

MEETING INTERRUPTUS

Record Turnout Forces Delay of Town Meeting

The Central School could hold 523 voters; about 700 appeared

BY SOPHIE MANN-SHAFIR · NOV 29, 2023

TRURO — About 700 people arrived at Truro Central School on Nov. 28 ready for a climax and dénouement to months of dramatically rising tension and civic disagreement here. But even using the school's library and cafeteria as well as the gymnasium, the building could hold no more than 523 voters. With nearly 200 more stranded outside, no votes on articles could be held, and the meeting had to be postponed for the third time.



About 700 voters showed up for Truro's special town meeting on Nov. 28. After 523 had checked in there were still about 200 waiting outside, and the meeting was postponed again. (Photo by Elias Duncan)

The 15 articles on the special town meeting warrant will now be considered at 10 a.m. on Saturday, May 4, 2024, which will also be the date for the annual town meeting.

The rising energy in town, including sharp debates over the Walsh property, a new DPW building, and the town's Local Comprehensive Plan, will now be set on simmer for more than five months.

“This is the last thing I wanted to do,” said Town Moderator Paul Wisotzky as he introduced himself and explained the need for a continuation roughly 20 minutes after the meeting was supposed to begin. “It is wonderful that we have so many people who want to participate in our town government,” he added.

Five-hundred-twenty-three voters had filled all 301 seats in the school's gymnasium and every spot in the overflow rooms: the cafeteria, with 108 seats, and the library, with 114. Fire Chief Tim Collins estimated the line of voters still outside contained 150 or 200 people.

Truro's prior record turnout was for last April's town meeting, when 383 voters showed up. The Outer Cape's most recent turnout record had been 582 voters in Provincetown last April — a number easily surpassed by the line of voters outside the Truro Central School on Tuesday

evening.



The Truro Central School cafeteria was one of two overflow rooms for voters. It reached its 108-person capacity, as did the library, which had room for 114. (Photos by Elias Duncan)

“In consultation with the police chief and the fire chief and on the advice of town counsel, this is not only a voter participation issue, but it’s also a public safety issue,” Wisotzky said.

State law gives the moderator the authority to postpone the meeting for up to 14 days, which Wisotzky had already done twice since Oct. 21, so that voter registration hearings could take place.

But no indoor venue in Truro could accommodate so many voters, town officials said.

“If we were to proceed, you would be excluding voters from the meeting, which is something that the moderator has been trying to avoid having happen for several weeks now,” said Town Counsel Lauren Goldberg of KP Law. Goldberg explained that for Truro’s town meeting to occur at a venue in a neighboring town, there would need to be special state legislation or a bylaw, which would require more than 14 days.

Select board chair Kristen Reed moved that the meeting be continued to Feb. 3 at Provincetown Town Hall, which has a capacity of 708 — but the crowd booed in dismay.



Hundreds of voters filed into Truro Central School expecting a meeting on Nov. 28 but wound up casting a vote only on the meeting's new date.

Wisotzky held the floor open for discussion of Reed's motion. First to the microphones was Karen Ruymann, who suggested postponing the meeting to spring 2024, around the same date as annual town meeting.

Michael Holt agreed. "It's also a voter participation issue," he said. "I think that in February we'll lose a lot of voters."

"The incompetence to bring us here after this many delays, and to continue it to a winter date, is an absurdity," said Steven Sollog. "Take it to the spring, have it in a tent, have it outside, have as many people as possible." There were cheers and applause.

"I would ask you to please not applaud or boo or hiss," said Wisotzky. "Allow people to say what they're going to say, and then we'll vote."

Jon Slater advocated for a spring town meeting where, he said, a thousand people could show up. "It's clear with this much passion, if we're voting on these issues, we need to postpone it to a time when we can hold it outside," he said.

Slater had produced a flier for town meeting voters over the signature "Take Back Truro." It argued against Article 2, a funding measure for a new DPW facility at 340 Route 6. Slater's

document said Article 2 “makes no sense.”



Michael Forgione, who delayed his trip to Florida in order to attend the Nov. 28 meeting, said he would be out of town for a Feb. 3 meeting.

Michael Forgione said that no articles on the warrant were pressing enough to make a spring vote problematic.

“I am one of those people that was supposed to be in Florida,” Forgione said. “I canceled my plans to be here for this town meeting, and now I’m being told that my vote is going to be taken away by holding it at a date when I am not going to be present. That’s just not right.”

“There are voters outside right now waiting to get in, and we’re going to take a vote,” said select board member Stephanie Rein. “How is that part of the democratic process?”

Voting to postpone the meeting is “all we can do,” Wisotzky said.

Only a few scattered hands raised their voter cards in favor of postponement to Feb. 3; a sea of them flew up in opposition. The motion failed in the library and cafeteria as well.

Reed then moved that the special town meeting be held on May 4 at the Truro ballfield. The town’s charter stipulates that annual town meeting is to be held on the final Tuesday of April, but Town Manager Darrin Tangeman said that provision can be changed locally.

The postponement to May 4, a Saturday, passed overwhelmingly.

“By continuing the meeting versus adjourning or dissolving the meeting, the warrant stays whole,” Wisotzky said before accepting a motion to adjourn.



Moderator Paul Wisotzky addressed a crowd of voters who raised their cards in opposition to a motion to postpone the special town meeting to Feb. 3.

After the meeting, Reed told the *Independent* that that final point was important: given the effort by board members, staff, citizen petitioners, and consultants that went into creating the warrant, she said, “I’m uncomfortable with dissolving all of that work. It’s just not fair to the town or the people who feel really passionate about these articles.”

As voters milled about after the adjournment, a palpable mélange of emotions and frustrations was evident.

“It was a boondoggle of the biggest kind in the history of Truro,” Bill Golden said. “They couldn’t hold the meeting because there weren’t enough chairs. That’s pretty elemental.”

Betty Gallo referred to the conflict that brought about the record-breaking turnout. “I thought Paul did an incredible job getting through a very difficult part of his first town meeting,” she said, adding that this was “probably a good outcome given where we are right now.”

Mike Fee was one of two assistant town moderators, along with Jeffrey Fischer, who Wisotzky

appointed to facilitate discussion in the two overflow rooms. Fee was less sanguine about the meeting's continuance.

“I think it was really unfortunate — but the issue of capacity is real, and it has everything to do with public safety, so their hands were tied,” Fee said.

“The last time I saw a crowd this big was when we were voting on Provincetown bringing their trash to our transfer station,” said Rich Sullivan. That was about 25 years ago — “before you were born,” he told a reporter.

Upstairs, 26 children enjoyed free child care, pizza, and a movie with a more satisfying narrative arc than the one downstairs. *Frozen* delivered a resolution to its conflicts — something Truro's town meeting could not do.
