

• **VIEWPOINT** •

What can be done to improve attendance at town meeting?

By **Bill Kelly**

On June 1, 2008, the Town of Jamestown held its annual Financial Town Meeting. At that meeting 115 of the approximately 4,500 registered voters of the town made a decision on how our tax dollars were to be spent. How the town budget is spent is such an important issue. In light of consistent low voter turnout, has the time come to reconsider how that decision should be made?

The term town meeting is defined as a meeting where the population of an entire geographic area is invited to participate in a gathering, often for a political, administrative, or legislative purpose. Traditionally, a town meeting is a time when community members come together to legislate policy and, in the case of Jamestown, approve or disapprove the budget for the coming year.

The less than 2 percent of the voting population of Jamestown that attended the June 1 meeting cannot be construed as a true representation of our community. Prior to the June 1 meeting I asked a number of individuals, whom I believed were concerned citizens of Jamestown, if they were going to attend the upcoming FTM. The general response that I received was "why bother." Their reasoning being that the meeting was just going to be stacked with town employees and individuals pushing for the school's interests and agenda. In fact, that was not the case at all. The audience in

attendance that evening did not represent a significant number of town employees or members of the PTO.

I tried to count representatives of both groups and I don't believe I came up with a combined total of 15. However, what I did see were individuals that regularly attend Town Council meetings and other individuals who have consistently shown an interest in town business.

As noted, 115 voting members of the Jamestown community were in attendance that night. That number included the five members of the Town Council; I believe all five members of the School Committee were present, members of the board of canvassers, town staff that were required to be there and the Town Moderator. With those individuals out of the mix, the number of voters present was below 100. Taking that number into consideration is this a process that needs to be fixed?

The simple definition of a town meeting does not accurately define what the town meetings were before computers, emails and cell phones and for that matter, TVs.

It was a social gathering as much as a business meeting, the opportunity to solve town issues and for the farmers, fishermen and tradesmen to come together and enjoy one another's company and share the news and concerns of the day.

On the night of our Financial Town Meeting, I was told that there were little league games scheduled with as many adults at the games as were at the FTM. For my own part I know if I had

children playing in a little league game and a town financial town meeting the same night I would have been at the little league game, too.

The council will soon appoint a Charter Review Committee. Should that committee be charged with restructuring the process by which we decide the town's annual budget? Some people are of the opinion "if it isn't broke, don't fix it," while others might want the budget decided by referendum at the polls. The decision on the budget could be given to the Town Council, who would be accountable at election time. Clearly, there are some choices before us. If the Town Council were responsible to approve the budget, an additional safeguard could be instituted so that in the event of 10-percent voter dissatisfaction, as outlined in a formal petition, the budget could go to an all-day referendum.

Another option would be to revert back to the original concept of a town meeting and turn it in to a real political and social event by coordinating with other organizations. This way there would be no conflicting events. A pot luck supper or barbeque to bring the community together could be part of the event.

The fact of the matter is more people attended the Rotary Club's annual breakfast then attended the Financial Town Meeting.

A healthy debate regarding this issue is justified. Letters to the Press or to me personally are welcomed. Send letters to news@jamestownpress.com or to me at wakmek@cox.net.

Editors note: Bill Kelly is a member of the Town Council.

Lower bay closed to boating this Saturday morning for annual swim

The 32nd annual Save the Bay Swim will take place this Saturday, July 26, between Coasters Harbor Island in Newport and Potter Cove in Jamestown.

The first wave of more than 450 swimmers will depart from Naval Station Newport at 8 a.m. and will swim the 1.7-mile length of the Newport Bridge. The first swimmers are expected to reach Potter's Cove just after 8:30 a.m.

During the swim, the U.S. Coast Guard will establish measures to ensure safety of participating swimmers and their escort boats.

The Coast Guard will close the lower Narragansett Bay to all vessel traffic from 7 a.m. to 11 a.m., for the Swim the Bay event. Also, a Safety Zone will be established to ensure the safety of participating swimmers and their escort boats. The safety zone consists of all waters within an area bounded by a line drawn 1,500 yards north of and parallel to the Newport/Pell Bridge from approximate position 41-30.8N, 071-19.75W west to position 41-31.3, 071-21.78W and a line drawn 500 yards south of and parallel to the Newport/Pell Bridge from approximate positions 41-29.75N, 071-19.25W to position 41-30.18N, 071-21.6W. All vessels must remain outside of this safety zone and may only enter with the express consent of the on-scene Coast Guard Patrol Commander, who may be contacted on channel 16 VHF.

For more information on the swim, visit the Save the Bay Website at www.savethebay.org.



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