

6/14/04-19

**Christine Joyce**

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**From:** Dore' Hunter  
**Sent:** Friday, May 28, 2004 12:46 PM  
**To:** Board of Selectmen; Manager Department  
**Subject:** Municipal Advocate Article

Hi Folks,

I am impressed with concept outlined in the article entitled "State of the Town Improves Connections and Decision-Making" which appears at page 16 of the Municipal Advocate magazine we all received this week. Please read it, if you have not already done so.

Don: Please put a discussion of this concept and whether it might be helpful to do something similar in Acton on the next regular meeting's Agenda.

Regards,  
Dore' Hunter  
Selectman, Town of Acton, MA  
Tel: 978-263-0882  
Fax: 978-263-9230  
Email: DoreHunter@aol.com



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# State of the Town Improves Connections and Decision-Making

By **KATIE CARROLL**

When Lincoln was founded 250 years ago, its residents belonged to one parish that congregated in a single meeting house, which was both the social center of the agricultural community and its seat of government. Townspeople and local leaders had frequent opportunities to speak informally about their concerns when they met for weekly services. "People saw each other on a regular basis," says Selectman Sara Mattes.

Lincoln's town leaders acknowledge their role as stewards of the town's history and value its tradition of open town meetings. At the same time they realize that the demographics and way of life in town have changed considerably over the past two-and-a-half centuries. Still a relatively small town at 5,500 residents, they saw that there was a need for increased citizen participation to keep the open town meeting a vital and effective way of decision-making for the town. With this in mind, they organized Lincoln's first State of the Town meeting in fall 2002.

State of the Town was designed to inform residents about important decisions and budget issues facing the town and to improve the process of town meeting. All residents are invited to attend the meeting, which is more like a discussion than a formal meeting or hearing. It is an open forum between town officials and residents covering the

*Katie Carroll is the MMA's associate editor.*

key issues facing the town. Several departments present issues and policy decisions that lie ahead. Residents are encouraged to ask questions, voice opinions and make suggestions. In fact, most of the three-hour meeting is devoted to a question and answer session.

"Residents enjoy the fact that it is more open than town meeting," Town Administrator Timothy Higgins says. Susan Harding of the Lincoln League of Women Voters describes State of the Town as "a mini-town meeting without having to say 'yes' or 'no' to anything."

Held each fall, State of the Town allows residents to learn about the priorities each town board and department is setting forth as they prepare for the annual town meeting to be held the following spring. This gives residents a chance to state their opinions early in the process—well in advance of a town meeting vote. It's a way for residents to "have input before the budgets are developed," Higgins says. Finance Committee member Susan Brooks says, "It has given those of us on town boards a way to be more clear about the issues the town is facing."

The meeting is an efficient way for residents to tap into the key issues and pending policy decisions in one place at one time. "It's the concept of one-stop shopping," Mattes says. A typical town meeting warrant in Lincoln has fifty items. In order to stay informed on all these issues, residents would have to

attend meetings and hearings two or three nights a week—something that's not realistic for most people. "We needed a way to talk to the town about what are the big picture items on our collective screen, the items around which budgets need to be coordinated," Brooks says. State of the Town drew about 250 residents in 2003 down slightly from the debut meeting in fall 2002. Lincoln officials consider the turnout impressive for the town's small population.

## Communication and Connections

State of the Town covers a lot of ground in one afternoon, with presentations from the town administrator, the Board of Selectmen and a few other key departments. A publication with reports from all town departments and boards is sent to every household to help residents prepare for the meeting. The booklet, also available at the meeting, contains the town's vision statement, the meeting agenda, and reports from the Board of Selectmen, the town administrator and all other town departments and boards. These reports identify each group's key issues and priorities in the short- and long-term. Reports were prepared by the public and regional schools, the Finance Committee, the Planning Board, the Zoning Board of Appeals, the Conservation Commission, the Community Preservation Committee, the library, the Board of Assessors, the Police and Fire



departments, the Council on Aging, the Information Technology Department, the Water Commission, the Housing Commission, and the Recreation Department.

In the interest of efficiency, not every department makes a presentation at State of the Town. Instead, the presentations concentrate on certain key topics, selected by the Board of Selectmen. The presentations highlight priorities and options in one hour, leaving two hours open for moderated discussion between residents and local officials. Generally the questions from residents fit into the broad categories of town government and schools, according to town officials. Specific items have included the town's relationship with Massport pertaining to Hanscom Air Force Base, affordable housing, water conservation, the Community Preservation Act, and the METCO program. The overlap of issues became apparent as residents questioned the impact of new housing development on the schools. State of the Town has helped residents see the connections between seemingly distinct areas of local government. It was "an eye opener for the town at large to how complex problems are and how interrelated problems are," Brooks says.

In addition to enhancing communication between local officials and residents on budget matters, officials say State of the Town has increased communication among town boards. Preparing the agenda for the meeting "forced the boards to talk to one another," Mattes says. "During State of the Town the boards talked to each other again. The conversation got bounced around the whole room. It was a really open conversation between citizens and all the board members. It's been quite remarkable." This result has been a positive "unintended consequence" of State of the Town, Mattes says.

Officials say that bringing town boards together to prepare for State of the Town has improved the coordination of the budget process. "State of the Town forced us to think ahead rather than be reactive," Mattes says. It "forced focus and discipline." It also highlighted for board members the many connections within town government. Prior to State of the Town, "each board would prepare

its own budget and hold its own hearings, but the missing piece was that the boards never came together on budget issues," Brooks says. Sometimes, Mattes says, boards would "make decisions in one arena and not be aware of the downstream effect." Now they "see government is a dynamic organism."

Brooks credits State of the Town with getting the Finance Committee and the Board of Assessors working together on developing a tool that would enable them to assess the costs versus revenue for various development projects, such as single family homes, multi-family homes, or commercial buildings. "There is a recognition now that there is a financial impact to any of the land use development choices the town makes," Brooks says.

### Residents as Resources

Local officials find the exchange with residents on town matters to be valuable. Longtime residents have institutional memory, Brooks says, and all residents are a great resource. State of the Town "has deepened the conversation that ideally takes place between boards, and between boards and residents," she says. It allows residents and officials to "have a conversation that is the best of the small 'd' that is democracy at town meeting." Higgins compares the State of the Town to a corporate shareholders' meeting. He says the meeting helps Lincoln officials answer the question: What is the will of the town?

"There is really no other way to get that sort of direct input," he says. Town Moderator Jack French says, "It gives the select board a chance to scope out people's concerns and issues that can translate into an action at Town Meeting."

Higgins says State of the Town "creates a sense of greater acceptability with voters despite fiscal difficulties. ... There was a sense of support and confidence demonstrated at town meeting and at the polls [for the annual town election]." At town meeting in March 2002, Higgins says, "an override was supported and the budget was adopted with almost no questions." Brooks adds, "what we are coming to grips with in

## We Have a Question for You

State of the Town gives Lincoln officials a chance to respond directly to residents' concerns. The following are examples of questions raised by residents at the 2002 State of the Town Meeting:

### Chapter 40B (affordable housing law)

- What is 40B?
- By how many units is the town under the 10 percent requirement?
- Does 40B allow the town to count apartments in its affordable inventory?
- Has the town considered how it might use development/impact fees so that developers are required to help offset the costs they impose on the town?

### Community Preservation Act

- How much revenue will the CPA generate for Lincoln?

### Environment/Conservation

- What is the town doing through its regulations and land use to encourage water conservation?

### Schools

- What is Lincoln's cost for providing the METCO program?
- What is the School Committee's philosophy concerning MCAS?
- Could the School Committee lease space to private organizations as a way of defraying costs?

### Volunteerism

- How do we express our interest in volunteering, and how do we find out about the positions/assignments that need to be filled?



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## STATE OF THE TOWN

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this town is that the costs of doing business generally exceed the rather arbitrary figures set by Proposition 2½. That balancing act is a trick the town is going to be practicing with regularity in the future."

State of the Town is now a regular part of the town's planning process. "I see a big payoff just in the first two meetings," Brooks says.

The idea for State of the Town originated about three years ago during an annual team meeting of the town's volunteer boards. (The team meetings were created as a way for the volunteer boards to communicate with each other.) State of the Town was designed to inform residents in order to improve town meeting. There was a "lack of meaningful citizen involvement early on in the town meeting process," Higgins says. "Town Meeting was taking so long to work through," Mattes recalls. "There was a sense of frustration. We thought, 'Is this any way to do business?' Important decisions were being made." With the State of the Town meetings, information gathering is done well in advance, she says, and there is "no need to use the floor of town meeting to be doing reconnaissance."

"State of the Town right now is perfect for us," Mattes says. "Will it be in ten years? Town meeting worked for how many years and then we needed to tweak it," Mattes believes, that State of the Town works well because Lincoln is a small town. She acknowledges that in the future State of the Town may need to change as the state of the town does just that.

*For more information, call Timothy Higgins at (781) 259-2600.*

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