
Government Study Committee Recommendations

Town Of Easton, Massachusetts
September 19th

GSC Charter

The Government Study Committee is charged with the responsibility to:

- ❑ Obtain information regarding various models of government structure for Massachusetts communities of size similar to Easton
- ❑ Consult with entities, including but not limited to the Massachusetts Municipal Association, and review professional journals and other resources regarding analysis of various governmental structures in Massachusetts
- ❑ Identify perceived strengths and weaknesses in the current form of government in Easton and areas for improvement
- ❑ Report its findings and recommendations in writing to the Board of Selectmen relative to the above findings.

Committee Members

John Refford – Chairman

Ben Farrell – Vice-Chairman & Clerk

Bob Carvin – Member

Mark Jennings – Member

Jane Martin – Member

GSC Research

- Open town forum on April 25th, 2006 to solicit input from town
- Massachusetts Municipal Management Association
- Forms of government in use by towns of similar size
- Open town forum on Sept 19th, 2006 to present preliminary recommendations and garner feedback from town

Interviews

- Board of Selectmen
- Town Administrator
- Supporters of every Form Of Government (FOG)
- Massachusetts Municipal Association representative
– Franklin Town Manager
- Towns:
 - Norton, Sharon – also went through a GSC in recent history
 - Braintree – recently enacted a Form of Government change (Council / Mayor)

Findings

There are four forms of government available to towns of Massachusetts (*Legislative* / *Executive*)

1. Open Town Meeting (OTM) / Selectmen & Town Manager
2. Representative Town Meeting (RTM) / Selectmen & Town Manager
3. Council / Manager
4. Council / Mayor

Forms of Government overview

Open Town Meeting

Form of government in use today in Easton

Notes:

- All voters eligible to vote on budgets, bylaws and all matters brought before town meetings and approve indebtedness.
- Town meeting acts as legislative body
- Board of Selectmen (BOS) and manager act together as the executive branch

Open Town Meeting –cont.

Pros:

- Direct and open citizen participation in government
- Ability to establish qualification for appointed chief executive
- Appointed executive can be removed at any time by elected board

Cons:

- Cumbersome decision making by legislative body
- Legislative body less likely to be knowledgeable on issues
- Shared executive authority between elected board and appointed manager can obscure responsibilities

More about Easton's current FOG

Input from BOS:

1. >14,000 voters, but historically low participation in OTM is a concern. Meetings have been rescheduled due to a lack of participation
2. Many Easton residents commute to work. This seems to foster a disconnect with town issues and makes it hard for traveling residents to participate.
3. Complex issues are difficult to explain and discuss in an OTM format
4. Ineffectual (slow) budget decisions
5. OTM can, at times, be overly burdensome for volunteer officials
6. Concerns over minority rule

More about Easton's current FOG

Input from first open forum:

- Realization that town meetings are slow and tedious
- Citizens should have a say in large, financial matters
- If OTM is kept, things must be streamlined and information should be made more available before the meeting
- Some concerns about “stacking the vote” in a low turnout town meeting
- Some concerns that, although citizens have a vote, people still feel powerless because everything the BOS recommends ultimately passes
- Concerns about Representative Town meeting format: elected representatives don't always listen to their constituents and town employees can become representatives

Representative Town Meeting (RTM)

Limited number of voters are elected, usually by district, to represent all voters in a representative town meeting.

Notes:

- Representatives vote on bylaws and all matters brought before town meetings and approve indebtedness.
- RTM is legislative body
- BOS and manager act together as the executive branch

Representative Town Meeting –cont.

Pros:

- Somewhat smaller body and less cumbersome (as compared with OTM)
- Legislative body more likely to be informed on issues than OTM
- Ability to establish qualifications for appointed chief executive

Cons:

- Difficulty in achieving broad community representation and achieving quorums
- The size of the legislative body can present challenges in trying to educate and provide information to this group prior to the decision making process

Town Council / Town Manager

Voters elect Council and the Council appoints a Town Manager

Notes:

- Council is the legislative body
- Manager is chief executive, appoints key officials, prepares budget, approves contracts, negotiates with unions and oversees administrations.

Town Council / Town Manager –cont.

Pros:

- Smaller legislative body
- Frequent meeting of legislative body
- Ability to establish experience and qualifications for a chief executive
- Ability to remove appointed chief executive at any time by vote of elected council
- Allows for smaller issues (e.g. street naming) to be handled more efficiently

Cons:

- Smaller citizen participation in decision making

Council / Mayor

Voters directly elect a mayor and council.

Notes:

- Council is legislative body
- Mayor is chief executive who appoints key officials and all or some boards, and prepares budget, approves contracts, negotiates with unions and oversees administration.

Council / Mayor –cont.

Pros:

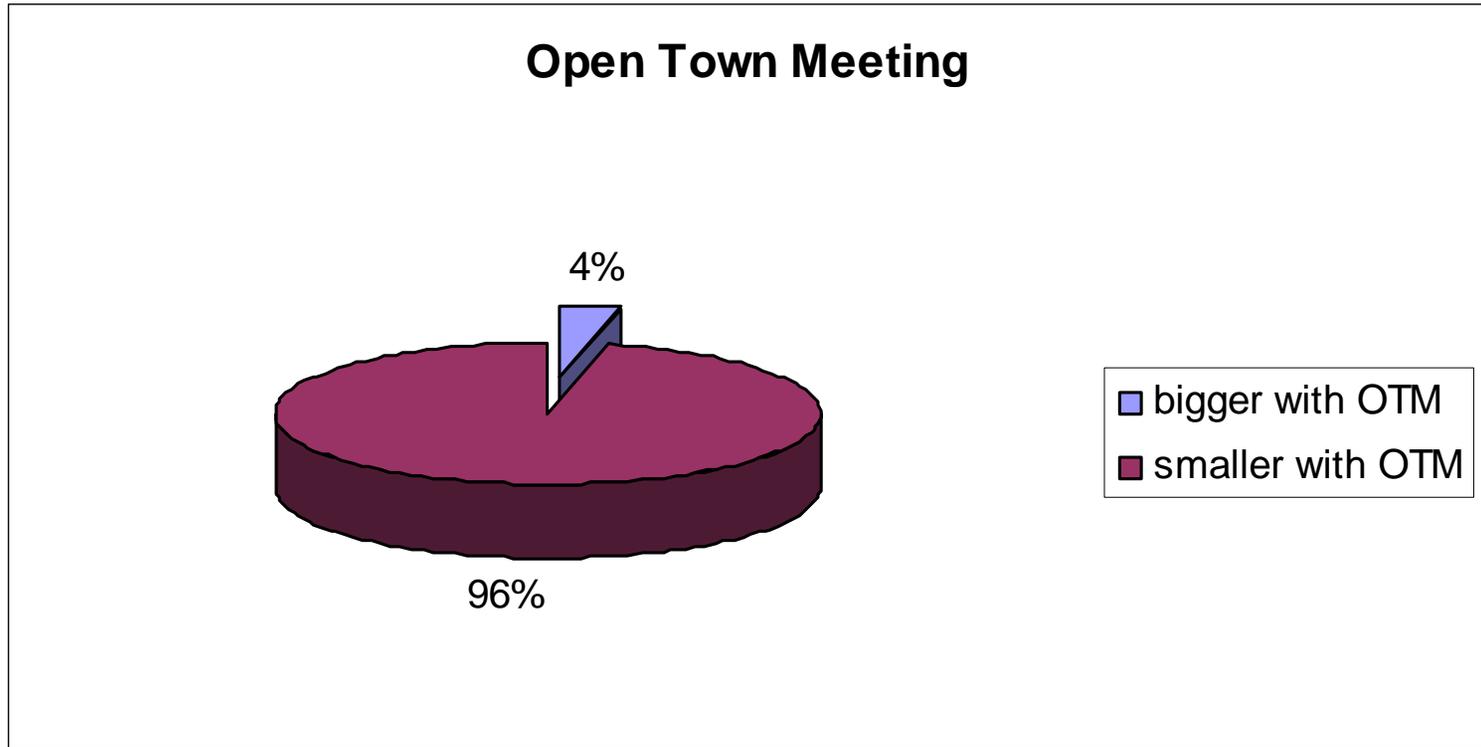
- Chief executive elected directly
- Small legislative body
- Frequent meeting of legislative body

Cons:

- Potential for political appointments to administrative positions
- Smaller citizen participation in decision-making
- Executive may not have proper technical and administrative experience

Form of Government by size

Nearly every town with OTM is smaller than Easton



bigger with OTM

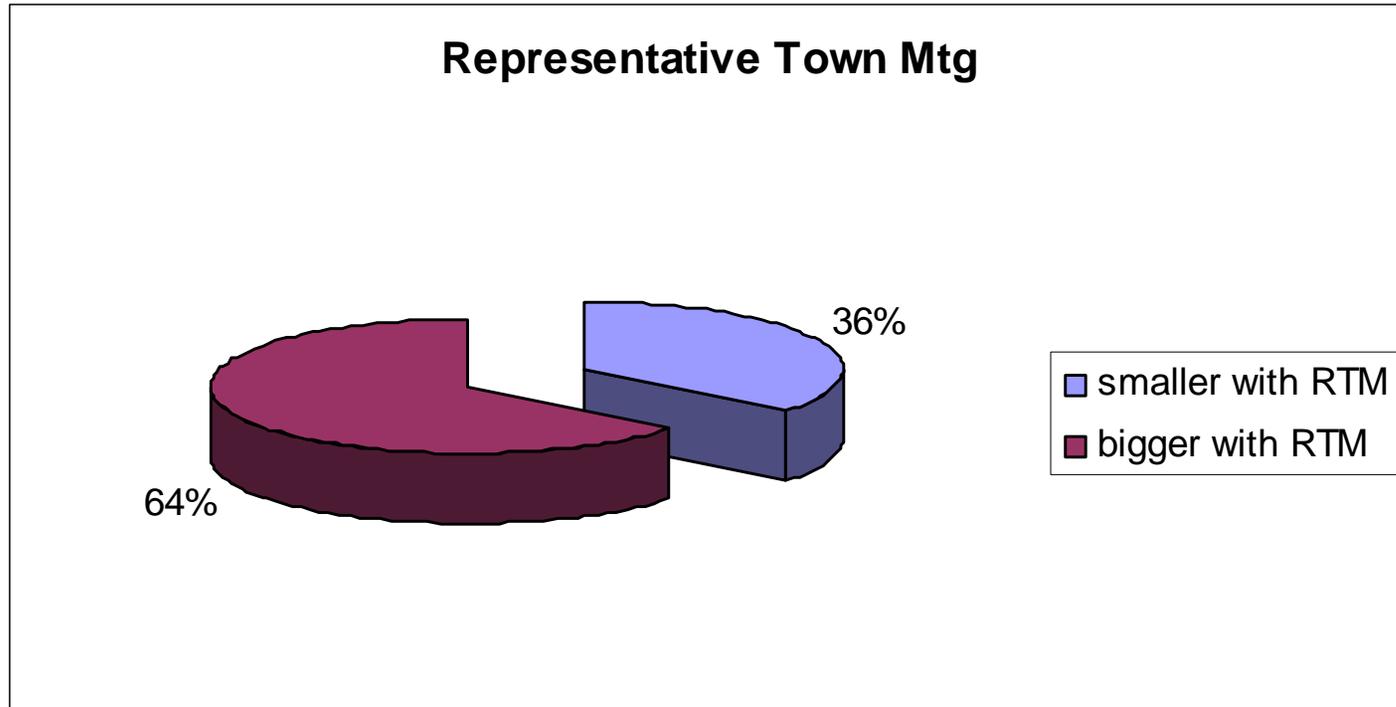
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smaller with OTM

248

Source: Massachusetts Campaign for Open Government

Many towns with RTM are larger than Easton



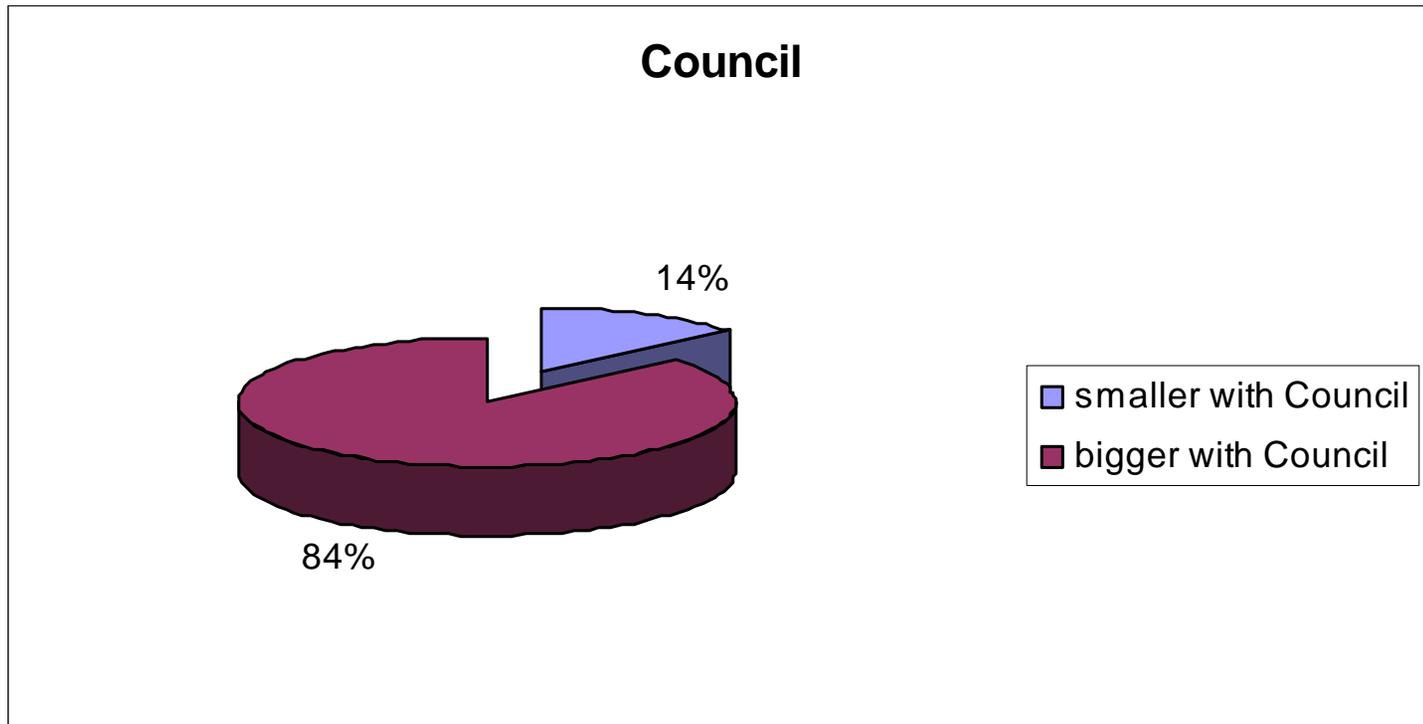
smaller with RTM

15

bigger with RTM

27

Nearly all towns with a Council FOG are larger than Easton



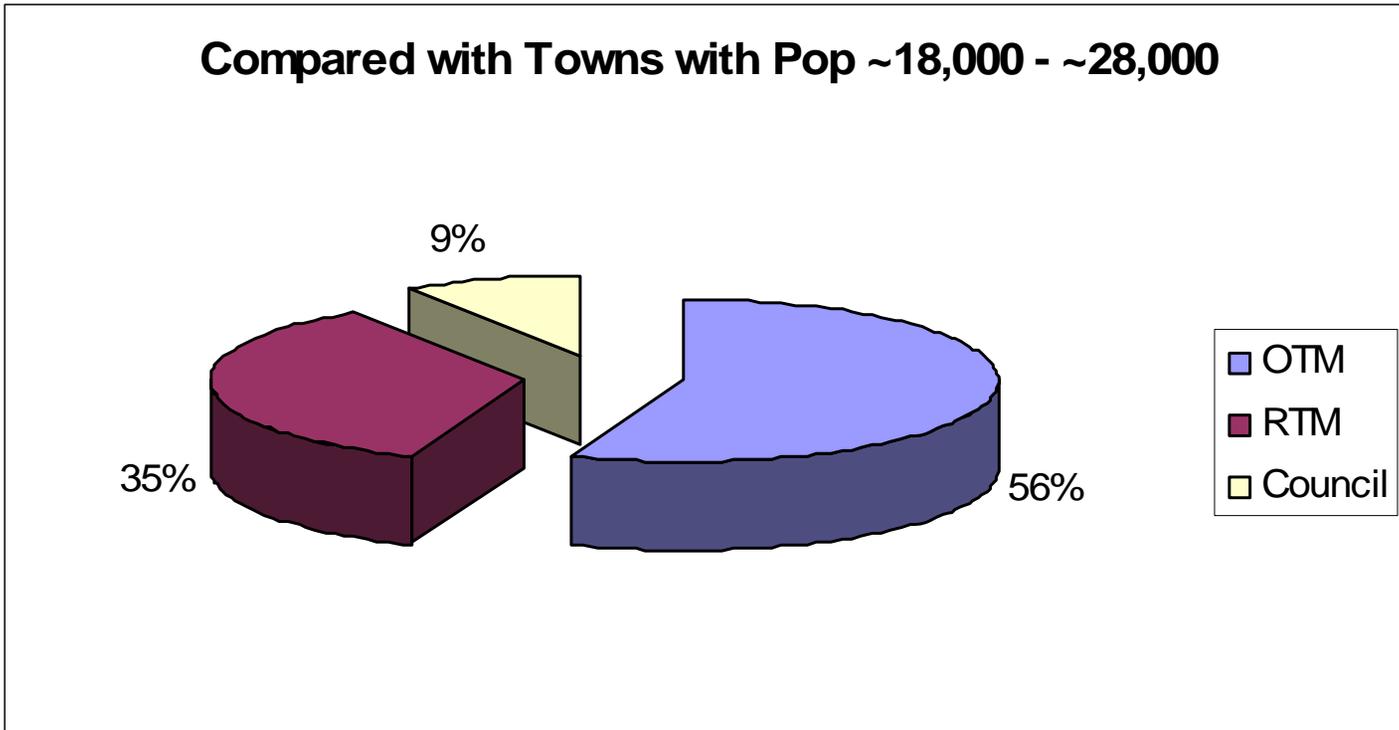
smaller with Council

7

bigger with Council

43

Compared to similarly sized towns



OTM	24
RTM	15
Council	4

Decision making process

Decision making process

- Identify criteria for FOG decision making
- Rank importance of the criteria individually and aggregate the results
- Individually evaluate how the criteria are impacted within the four FOGs and aggregate the results
- Ranking process was meant to compare and contrast the four FOGs. It was not used as the sole factor in making recommendations

Decision criteria

1. Business decision efficiency – ability for the business of the town to be completed efficiently (importance factor= 24%)
2. Accountability – clearly defined responsibilities and ownership (importance factor= 22%)
3. Job knowledge - ability to have a good, strong knowledge base (importance factor= 20%)
4. Direct vote – every citizen represents their own need (importance factor= 18%)
5. Cost – cost of implementation and cost to maintain (importance factor= 8%)
6. Acceptance – likelihood of implementation and acceptance (importance factor= 8%)

16% would be normal weighting

Criteria #1 – Business decision efficiency

Efficiency was determined to be the most important factor.

The GSC felt a Council FOG, either with a Manager or a Mayor, would be the most efficient FOG because there are fewer people involved in the decision making with quicker decision cycles.

Criteria #2 - Accountability

Accountability was found to be the second highest factor.

In order, the GSC ranked the FOGs in the following order from most accountable to least:

1. Mayor / Council
2. Manager / Council
3. Representative Town Meeting
4. Open Town Meeting

Criteria #3 – Job knowledge

Job knowledge was found to be the third highest factor.

By a slight majority, the GSC felt that the Town Council/Manager FOG was most likely to be knowledgeable about their responsibilities and duties.

1. Council / Manager
2. Council / Mayor
3. RTM
4. OTM

Criteria #4 – Direct vote

Direct vote was found to be the fourth most important factor.

OTM allows for direct citizen participation. All other FOG allow for indirect participation where citizens vote for either a representative or councilman to vote on their behalf.

Criteria #5 - Cost

Cost was tied for fifth as the least most important factor.

GSC felt any FOG change would incur some cost. Therefore OTM was the only FOG that has no cost implication. A Council / Mayor would probably include the cost of a new position.

Criteria #6 - Acceptance

Acceptance was tied for fifth as the least most important factor.

It was felt the Council / Mayor was the least likely to be accepted by the citizens of the town and making no change would be most acceptable to citizens.

1. Open Town Meeting
2. Representative Town Meeting
3. Council / Manager
4. Council / Mayor

Recommendations

Making tradeoffs

There is no perfect form of government, and no choice will create a utopia or erase the sins of the past. In this study the GSC has had to reconcile the benefits and drawbacks of the various FOG.

In this recommended change of government we are making the following tradeoffs:

- Choosing representation of all citizens over the value of direct participation
- Choosing realism over idealism – ideally everyone would participate in government, but this isn't realistic. We chose to react to and manage the reality of the situation
- Choosing job knowledge, accountability and efficiency over open debate

Recommendations

By a slight majority, the GSC decided to make the following recommendations. The minority opinion wanted to maintain the Open Town Meeting format.

- Adopt a Town Council form of government with a Town Manager.
 - The GSC did not feel it was within our charge to make specific recommendations on how the Town Council / Manager form of government should be constructed. Details should be worked on by a charter committee that has a sound understanding of the governing Massachusetts laws and significant experience in local government.
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Why not stick with OTM?

- Issues and realities associated with low participation
- Slow decision making cycles
- OTM does not often allow decision makers to become as educated on the matters as one would wish
- Complexity of budget
- Tactical rather than strategic focus
- Lack of clear ownership and accountability

Why not RTM?

- Other towns have had difficulty filling representative seats
- Not enough benefits to making the legislative body representative to warrant a break from a direct, participatory voting model
- Had the least amount of support within the GSC

Why not Council / Mayor?

- Mayor would provide excellent accountability and efficiency
- Most costly option
- Concerns that a political appointed Mayor may not have the technical and administrative skills to govern effectively
- Concerns over political appointments
- Seemed like a drastic move for our town

Why Council / Manager ?

Efficiency

- It is expected Town Council will meet several times a month allowing for efficient decision making. The committee believes the town will benefit from faster decision cycles.

Broader representation

- Participation in town government is essential for a healthy local government. There are numerous volunteer boards and action groups in town. However, representing the concerns of all citizens (even those that are unable or unwilling to attend town meeting) is more important than maintaining the direct vote of those that do attend town meeting. In fact, considering the opinions of all citizens, is a healthier legislative mechanism than relying on the relatively small number of voters that do attend town meeting (who are accountable to no one) to make decisions in the best interests of the town.

Complexity of issues and budget

- The committee recognizes the complexity of a +\$50mm budget makes it difficult for average citizens to make educated and informed decisions on town finances. A Town Council has more time to study the issues

Accountability

Today:

- OTM does provide for “in the moment” accountability in that issues are put in front of the town where citizens are able to critique the warrants. However once a decision is voted on – who is responsible for the results of the decision? BOS? Voting citizens?
- The BOS is somewhat incapacitated because they do not have full ownership. They rely on the citizens to vote on issues and efforts are stymied until such the decision is made. Often months later.

With a Town Council:

- A Town Council will be responsible for their voting record. Citizens will hold the council accountable on election day.
- Town Council will be able to set the direction for the town and will have the capacity to see it through. The council will clearly have ownership and responsibility for the town government.

Vision

In our interviews, one thing that seemed to be lacking was a sense of purpose and vision for the town. The BOS has only a limited ability to set the direction of the town. It must wait for the town meeting to bring ideas and issues to the town for a decision. And it's really up to the town to decide what will and won't move forward. Further, citizens only have a few minutes to consider and discuss matters before voting.

It is the committees hope that by:

1. Streamlining the decision making process
2. Granting elected officials more authority in governing
3. And granting the decision makers more time to study the issues

Officials will have both the capacity and capability to:

1. Establish a vision for the Town of Easton
2. Communicate the vision with the citizens
3. Succeed in achieving the long term goals for the town.

We feel that long term planning is critical to improve the town for the next generation.
