

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Unless noted otherwise, the following answers were prepared by Town Moderator Adam Shuster.

1. Why are we having a Special Town Meeting on January 23rd? The meeting is being held to determine whether to authorize funding for the construction of a public safety building and funding for the design and construction of a replacement for the David Mindess School.
2. We're in the middle of a global pandemic and the Governor has issued emergency orders limiting the size of gatherings. How can we hold a town meeting? All the emergency orders issued since the onset of the pandemic have specifically excluded municipal legislative bodies. Since town meeting is a legislative body, town meetings are not subject to the limitations in the emergency order.
3. OK, we can legally hold a town meeting – but should we? This will be the 3rd (and probably not the last) town meeting that Ashland holds during the pandemic. Long before the warrants were opened for each, I asked the same question multiple times: Do we really need to hold this meeting, or can we postpone the articles to a later date? If there was a way to delay the meeting, I encouraged that we do so.

Even after having been posted, I wasn't comfortable holding the Annual Town meeting as scheduled on June 16th. But there were potentially negative financial and operational impacts to not having an approved budget by the end of the fiscal year on June 30th, so I delayed the meeting to the last possible day - June 30th.

It was important to hold the special town meeting in December before the tax rate was certified by the Department of Revenue. Failure to do so would have meant – among other things – that there would be no senior tax exemption for the current fiscal year. The Department of Revenue deadline was December 15th, so we held the special town meeting on December 13th.

For this special town meeting I have asked the same question to which I received the following response from the Town Manager:

“As the pandemic evolved, experts were telling us that now is the right time to move forward with construction projects because there was a lack of work available and contractors were bidding aggressively to get work. This has turned out to be accurate, with bids for the public safety building coming in at \$7 million (or 25%) less than construction estimates. We are also in the middle of a favorable interest rate environment. These two major economic factors (low costs and interest rates) will lead to a savings of thousands of dollars for individual property owners in Ashland over the next three decades. With the economy projected to rebound later this year, we should take advantage of this environment while we have the opportunity.”

“The new Mindess School is part of the MSBA program. While this program will provide the town with tens of millions of dollars in reimbursement from the state, it also has strict guidelines and timelines. The votes in January help us maintain those guidelines. Plus, pushing the votes out by even just a couple of months would move the opening of the new school by a full year.”

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“Although we acknowledge that some are worried about the economy related to the pandemic, we're trying to look at the long-term financial benefits that all Ashland taxpayers would receive for decades to come.”

4. *If we must have town meeting, can't we hold it remotely?* Unfortunately, no. Emergency legislation passed in the spring allowed representative town meetings to be held via remote participation, but the same option was not provided for open town meetings (likely due to factors relating to the potential size of an open town meeting and issues revolving around voting integrity and security). The only way under Massachusetts General Law to hold an open town meeting is in person and the only way to participate and vote is to physically attend the meeting.
5. *Wait, I thought I could vote by absentee ballot?* The absentee ballot option relates to the town election that will be held on January 27th.
6. *So I must come to town meeting and sit through the entire thing so I can vote?* Not necessarily! A significant amount of time and effort has been spent coming up with a unique process to allow voters to watch the meeting from their own homes then drive to the high school to vote after the regular part of the meeting during a “voting period”. Read more about that here: <https://www.ashlandmass.com/DocumentCenter/View/7146/Procedures-for-STM-January-23-2021>
7. *Why couldn't we just have the meeting outside?* I do not support planning and attempting to hold a town meeting for what could be 750+ voters outside in the middle of winter. (But if we're still under emergency orders when annual town meeting comes around – and we likely will be – an outside annual town meeting is something I'd strongly consider.) And with the special procedures we're going to use – including the ability to email questions in ahead of time – there really isn't much to be gained holding the meeting outdoors. Those that are comfortable doing so can attend the meeting in person, those that aren't will have 2 ½ hours after the conclusion of the regular part of the meeting to go top the high school, walk in, register, vote, and leave.
8. *I read that the Select Board is going to reduce the quorum from 25 to 3. Shouldn't we be encouraging more participation not less?* The reduction in quorum has nothing to do with encouraging or discouraging attendance, but rather with the “voting period” being used for this meeting. A town meeting needs to always maintain a quorum to conduct business. In this case, that would mean that there would need to be 25 voters in the gym throughout the entire period of voting. It would be a huge challenge to make that happen, and we don't want people staying in the gym for any longer than they need to.
9. *Do I have to vote twice or just once?* The votes that will be taken at Special Town Meeting are the first of a two-part process needed to approve the projects being discussed. Each project needs to be approved at Special Town Meeting on the 23rd by a 2/3 majority to authorize the appropriation and borrowing of the funds for the projects and then again at the Town Election on the 27th to exempt the debt from Proposition 2 ½ (but this time just by a simple majority).