents was 53 years old - slightly older than the median age for Belmont residents, which is 41 years old.[4] The youngest survey respondent was 21 years old and the oldest was 83. The mode for respondents was 58.

Community involvement

Our resident survey skewed in the direction of individuals who were involved in Belmont town government in some way. Of the 175 unique responses to a question about whether respondents were a member of an elected or appointed board or another community group in Belmont, a majority (52%) said they were.
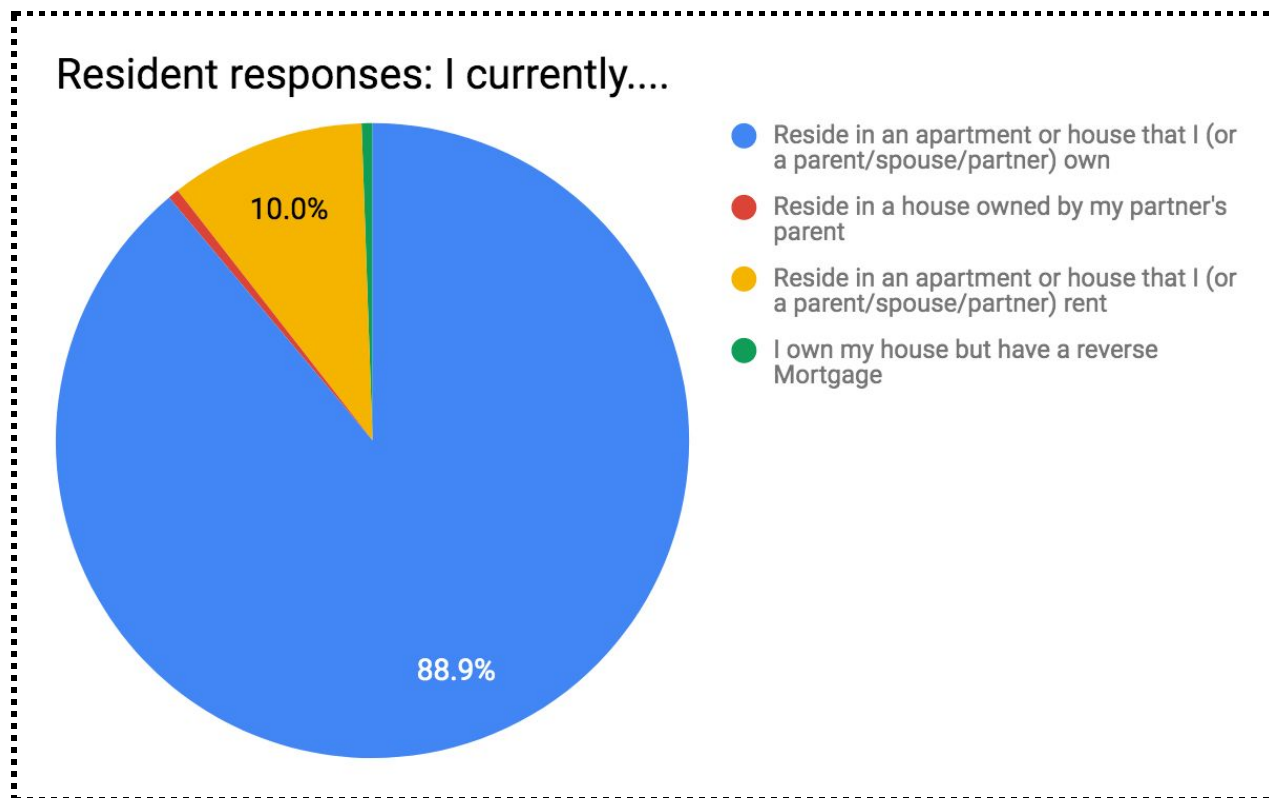
It is worth keeping this skew in mind when considering responses to the other resident survey questions - in particular those about participation in local community events. This survey sampled a relatively involved subgroup of Belmont residents. A poll of the full community might well yield different results especially re: involvement in or awareness of local government.

Homeowners versus renters

Of the 175 unique responses we received to a question asking resident respondents about whether or not they were homeowners, the vast majority (89%) were homeowners. Around 10 percent of respondents said they were renting their home. The data suggests a skew in favor of homeowners versus renters from the community as a whole, where 63% of homes are owner occupied and 37% are occupied by renters.[5]

---

[4] https://censusreporter.org/profiles/16000US2505105-belmont-ma/
[5] https://censusreporter.org/profiles/16000US2505105-belmont-ma/

Resident responses: I currently....

- Reside in an apartment or house that I (or a parent/spouse/partner) own
- Reside in a house owned by my partner's parent
- Reside in an apartment or house that I (or a parent/spouse/partner) rent
- I own my house but have a reverse Mortgage

10.0%

88.9%

Residents' Feelings about Remote Participation

As we did with Town committee members, ITAC polled residents specifically about their feelings about remote ("virtual") participation in meetings of Town committees and other elected and appointed bodies. We were interested to learn residents feelings both about virtual participation by the public in committee meetings and about the possibility of allowing committee members, themselves, to participate, deliberate and vote remotely.

In both cases, we were encouraged to see public sentiment about remote participation by the public and by officials to be closely in line with the responses we received from committee officers. Namely: there was strong support for allowing both members of the public and committee members to participate remotely in Town government meetings.

Residents' Use of Remote Participation/Sharing Technology

One thing we wanted to understand about our residents was their level of experience with- or exposure the kinds of technologies that might conceivably be used to increase engagement between Town bodies such as committees and residents. That includes remote presence tools like Skype, Google Hangouts or GoToMeeting as well as cloud based sharing platforms like Google Drive, Dropbox, and so on.

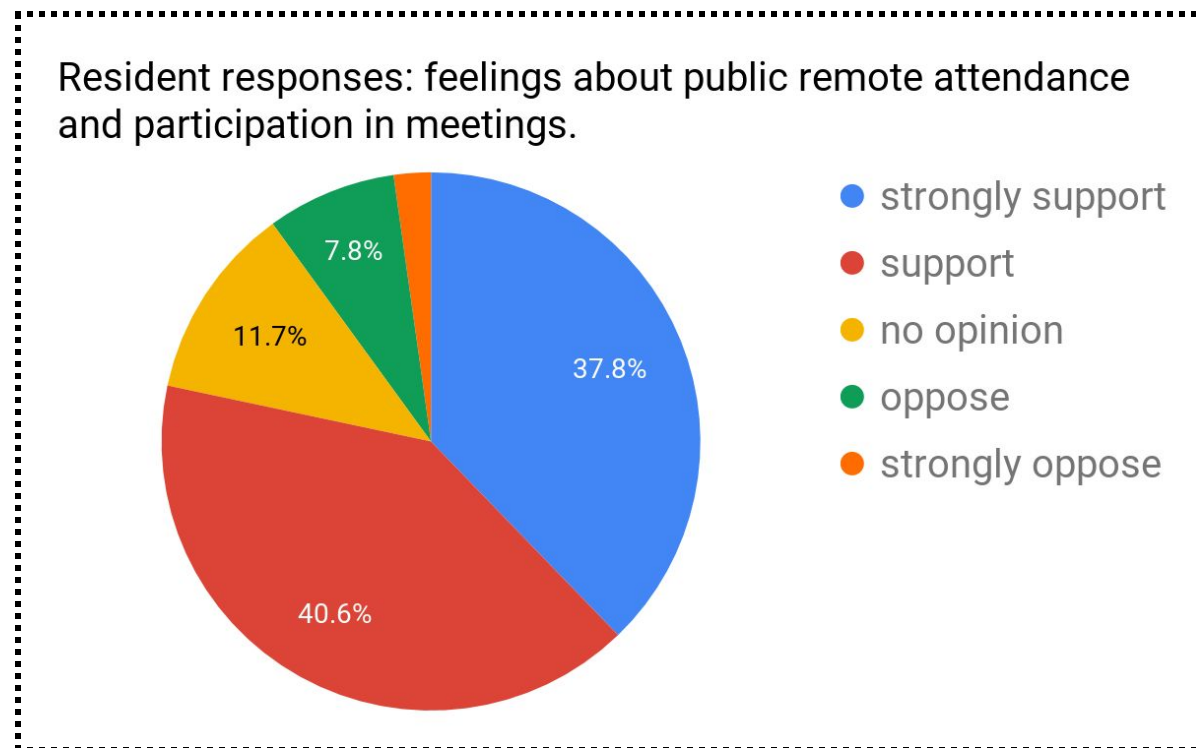At some point in the past I have done the following...
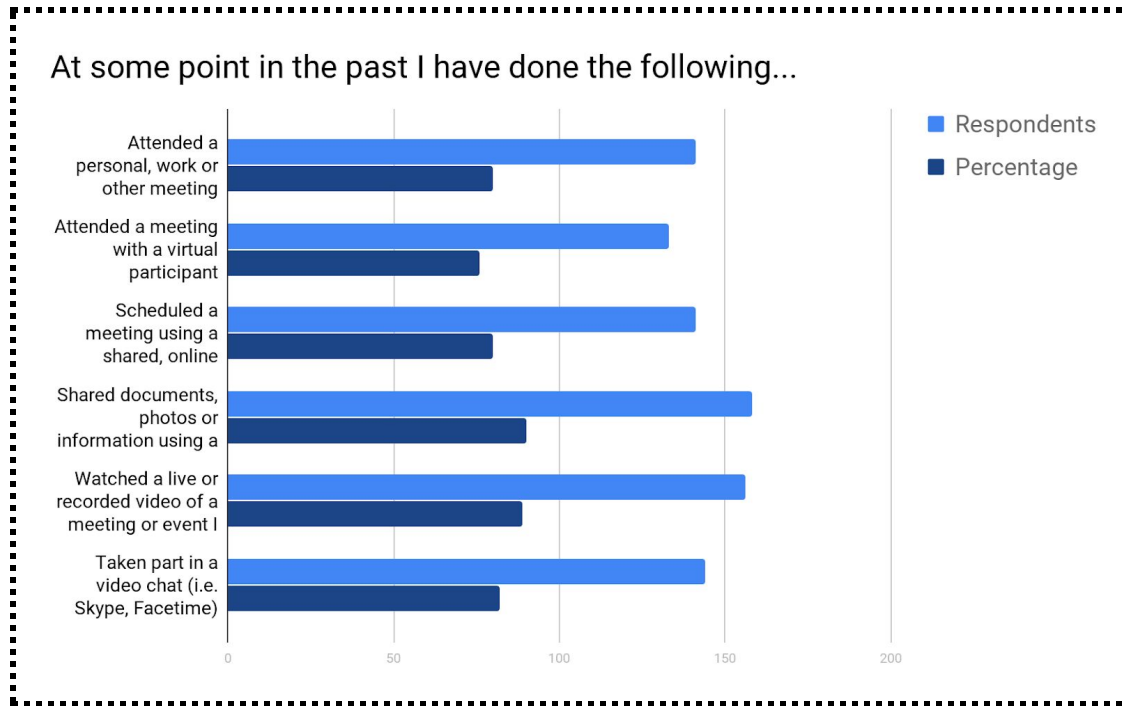
Responses to these questions suggest that the vast majority of residents who responded to our survey had direct experience using remote presence tools, shared calendars and cloud based sharing platforms.

Specifically: more than three quarters of respondents indicated they had taken part in each of our technology interactions, with around 90 percent of respondents reporting experience sharing documents online or watching video. Around 80 percent said they had attended a work or personal meeting virtually and 76% said they had taken part in a meeting where a colleague attended virtually.

Remote participation by the Public

First, on the question of remote attendance by the public, more than three quarters of respondents supported the idea (41%) or strongly supported it (38%). Just 10 percent of residents polled opposed the idea and just 2% "strongly" opposed it.

Resident responses: feelings about public remote attendance and participation in meetings.

- strongly support
- support
- no opinion
- oppose
- strongly oppose

37.8%
40.6%
11.7%
7.8%

Another 12% of respondents had "no opinion" on the question, which often meant they were withholding support or lack of support, but had questions. We've collected some of these comments in Appendix B: Resident Responses and Comments.

What's clear is that support for remote participation by the public is strong - but not unconditional, and that some concerns linger about the potential of members of the public to disrupt or misdirect committee business.

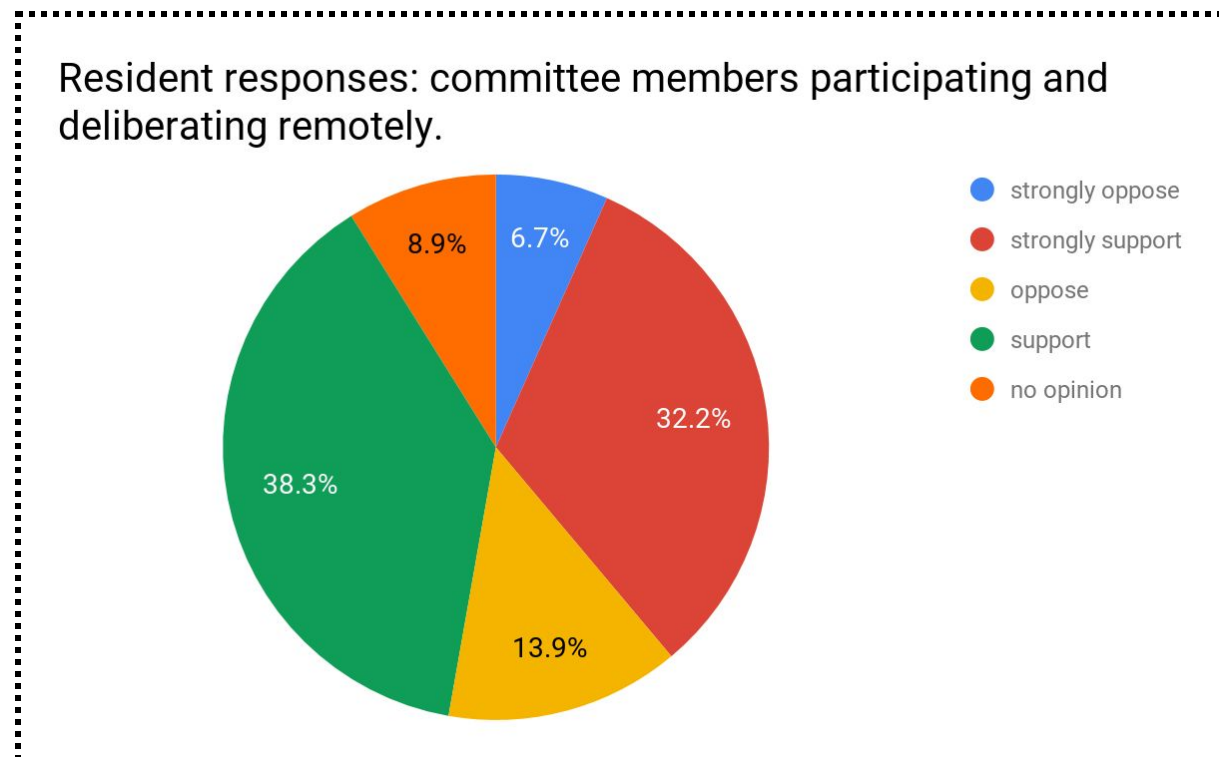## Remote participation by Committee Members

While the state's Open Meeting Laws allow the public to participate remotely in any open meeting without the need for special dispensation, the same is not true of committee members. There, the State has outlined specific conditions that must be met in order for remote participation and deliberation by committee members to take place in harmony with OML. Among the requirements: that a quorum of committee members be physically present in the meeting room (no "virtual quorums") and that the proceedings be clearly audible.

For our resident survey, we didn't get into the specifics of the implementation of virtual committee member participation, but simply asked whether residents supported the idea of committee members being able to take part in committees virtually including

deliberation and voting. Here again, we found strong support for the idea mong members of the public, though slightly lower than support for public remote participation. Still, more than 70% of those we surveyed said they supported (38%) or strongly supported (32%) the idea of committee members participating and deliberating remotely.

Almost double the percentage of respondents (~21%) were opposed (14%) or strongly opposed (7%) to the idea as opposed to public participation, indicating that remote committee member participation is a bigger ask for some members of the public.

On this question, again, there were residents who responded to our question with questions of their own. Around 9% of respondents expressed "no opinion" or included comments indicating they were not ready to support or not support the idea. We have included these comments in Appendix B: Resident Responses and Comments and encourage you to review them there, as they provide an indication of some of the reservations or implementation questions that members of the public have.

Resident responses: committee members participating and deliberating remotely.

- strongly oppose
- strongly support
- oppose
- support
- no opinion

6.7%
32.2%
13.9%
38.3%
8.9%

Residents' Engagement with Committees

At a high level, our survey of residents was intended to measure their level of engagement with the work of Town bodies - whether elected or appointed. In a series of questions, we asked residents about their recent experiences attending public meetings.

Public Meeting Attendance

As noted above in the [discussion of respondents involvement in town government](#), our resident population skews in favor of those who are engaged in government in some way with a majority of our 175 unique respondents identifying as members of an elected or appointed body or some other community group. Responses to our inquiry about how many public meetings respondents had attended in the last year reflects that. Almost one third (31%) reported attending more than 10 public meetings and a majority (55%) had attended five or more public meetings in the last year.
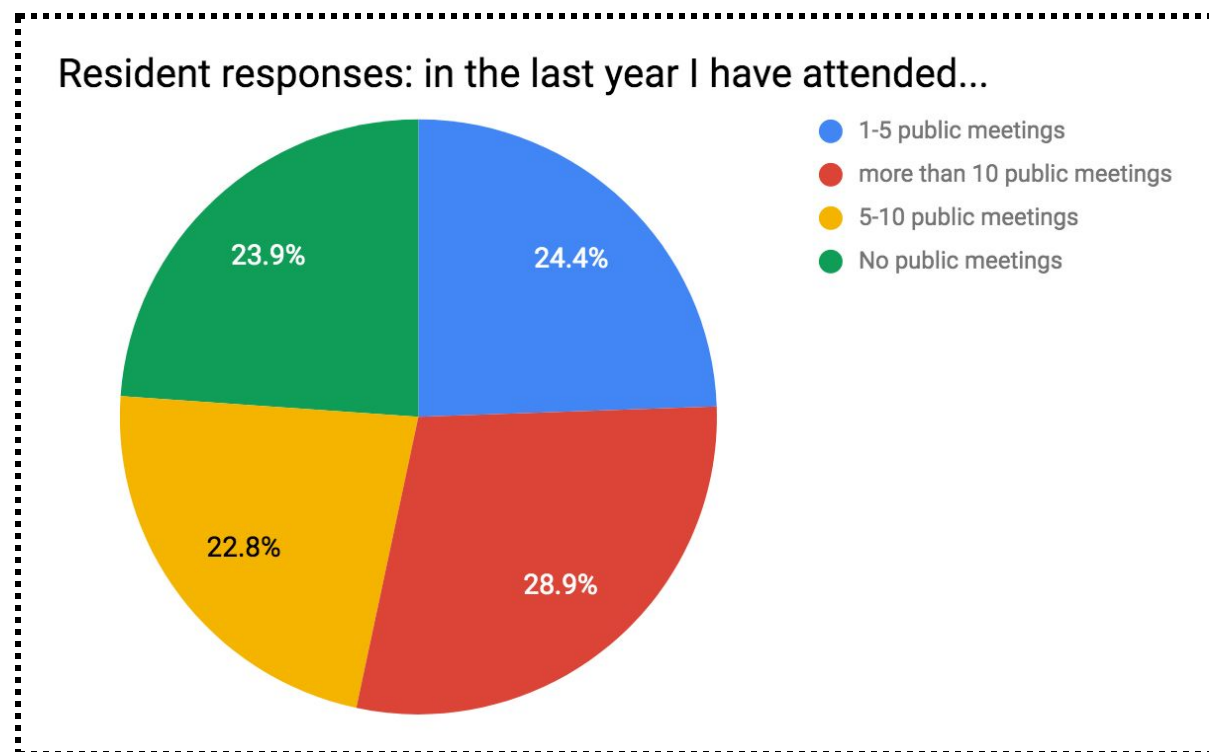

On the one hand: these numbers are encouraging: more than three quarters of participants said they had attended a public meeting in the last year. On the other hand: our assumption is that this isn't the norm and that the level of engagement across the broad population of ~26,000 residents. In fact, even among our more-engaged population of respondents, almost a quarter of our respondents to this poll (23%) reported not attending any public meetings in the last year.

Public Meetings attended in the last Year

We asked our respondents what meetings they had attended in the past year. This question yielded a long list of committees that respondents had attended and had a "long tail" distribution, with many committees and government bodies attracting interest from a small number of respondents. The most commonly cited committees are listed below, with Town Meeting, the Select Board and the School Committee garnering the most responses.

It is worth noting that the high number of responses citing Town Meeting may reflect a bias in respondents towards Town Meeting members rather than public attendance at Town Meetings by non Meeting members, which is generally sparse.

Resident Responses: Committee meetings attended in past year...
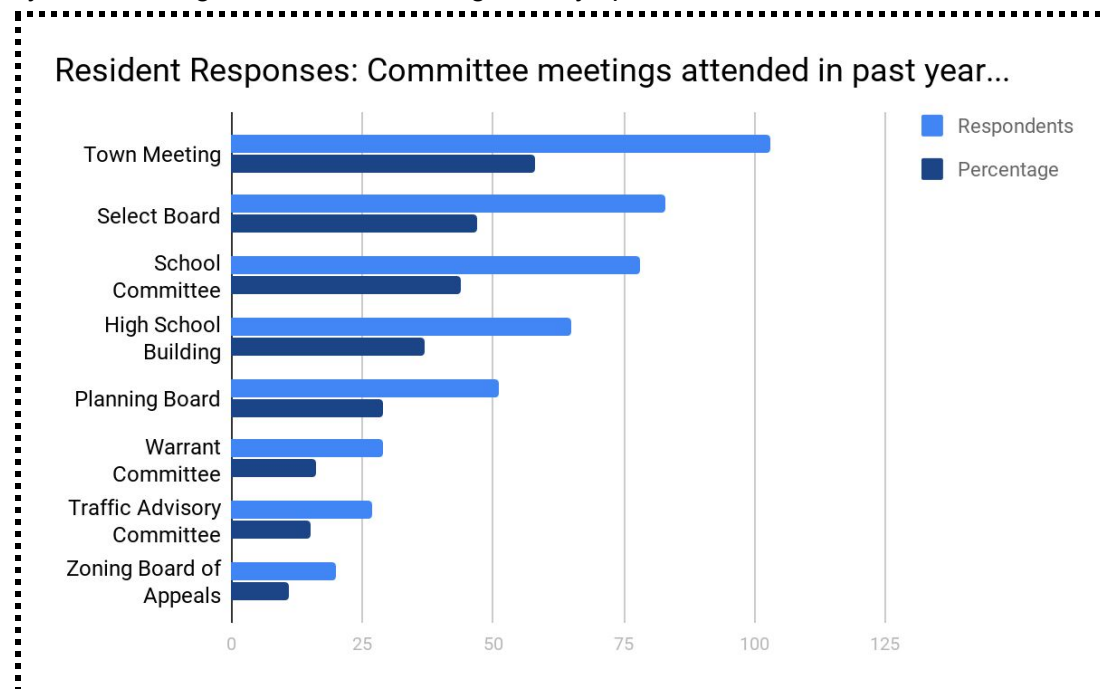
How Residents engage with Committees

We asked community members to indicate how they engaged with Town committees and other bodies when they had occasion to do so. Once again, we received a long list of responses, many of them highly personalized. We've extracted the most common answers below.

Here again, the responses we received are not surprising and suggest that email and face to face interactions are the most common avenues for the community and committee members to interact. Interactions via social media (i.e. Facebook comments) registered here - they were about as common as interactions via phone. Other interactions like text or SMS communications were far less common.

Resident responses: how I have interacted with committee members
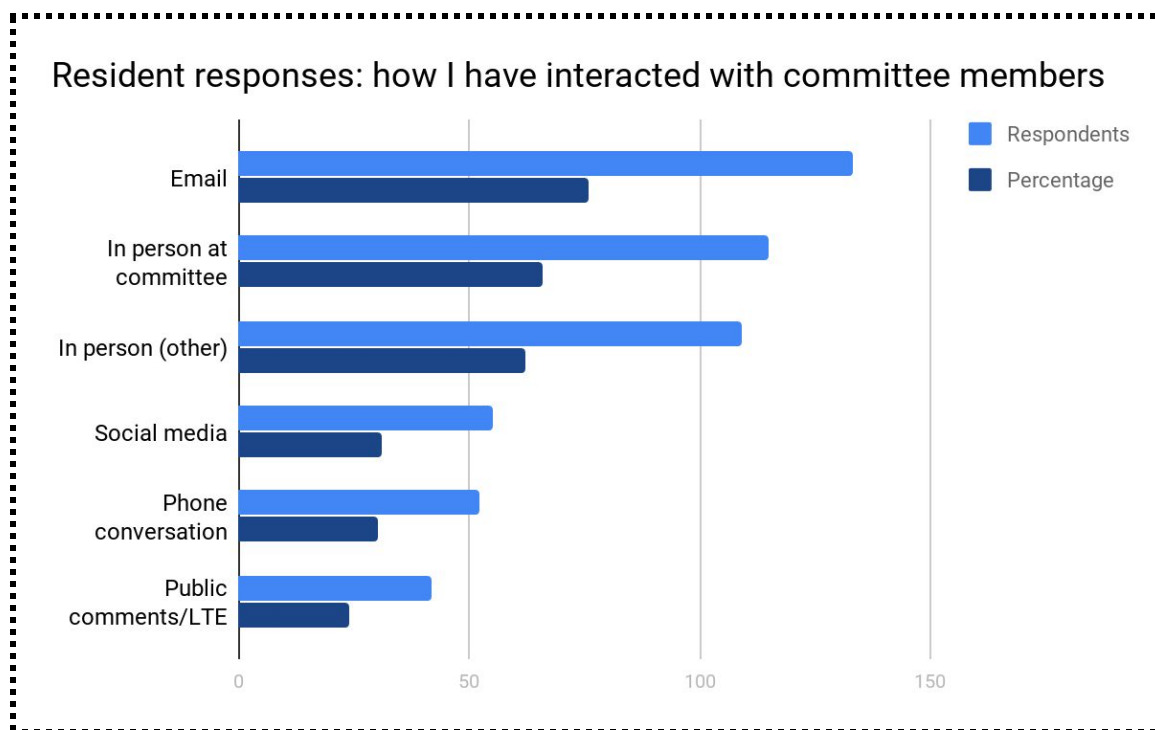
How Residents access Meeting Content

Much of the work of managing our Town of Homes falls to elected or appointed committees. It goes without saying that residents need to be kept abreast of what happens in committee meetings, as well as the materials that contribute to committees making the decisions they make.

How Residents access Committee Materials

To that end, we surveyed residents about whether members of the public had access to committee materials both when attending meetings in person and after committee meetings had taken place. We sought to understand to what degree residents have been able to access committee materials before or after a meeting takes place.
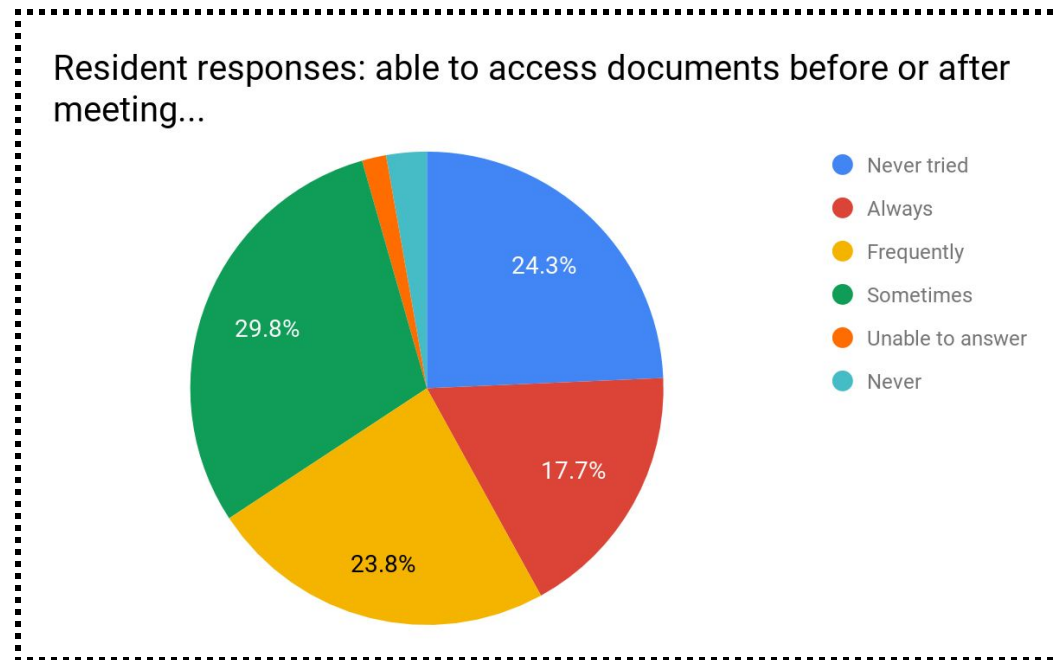
Accessing Materials Before a Meeting
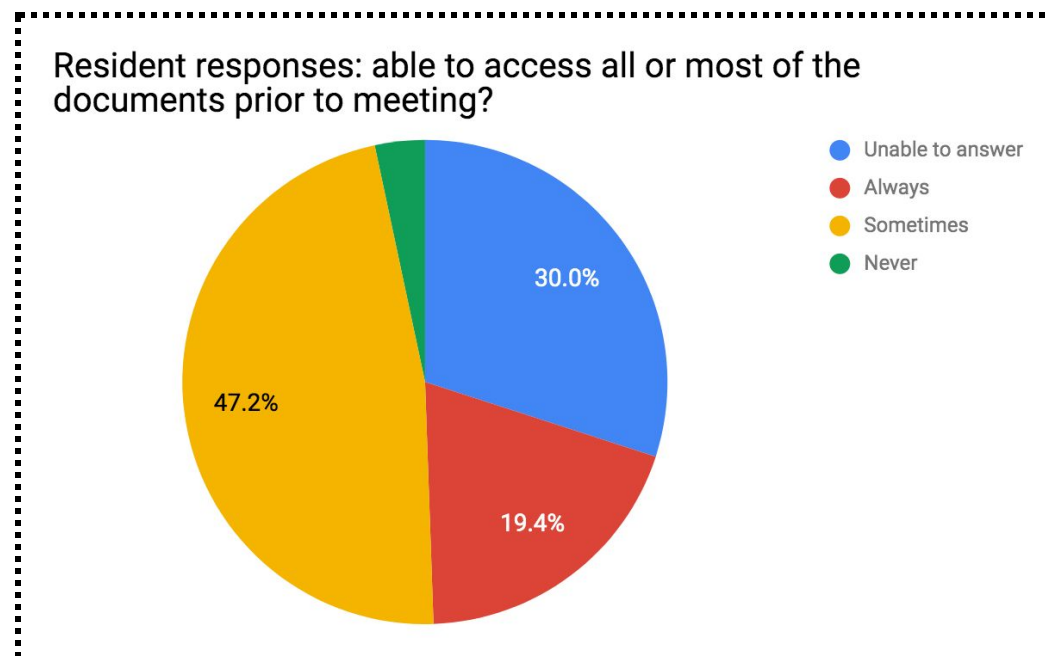
When we asked residents about obtaining committee materials before a meeting takes place, the responses indicate that residents more often than not had access to all or most of the documents discussed in committee meetings. Two thirds of respondents (66%) said they "always" or "sometimes" were able to access all or most committee documents prior to a meeting. However, a substantial minority - 30% - said they couldn't answer this question, likely suggesting that they did not have experience trying to obtain documents before a meeting. Around 3% said they were "never" able to.

Accessing Committee Materials After a Meeting

In our next question, we expanded the scope a bit: asking residents to indicate whether they had been able to obtain committee materials before or after a meeting took place. The responses here mirrored our earlier question, with close to three quarters of respondents saying they were able to obtain committee materials "always" (18%); "frequently" (24%); or "sometimes" (30%). Here, though, close to a quarter of respondents indicated they had "never tried" to obtain documents - another possible indication that more work could be done to educate the public about how to obtain the materials committees discuss and, also, to make it easier for them to obtain such materials.

Resident responses: able to access documents before or after meeting...

Legend:
- Never tried
- Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Unable to answer
- Never

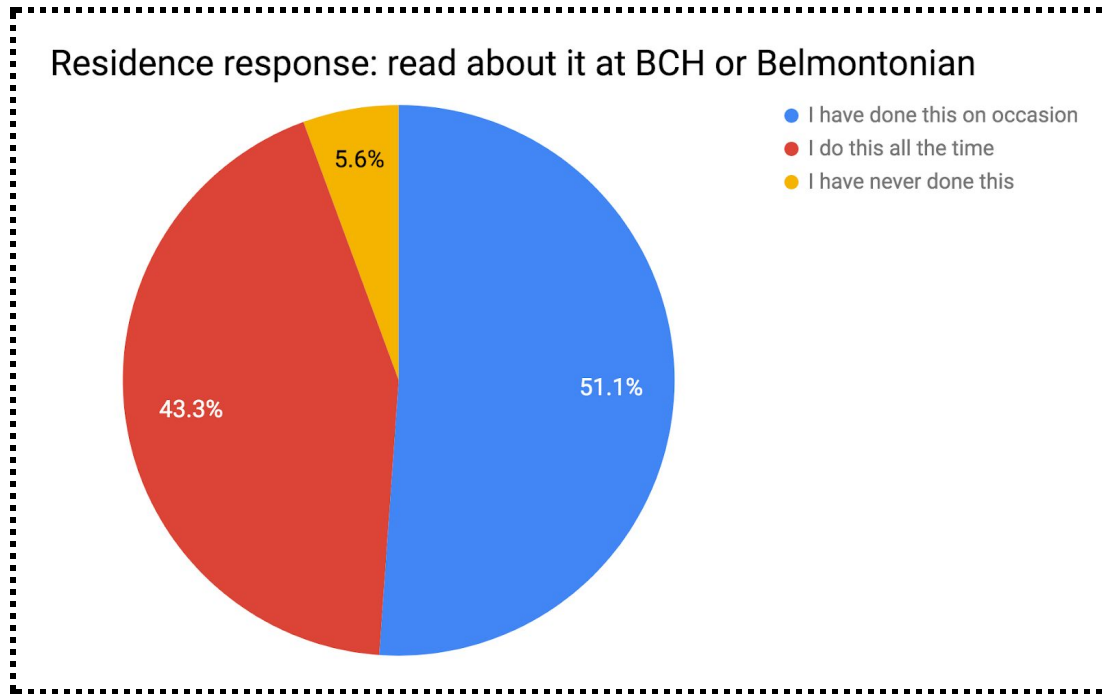Pie chart values: 24.3%, 17.7%, 23.8%, 29.8%

How Residents familiarize themselves with Meetings they don't attend

Given the heavy reliance on face to face interactions, the next question we sought to understand was how Belmont residents or members of the public who are unable to attend meetings in person come to familiarize themselves with what transpired at a town government meeting.

To that end, we asked a series of questions about different ways that residents can currently learn about what transpired in a Belmont government meeting after the fact: from Belmont Cable TV broadcasts to the Town Website to social media and face:face interactions.
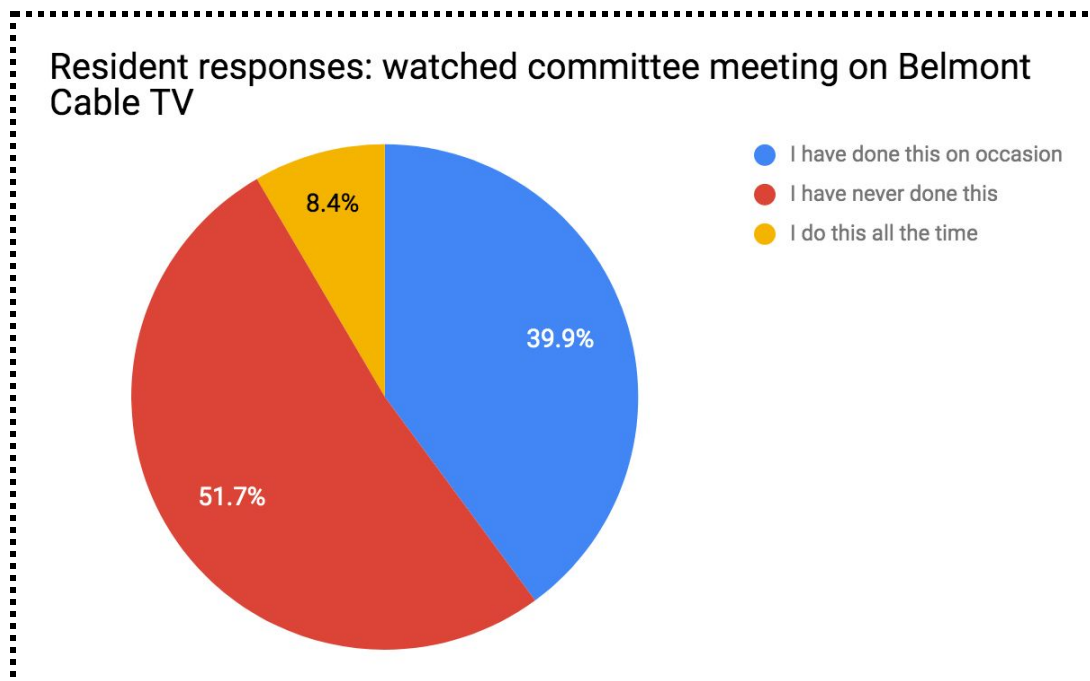
Read about it in the Citizen Herald or Belmontonian

It's 2019, but the most common means of finding out about what happens in Town committee meetings is to read about it in the local papers including Belmont Citizen Herald or Belmontonian. Fully 94% of respondents have done this "on occasion" (51%) or do it "all the time" (43%).

Residence response: read about it at BCH or Belmontonian

● I have done this on occasion
● I do this all the time
● I have never done this

- 5.6%
- 51.1%
- 43.3%

Watch Meetings on Belmont Cable

Watching Belmont government and committee proceedings on Belmont Cable proved to be a somewhat popular choice for our resident respondents. Just shy of half (48%) said they did this "on occasion" (40%) or "all the time" (8%). A majority of our respondents, however, said they had never watched a committee meeting on Belmont Cable.

Resident responses: watched committee meeting on Belmont Cable TV

● I have done this on occasion
● I have never done this
● I do this all the time

- 8.4%
- 39.9%
- 51.7%

Watch Meetings on Belmont Media Center Website

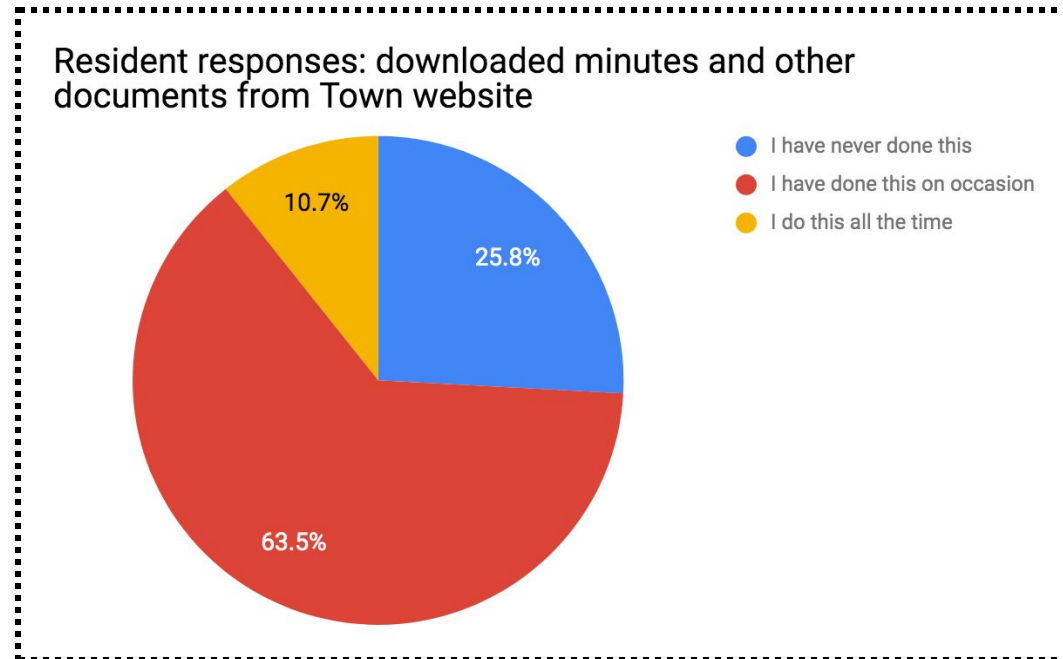Interestingly, a slightly higher percentage and a clear majority of respondents said they had checked out the proceedings of a Belmont committee by watching a video posted on the Belmont Media Center website. Roughly 63% percent told us they had done this "on occasion" (53%) or "all the time" (10%).

Resident responses: watched committee meeting on Belmont Media Center website

- I have done this on occasion
- I do this all the time
- I have never done this

37.6%

52.8%

9.6%
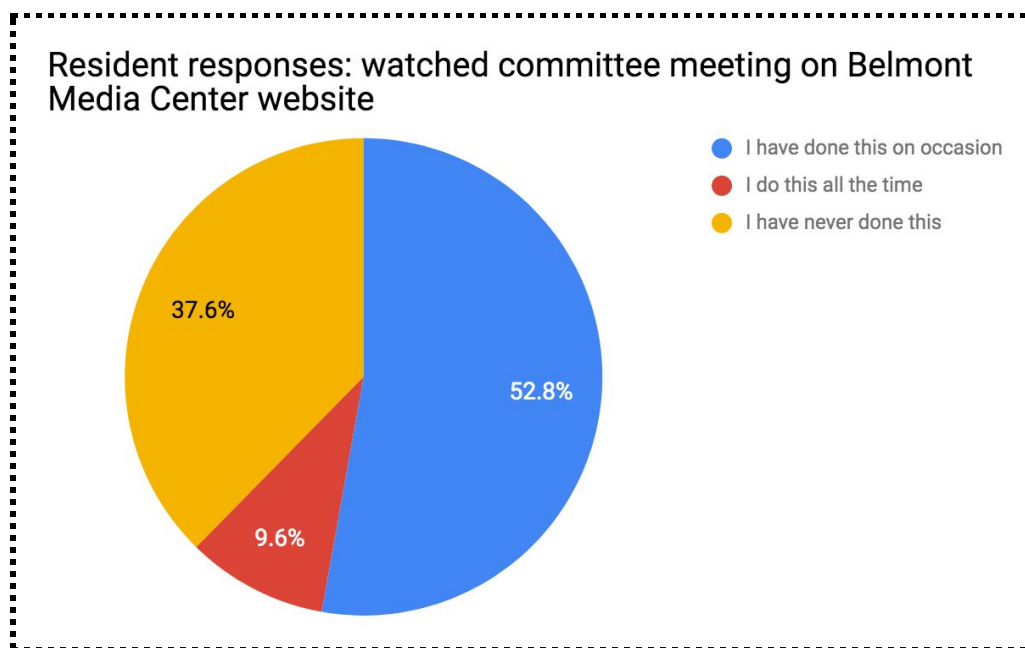
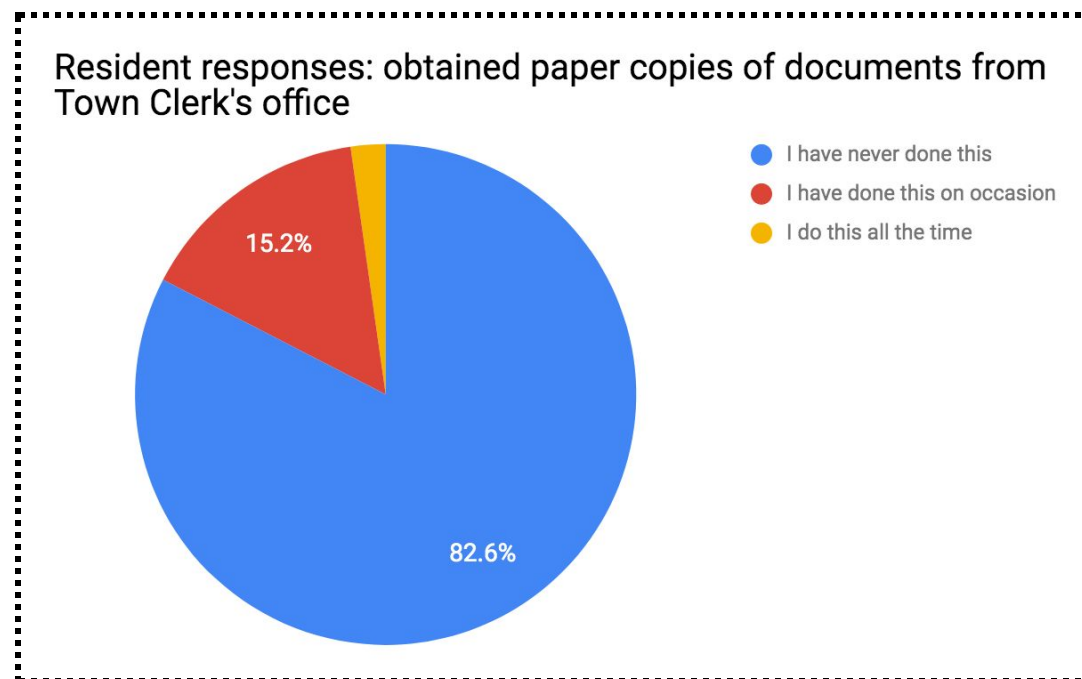## Download Meeting Minutes and other Documents from Town Website

Our respondents indicated that they frequently use the Town's website to familiarize themselves with what happened in committee and other Belmont government meetings. Around three quarters of respondents said they downloaded meeting minutes or other documents from the Town website "on occasion"(64%) or "all the time" (11%).

Responses to this question point to the Town's website being an important source of information for the public, though the onus to make documents and detailed minutes available falls to committee members. Absent reliable access to documents from meetings and detailed minutes, the public is likely to be left in the dark.

Resident responses: downloaded minutes and other documents from Town website

- I have never done this
- I have done this on occasion
- I do this all the time

10.7%

25.8%

63.5%

Obtain Minutes and other Documents in Paper Form from Town Clerk's Office

We sought to determine whether residents were obtaining paper copies of minutes and other committee documents from the Town Clerk. Responses from the residents who took our survey indicate this is a rarely used method. Just 15% said they "occasionally" do this, while 83% indicated they never obtain committee materials that way.

Resident responses: obtained paper copies of documents from Town Clerk's office

- I have never done this
- I have done this on occasion
- I do this all the time

15.2%

82.6%

Contact Committee Members directly by phone, email, etc.

A slight majority (56%) of our resident respondents indicated that they have reached out to committee members directly via phone, email or in person to find out what happened in a committee meeting, though with 44% saying they had "never done this," this is not a ubiquitous choice for the public.
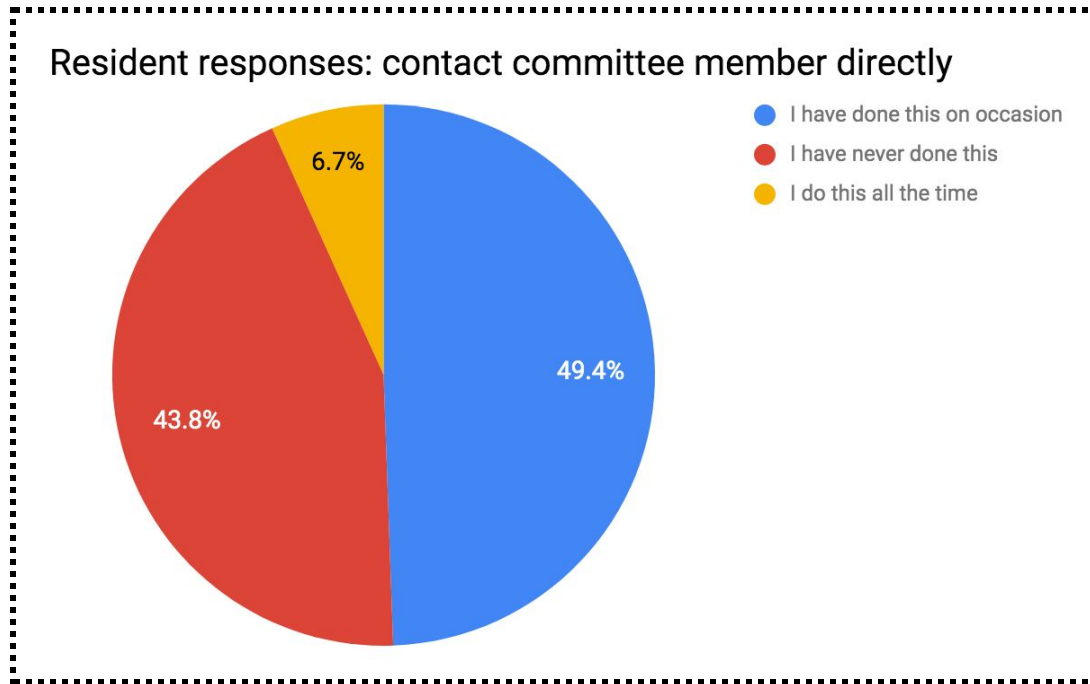
Use social media to find out from others

Social media use is well established within the Belmont community, with a number of Belmont-focused groups on Facebook, Nextdoor and other sites that allow community members to share information. No surprise, then, that a majority of respondents had used social media to find out from other residents about what happened in committee meetings. Just over 16% said they used social media to find out what has happened in committee meetings "all the time," and 30% said they did so on occasion. Still, 48% said they had never used social media to find out about goings on in Town meetings, suggesting this is still an emerging avenue for residents and the public to follow committee proceedings.

Resident responses: use social media to find out

- I have done this on occasion
- I have never done this
- I do this all the time

16.3%

35.4%

48.3%
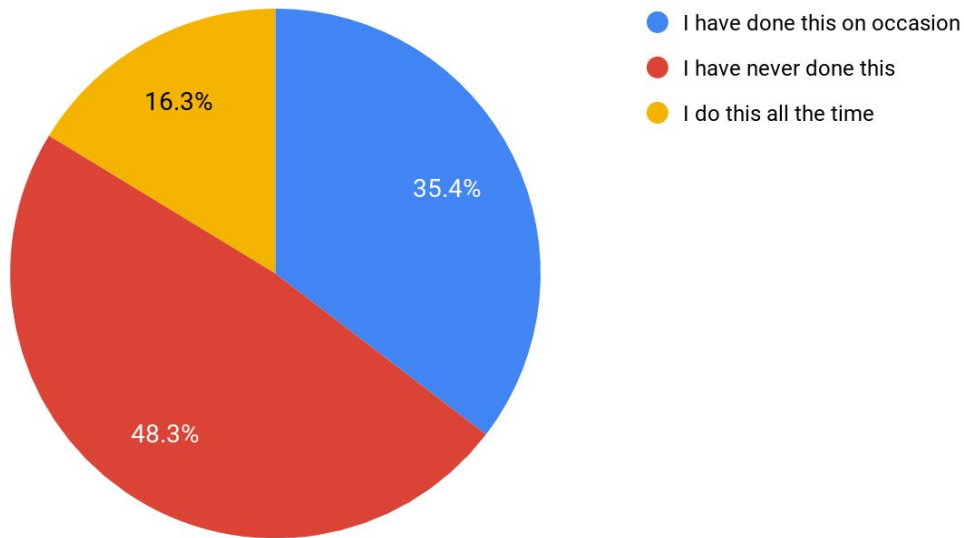
Don't follow up to find out what happened

At least among our sample population of residents, simply not following up on a meeting of interest was a minority option. Just five percent of respondents said they don't follow up "all the time," whereas 43% said they never fail to follow up. For a majority (52%) they occasionally fail to follow up on what happened at a meeting of interest.

Resident responses: I don't familiarize myself with what happened in meetings I miss.

- I have done this on occasion
- I have never done this
- I do this all the time

5.1%

43.3%

51.7%
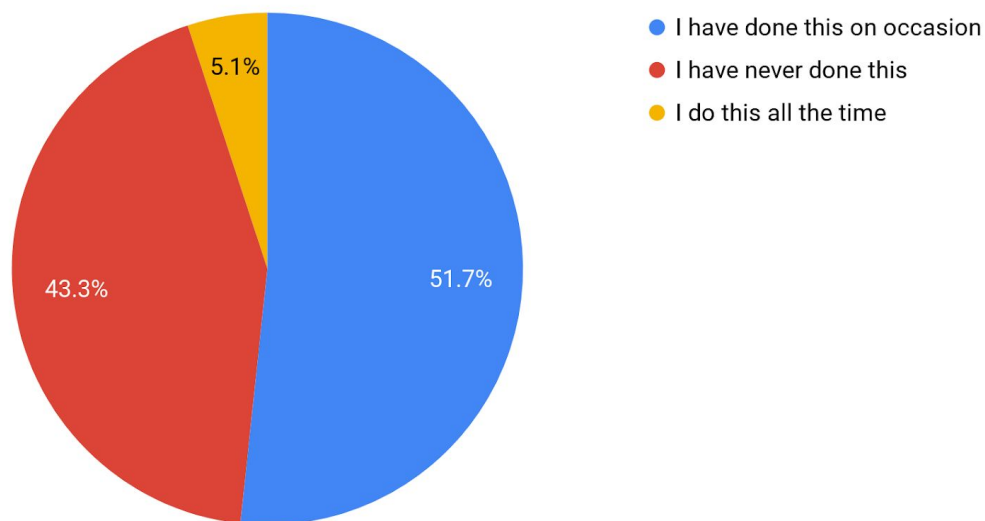
Discussion

There is no hierarchy of communications mediums. Simply put: whatever way the public is learning about the doings of committees and other government bodies in town "works" insofar as it communicates the necessary information to the public in a timely fashion.

That said, the tools and means of communicating and sharing information have been revolutionized in the last 20 years. Today Belmont has more powerful and affordable means than ever before for engaging residents in the work of government. However, taking advantage of these new tools and technologies requires an evaluation of how we do business currently, where we succeed, where we fall short and how we might improve.

What other towns are doing

As part of our work, we surveyed local, "peer" communities about their use of technologies like online scheduling, remote participation, social media and so on. We also did open source research on what cutting edge communities are doing nationally.

Belmont tracks to its peers

Based on our survey of peer communities, Belmont is neither a laggard nor a leader. Surveys of both Wellesley and Arlington (see [Appendix A: Peer Town Survey Interviews](#)) indicated that those communities also have not ventured into remote participation (though Watertown is doing a trial with Skype to allow remote participation with one board). Those communities also reported varying approaches to scheduling and sharing committee materials.

Broadly speaking: highly visible committees were more likely to post documents regularly online, using platforms like NovusAgenda which can streamline scheduling and document sharing. Neither town had a common platform for doing so, nor a common set of expectations, meaning that practices varied from committee to committee. (Which is what we found in Belmont, as well.)

One issue appears to be that many Bay State communities share suppliers - whether those be the hosting company that runs a town's website, or the company providing scheduling and calendaring tools. Common platforms can lead to common implementations - and those implementations may not take full advantage of the capabilities of a platform.

Other Bay State communities are experimenting with electronic outreach.

Framingham moves to allow remote participation

Within recent weeks, the City of Framingham has moved to allow remote participation on City committees and boards. Framingham Mayor Yvonne Spicer will be issuing a policy on remote participation for all boards and commissions, to include the City Council and School Committee, with the City's IT department helping to assist committees in coming online.

North Andover experimenting with technology outreach

North Andover's Town Moderator, for example, has introduced a Google Poll for residents to weigh in on the Warrant Articles being considered by Town Meeting in that community.[6] Other innovations introduced for North Andover's Town Meeting include live streaming and electronic check-in.

Nationally, communities are adding remote participation

Looking more broadly, it is still early days, but communities across the U.S. have started to encourage remote participation in government meetings.

In Boulder Colorado, for example, the City Council has been inviting residents to participate in meetings via the Eventbrite platform.[7]

Austin, Texas allows remote citizen participation via kiosks at the City's libraries.[8]

East Tawas, Michigan's City Council voted in December, 2018 to allow remote deliberation and voting via Skype Meeting when members are unable to physically attend.[9]

Also, Miami Lakes, Florida's Town Council introduced a remote participation option that lets residents participate virtually in Council meetings.[10]

What Belmont can do

Remote presence technologies can streamline committee work

Belmont has an opportunity to be a leader and innovator in leveraging technology to foster greater interaction between the public and Belmont's many boards and committees.

---

[6]
https://www.govtech.com/gov-experience/Town-Meetings-Get-Remote-Voting-Option-in-North-Andover-Mass.html
[7] https://www.eventbrite.com/o/boulder-city-council-782576959?s=12605786
[8] http://www.austintexas.gov/department/citizen-participation-council-meetings
[9] http://www.iosconews.com/news/article_d16a3244-0558-11e9-9adf-d39781147f50.html
[10] https://www.govtech.com/dc/Internet-Provides-for-Remote-Participation-in-Town-Meetings.html

Our surveys of committee members and residents revealed strong support for the idea of remote participation by both the public and committee members.

Remote meeting and remote presence technologies like Google Hangouts, GoToMeeting, Zoom Conference and others provide robust and affordable platforms for streaming committee and board meetings and allowing the remote participants to partake in them. Further, such platforms provide ample features for meeting organizers to control both how and under what conditions remote participants engage with the meeting.

Judging from the responses of both committee members and residents, support for remote participation is not unqualified. There is a need for the town to determine the platforms used, the conditions upon which, say, remote deliberation and voting will be allowed and how the public is invited to engage. That said, the benefits of virtual meetings and remote presence technologies are substantial and the Town should move ahead deliberately to make such an offering available to the public.

There is room for improved communications

That said, the responses to our questions about how information is disseminated to the public and how the public engages with the work of committees suggest that there is room for improvement in Belmont.

Specifically: many of the tools now being used to communicate about committee business (email, face:face communications, documents posted on the Town website) are necessary, but insufficient. The town should look for ways to leverage social media and other communications platforms to inform the public about the doings of its committee and to make committee materials readily available to them.

Belmont should streamline committee scheduling and work

Survey responses indicate, as well, that there is room for improvement in how committees manage internal communications and scheduling. Shared scheduling and calendaring technologies are commonplace in most workplaces and allow individuals to efficiently coordinate meeting times and locations. Cloud based platforms like Office 365 (already in use in Belmont) GSuite/Google Calendar and more specialized web based applications like Doodle allow calendars to be shared with the public.

It stands to reason that, for committees with frequent meetings (not to mention subcommittee and joint-committee meetings), "scale" becomes an issue: any overhead in scheduling and posting meeting notices and materials is multiplied by the number of meetings as well as by occasions where meetings must be rescheduled.

For the Town's many volunteer committees which lack permanent (paid) staff to manage the overhead of notification and posting, this extra obligation can be considerable. As a result, it is

in the Town's interest to streamline this process as much as possible and to emphasize ease in scheduling, rescheduling and notifying the public of upcoming meetings and events, leveraging automation in place of manual processes whenever possible.

There is a need for a dedicated Communications Liaison

One trend that clearly emerged from the responses to our Committee and Resident surveys was a lack of consistency across committees and other Town government bodies when it came to communications and sharing information.

What kinds of information was shared with the public and when, what means of communicating were or were not used, where information was shared - all varied depending on the committee we asked. That's a situation that is bound to sow confusion in the public, and so it did.

The Town would benefit tremendously from ensuring consistency and predictability across Town government. We believe that the town should establish a full-time communications liaison to manage this task: working with the Town Administrator and Town leadership to establish clear guidelines and then serving as a resource to Town bodies: helping to promote notices of upcoming meetings, share meeting materials via the Town's website or other platforms, and so on.

Note that the communications liaison's role extends well beyond "posting to the web site." (Though that is part of the job.) Rather, it should take on the challenge of how best to make the work of committees available to Belmont residents and the public. This might include centralizing the town's social media activities and taking full advantage of new platforms for communicating with the public about goings on in Town government.

Shared calendars and collaboration tools can help

Our survey of committee members revealed that Belmont's committees and other public bodies make scant use of shared calendars and other productivity tools that are very well established in the public sector.

As it stands, Town processes for simple tasks like reserving a public meeting space, scheduling a meeting and posting an agenda or other committee materials are multi-step processes that often involve two or more town employees. Additionally, there is anecdotal evidence that these manual processes also result in resources being under utilized. A shared, online calendar for reserving meeting rooms, for example, would allow multiple parties to coordinate their activities and make sure public spaces were heavily used.

We believe many processes that, today, are manual and rely on email or phone calls could easily be automated using technology (such as Microsoft's Outlook 365 or Civic Plus) that the Town is already paying for. Belmont should conduct an assessment of a wide range of business

processes related to committee work and evaluate ways to streamline and automating them using shared scheduling and other collaboration tools.

We should modernize our public notice system

Both state law and local bylaw mandate the posting of "notices" of public meetings (such as Town Meeting) about Town. This recognizes the basic reality that one way to communicate with residents is simply to reach them when they are out and about in the community.

Needless to say, technology for communicating with the public has come a long way since the 1930s, while our Town's notification practices have not. Today, in 2019, public notices take the form of printed papers pinned on message boards at Town Hall, at the Public Library, Beech Street Center or printed notices on "sandwich boards" stationed about town. Upon entering Belmont Town Hall, visitors are greeted with a handwritten list of meetings posted on a white board and easel. Such efforts aren't just ineffective - they are also inefficient: each requiring the labor of one or more Town employees.

We believe the Town's government and residents would benefit greatly from the purchase and deployment of electronic messaging boards at key locations in town, including Town Hall, the Beech Street Center, Belmont High School, Chenery Middle School, the LIbrary and in the Town's main shopping districts. Such electronic signs could be updated instantly and efficiently from a central location by just a single town employee. It's contents could be localized to different locations about town: displaying room assignments for meetings and helping to get the word out about other events (cardboard recycling, One Town One Book, rec department signups, etc.).

Appendix A: Peer Town Survey Interviews

Wellesley Response

Name: Kathleen Nagel
Title: Town Clerk

Q1: Does Wellesley use an online platform (Google Docs, Office365, Doodle, etc.) to schedule public meetings, reserve rooms, distribute meeting materials (minutes, supporting documents, etc.)?
If so:
   ● Who is responsible for maintaining the systems and processes?
   ● Who maintains the system? (Town Clerk's office, Town's IT dept. etc.)
If not:

- ● Does the Town have any concrete plans to adopt online scheduling and calendaring for meetings?

A: Not really – Each committee has its own distribution system for documents. Town website is the official posting site for meeting agendas. Each committee can post its own meeting notices and agendas and minutes.

Q2) Are substantive committee materials / public documents published on-line in advance of meetings in Wellesley? (That is: not just agendas, but the actual materials that will be reviewed by committee members?)
If so:
- ● What is the process for gathering and disseminating those documents to the public? How and where are they posted? What notice is the community given that they are available?
If not:
- ● Does the Town have any concrete plans in this area?

A: Each committee has its own policy for meeting documents. Those that post documents do it through the town website. Notice is by way of the publication of the agenda and that is sent out to subscribers for that committee.

Q3) Does Wellesley allow remote participation in your town committee meetings available? (Note: this doesn't include public access TV.)
If so:
- ● Do you allow the public to "virtually" attend public meetings using a platform like Google Hangouts, GoToMeeting, etc.?
    - ○ Do you allow committee members/elected officials to participate virtually in deliberations via a platform like Google Hangouts, GoToMeeting, etc.?
    - ○ Who is responsible for coordinating live streaming/participation?
    - ○ Who maintains the system? (Town Clerk's office, Town's IT dept., public access media etc.)
- ● How long have you been supporting remote participation by the public and/or committee members/elected officials?

A: NO REMOTE participation

Q4) Could you estimate the percentage of interactions with residents in Wellesley (for your office) that happen via the following platforms (so the total should be 100%):

- ❏ In person/face-to-face
- ❏ Postal ("snail") mail
- ❏ Telephone
- ❏ Email

❏ Online (so: via Town website or a dedicated news/discussion group)
❏ Social media (Facebook, Next door, Twitter)
❏ Text message
❏ Other

A: Very hard to quantify. Different methods for different functions. More email these days. No social media right now.

Q5) Does Wellesley use social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter,NextDoor, etc. to:
● Communicate with the public about upcoming events
● Solicit input from the public
● Provide access to Town Government materials or information
● Provide access to Town officials or employees

If so:
● Which platforms do you use?
● Who is responsible for coordinating live streaming/participation?
● Who maintains the system? (Town Clerk's office, Town's IT dept., public access media etc.)
● Who manages the communication / who is responsible for monitoring / responding if needed?

A: Each committee has its own policy. Town is working on a communications policy to better use outreach, but no program has been adopted now.

Arlington Response

Name: David Good
Title: Chief Technology Officer

Q1: Do you use an online platform to schedule public meetings, reserve rooms, distribute meeting materials (minutes, supporting documents, etc.)?

 If so:
● who is responsible for maintaining the systems and processes?
● What infrastructure is in place to support it?
● How is it maintained?

If not, do you have any concrete plans in this area?

A: We currently use a hosted service product called NovusAgenda as a meeting management tool for our School Committee Meetings and Select Board Meetings. For most of our other committee meetings we post agendas and minutes on our Web site along with reports and other documents.

For NovusAgenda the School Committee and Select Board administrators manage the flow of documents, agenda items and votes taken. For our other committees and departments the processes vary.

We supplied ipads to both the Select Board and School Committee. Some members have opted to use their own equipment. Both our Website and Novusagenda are cloud hosted so the infrastructure is minimal.

Setup was done by our Systems Analyst and he does most of the vendor interface and training work.

There are always discussions going on as to how we make our work more transparent to our citizens. This topic is one of those ongoing ones.

Q2: Are substantive committee materials / public documents published on-line in advance of meetings? (i.e., not just agendas, but actual docs that will be reviewed by committee members)
- If so, what is the process for dissemination?
- If not, do you have any concrete plans in this area?

A: Yes, some of our more organized and key committees(Finance, Capital Budget, Planning, Redevelopment Board, and others) distribute documents electronically via the web site to be downloaded by members or the public). Processes differ by Committee. Some are bound by statute or bylaw. [For other committees this is] a work in progress

Q3: To what extent is remote participation in your town committee meetings available?
- If at all, what platform(s) do you use to support it?
- How long have you been supporting remote participation?
- Does this support involve your local public access cable station?

A: We really don't yet support remote participation. We have begun a pilot with our Finance Committee using Skype for committee members who are traveling who want to participate in the meeting. I don't believe Skype is the answer for this type of participation. We are working with our Cable Media Organization for ideas.

Our Community Media organization does televised meetings and are able to stream a feed of documents being presented at our larger meetings, as well as showing voting results from our electronic voting system.

Q4: Do you use social media, live or otherwise, to solicit input from the public and/or distribute information to the public (for example about committee meetings, public events, etc.)?
- If so, for what sorts of information, and what are the logistics of this
- What platform?
- Who manages the communication / who is responsible for monitoring / responding if needed?

A: We mainly use Social Media (Twitter and Facebook) for announcements. Currently only a small number of depts have ventured into Social Media. Logistics are different per department. Postings are managed by the Chief Communications Officer or in the case of the Police Department, one of the administrators under the Chief.

Appendix B: Responses and Comments

Committee Survey

Question: To coordinate with Committee members (e.g. to agree on meeting times) I/we use (check all that apply):

- "Most often face to face at a public meeting."
- "Public meetings and committee support staff."
- "Meetings are set in advance by Chair without coordination."
- "We schedule future meetings during Committee meetings."

Question: To post our meeting minutes, I/we use (check all that apply):

- "Town Administrator's office does this."
- "Paper copies are provided to the administrative staff who send them to the town clerk and post them on our website."
- "Posted electronically by Library Director."
- "Posted on town website."

Residents' Survey

Question: How do you feel about elected or appointed members of Belmont town committees being permitted to participate in committee meetings remotely (including deliberating and casting votes)?

- "I'm not sure. I don't equate virtual meetings with in person meetings."
- "I support texting in questions, written comments but they may not necessarily be all addressed."

- "This may be worth trying but there's a non-negligible risk of people derailing meetings from the comfort of their couch. I have seen this happen at work meetings that don't have time limits."
- "Same as previous, but I think this is more manageable, since the communication is less multivalent: you can have a queue of questioners (live and dial-in) and a relative (sp) small number of people designated as answerers (sp)."
- "Again, would want to understand more about how it could practically work before casting an opinion."
- "Again, an intriguing idea, but issue about security, and about how we allow this. "
- "Limited questions remotely, statements and representation should be on site. "
- "Strongly support as long as some thought is put into how to avoid potential abuses. In person meetings are bad enough. People have less impulse control the more distanced they are. Some way to avoid repeat questions? A delay so Inappropriate stuff could be muted. Also, a simple enough interface so the remote participant (sp) doesn't get frustrated? I've had mtgs where half the time was spent getting everyone to mute their phones to avoid feedback or to get everyone successfully joined into the meeting. Those were awful."
- "As long as all comments are captured in the same manner."
- "Have time for Citizens Concerns during your meeting."
- "I think this might help more people become more involved with town business. That would be welcome. However, this would have to be thoughtfully managed because this might become quite cumbersome."
- "Not sure about that. Would need to understand how it would be managed without becoming disruptive"
- "Support if they are town residents and not anonymous. "
- "Unsure how I feel about this"
- "The effectiveness of this depends heavily on good technology"

How do you feel about elected or appointed members of Belmont town committees being permitted to participate in committee meetings remotely (including deliberating and casting votes)?

- "Only when necessary due to illness, injury, travel for work."
- "Depends how it is organized/transparent/bringing improvement."
- "I support this when a member has a good reason for being unable to physically attend such a meeting."
- "This might make it more convenient for all members to attend. is attendance an issue now? will members call in because they don't feel like showing up? that would not be a good outcome."
- "Depending on the importance of the meeting where there is an important vote."
- "If there is a reasonable explanation as to why the person cannot be there in person to attend, then I can understand. Most of these meetings are scheduled far enough in

advance that arrangements can be made to be there. Video meetings are useful for certain things - such as planning for future meetings - but I would hold off on using them for voting or deeper discussions."

● "I am torn about it."
● "I support this idea within limits. Maybe someone could count 2-3 virtual appearances as being present. That would help a lot of parents, people with disabilities, etc, participate. If it's an elected voting person or someone whose decisions have a direct impact on the town, I think they need to regularly be in the room to work with others and answer questions. But better virtual than not at all."
● "Support if this such remote participation is an exception."
● "I don't have a problem with this, but often it is difficult to hear or interject when one is not present at a meeting."
● "Need more information about parameters."
● "Good in theory, but what about security/internet connectivity?"
● "I see the value, just would like to hear more about plans on how it could be feasibly utilized so that both the attendees plus people who may be watching a televised version, can "see" and hear the remote person."
● "Oppose unless the technology ensures that observers (both present and virtual) can hear all that remote pariticipants (sp) are saying."
● "Ambivalent. In favor of greater access, but worried about how implementation would work with a large group of people dialing in."
● "Generally oppose because it's hard to read the tone of a room remotely, but as long as members are present for most meetings, allowing exceptions would be beneficial."
● "With limits as to the number of times a year a member can do this"