



# Survey on Town Meeting Member Communication December 2021

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Appendix A: Survey Form

Appendix B: Survey Results for Quantitative Questions

Appendix C: Survey Results for Open Text Questions

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The League of Women Voters of Needham (LWVN) was responsible for the preparation, distribution, and reporting of the Town Meeting Communication Survey. LWVN Study Committee: Rebecca Waber (Chair), Carol Patey (LWVN President), Karen Price (Voter Service Chair), Heidi Frail, Si Si Goneconto, Elizabeth Handler, Eileen Mullen, Elin Soderholm, Jan Soma.

## Executive Summary

As part of its study on Town Meeting Communication the League of Women Voters of Needham (LWVN) conducted a survey of current Town Meeting Members (TMM) on their communication preferences in October 2021. Of the 250 current Needham TMMs, 150 responded.

### Findings in Brief:

- For communications from constituents to TMMs, most respondents selected email as the preferred method of receiving input and feedback, and more than two-thirds chose email through precinct distribution lists as a preferred method.
- Respondents desire tools to facilitate communication to constituents and one another, such as precinct Zoom office hours, online discussion groups, and in person “meet your member” events.
- Respondents support the continuation of both the pre-recorded warrant article information before Town Meeting and in-person presentations, with more favoring videos.

## Needham Town Meeting

Needham has a representative Town Meeting, meaning that TMMs are elected within each precinct to vote as part of the legislative body known as Town Meeting.

Needham Town Meeting consists of 240 TMMs elected for 3-year terms within ten precincts, plus up to 14 at-large Members. In 2021 there are 240 precinct members plus 10 at-large members, for a total of 250.

More details on Needham Town Meeting are available in the Needham Town Meeting Members Handbook (2021 edition) [<https://www.needhamma.gov/DocumentCenter/View/4133/Town-Meeting-Handbook---Revised-2021?bidId=>]

Michael Fee, the current Town Moderator wrote in the Handbook:

“It is important to remember that Town Meeting Members have dual representative responsibility. On the one hand, each member represents the interests of her constituents in the precinct where she lives. On the other hand, each member must always consider the well-being of the entire Town of Needham when matters come before the meeting.”

According to the Secretary of the Commonwealth, Town Meeting in Massachusetts has three major roles:

- It sets the salaries for the elected officials.
- It votes to appropriate money to run the town.
- It votes on the town’s local statutes, including general and zoning by-laws.  
[<https://www.sec.state.ma.us/cis/cistwn/twnidx.htm>]

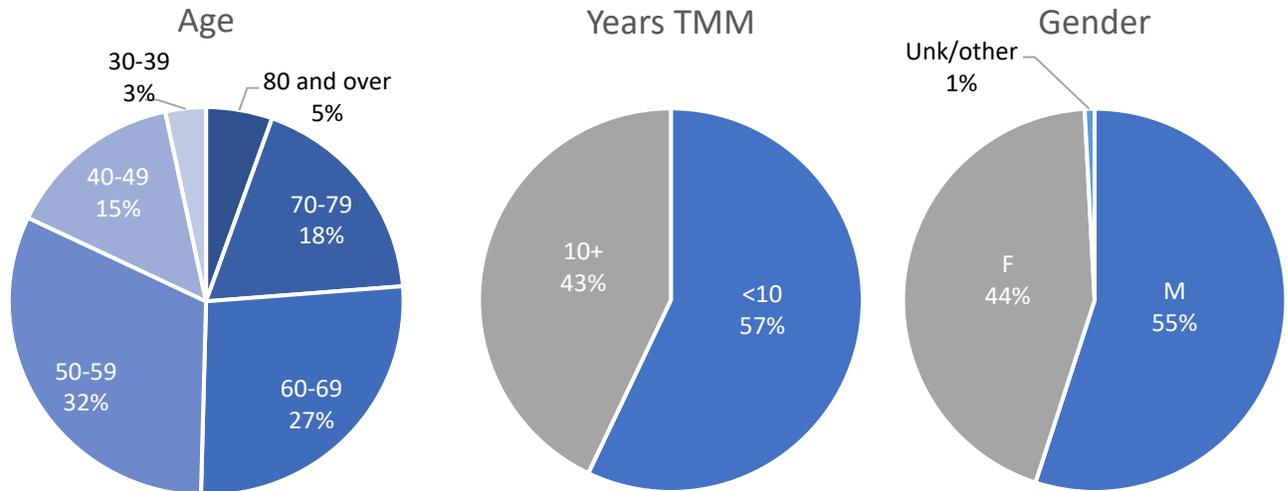
There are other roles that may be defined by the state and the town. For example, certain state programs may require Town Meeting approval, and Town Meeting may consider resolutions, home rule petitions (such as charter amendments), and citizens petitions.

## Needham TMM Demographics

The charts below show the distribution of **all** precinct TMMs according to age, years as a TMM, and gender. These demographics were obtained from publicly available resources and were not obtained by our survey. [Data compiled by Michael Greis.]

The figures show that about half of TMMs are younger than 60, with very few (3%) less than 40 years old. Most (57%) have been a TMM for 9 years or less (3 terms), and 55% of the members are male. In the next section we compare these results to those collected in our survey population.

**Figure 1. Town Meeting Member Distribution According to Age, Years TMM, and Gender**



## Survey Population

The survey also captured demographic responses from 147 TMMs (shown in Appendix B). The section above shows age, years served, and gender for all 240 precinct TMMs. The survey response population was more evenly distributed female to male (48% F, 47% M) than all TMMs (44% F, 55% M) and was consistent regarding age. The survey tenure question responses could not be compared to the all-TMMs data because of the wording of the responses.

The survey captured all precincts with 11-17 members from each.

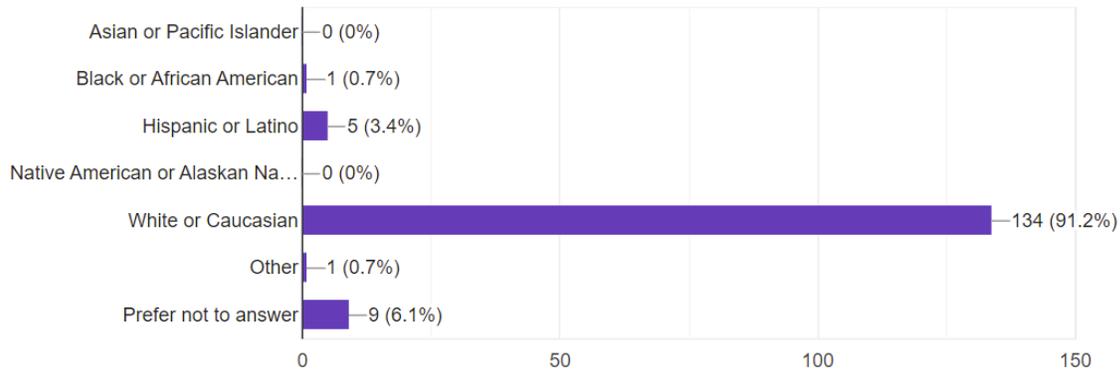
The survey captured race/ethnicity, which was not available for all TMMs. Racial/ethnic identity among survey respondents is less diverse than the town as a whole, with 91% self-describing as white, 3% as Hispanic/Latino, <1% as Black or other. In the 2020 census report, 82% of Needham residents chose their race as “white alone.”

<https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=needham,%20massachusetts&tid=DECENNIALPL2020.P1>

**Figure 2. Survey Respondents Racial/Ethnic Diversity**

Which of the following best describes you? (Check all that apply)

147 responses



## Survey Methodology

The survey was built in Google forms. LWVN emailed survey invitations and reminders to current TMMs beginning October 17, and the survey was closed November 1, 2021. See Appendix A for the survey form.

The survey included the following sections:

- Communication from constituents to TMMs
- Communication from TMMs to constituents
- Communication regarding warrant articles
- Communication among TMMs
- Demographics

The survey used the following types of responses to questions:

- A 10-point scale, in which respondents chose an integer from one to ten, with the most positive response being the highest number. Responses are summarized as the average from the respondents.
- Check boxes, in which the respondent was instructed to “check all that apply.” These responses are not mutually exclusive and are summarized with percentage of TMMs who selected each response.
- Multiple choice, in which only one answer can be chosen (mutually exclusive), summarized as percentage of TMMs who selected each response.
- Open comment fields which allowed respondents to respond with open text.

The survey was anonymous.

## Survey Results

On November 1, 150 of 250 current TMMs had responded, for a 60% response rate. The full results of the non-comment questions appear in Appendix B and the comments are shown in Appendix C.

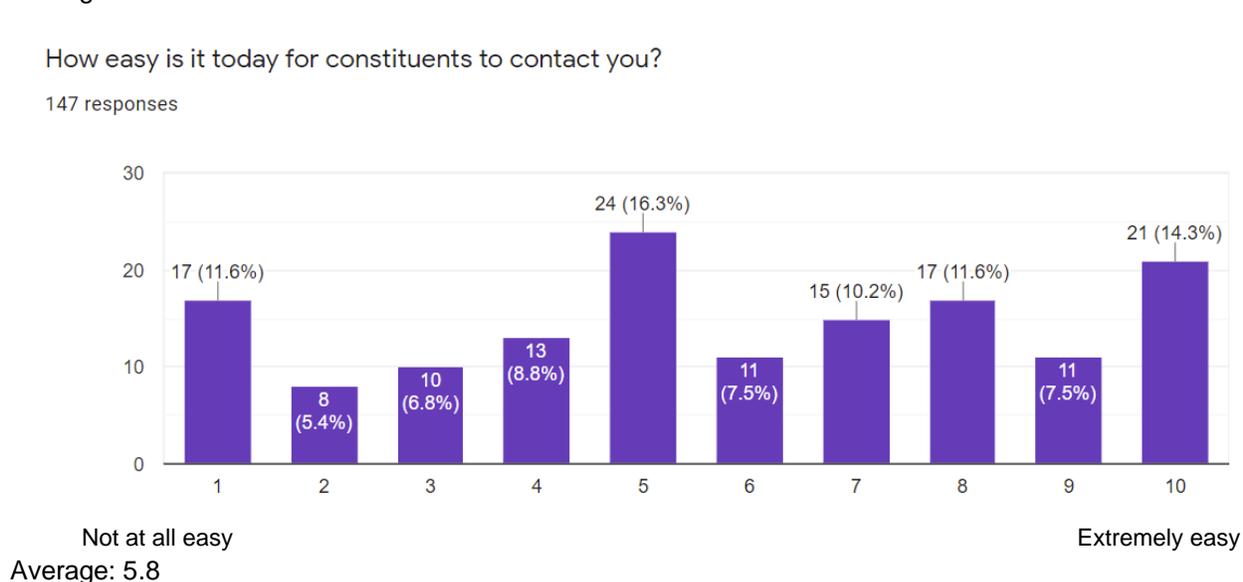
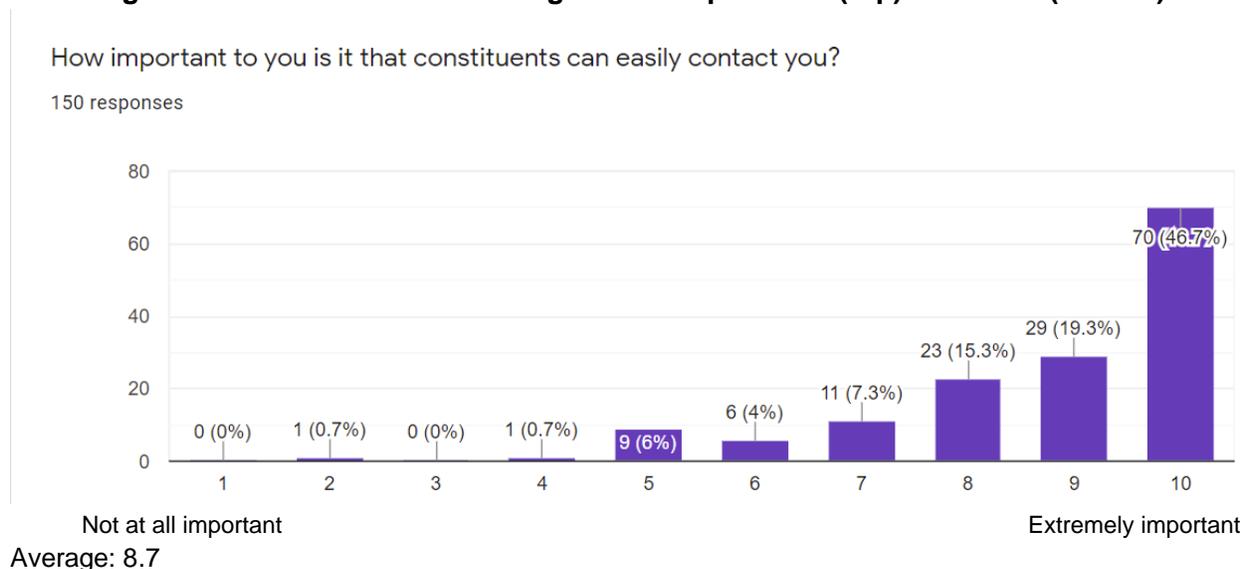
## Communication from Constituents to TMMs

### Highlights and Conclusions:

TMM respondents considered it very important that constituents be able to easily contact them (avg 8.7 out of 10), with 70% choosing 10: “extremely important.” In response to how easy it is today for constituents to contact them, respondents fell in the middle of “not at all easy” and “extremely easy” (avg 5.8). These results taken together indicate a desire to be easily contacted, and a need for easier methods of contact.

*“Our role is to represent our community yet we have no way to collect their feedback.” - TMM member*

**Figure 3. Constituents Contacting TMMs: Importance (top) and Ease (bottom)**



Regarding the method of the contact, 94% chose email as a preferred method, while a third of respondents found phone and physical mail to be preferred methods as well. Using the “other category” 4% added some sort of conversation as a preferred method. Details on other categories can be found in Appendix B.

For preferred email methods, 69% of respondents chose distribution lists, 21% personal email addresses made public, and 37% new email addresses set up by the TMM for the purpose of TMM communication. Note that respondents could choose multiple responses.

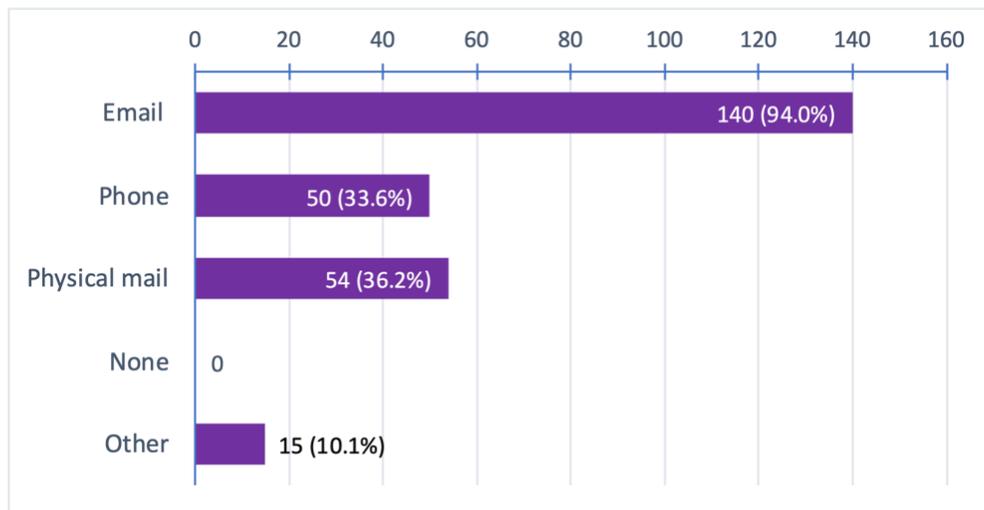
A new suggestion was to have a system that would allow TMMs to send out information and get feedback from constituents who sign up.

*“As an elected representative, I feel it is extremely important for constituents to be able to easily contact all of their representatives at one time by providing one email address that will forward to all TMMs for that precinct. The easier the process is, the more likely people are to use it.” - TMM Member*

**Figure 4. Constituents Contacting TMMs: Methods (top) and Email Methods (bottom)**

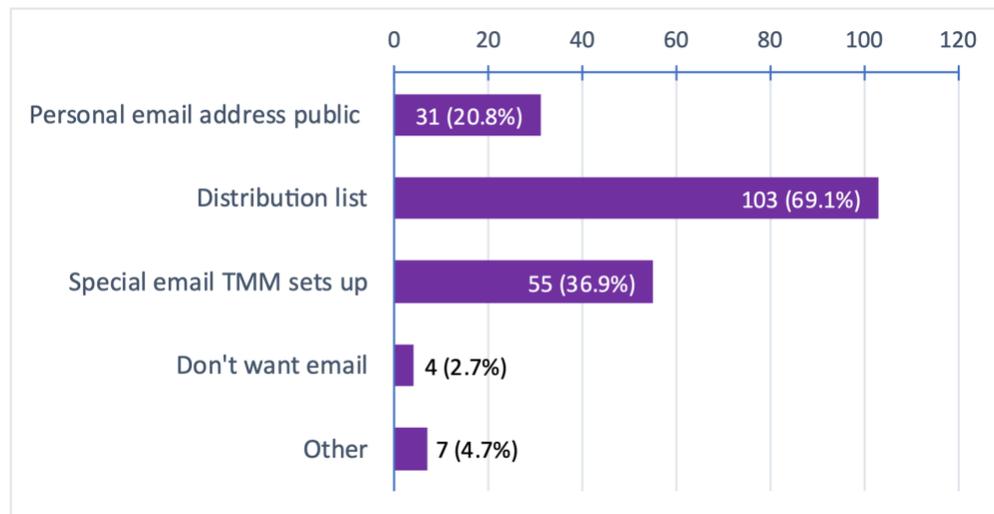
What is your preferred method(s) for constituents to contact you? (Check all that apply)

149 responses



What is your preferred EMAIL method(s) for your constituents to be able to contact you? (Check all that apply)

149 responses



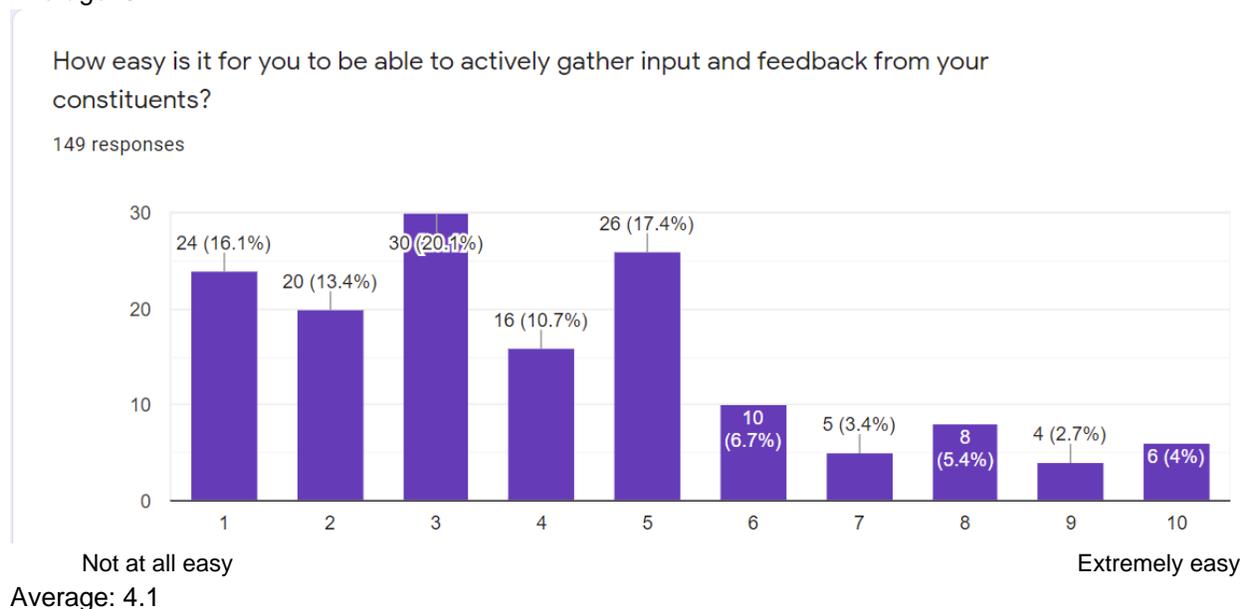
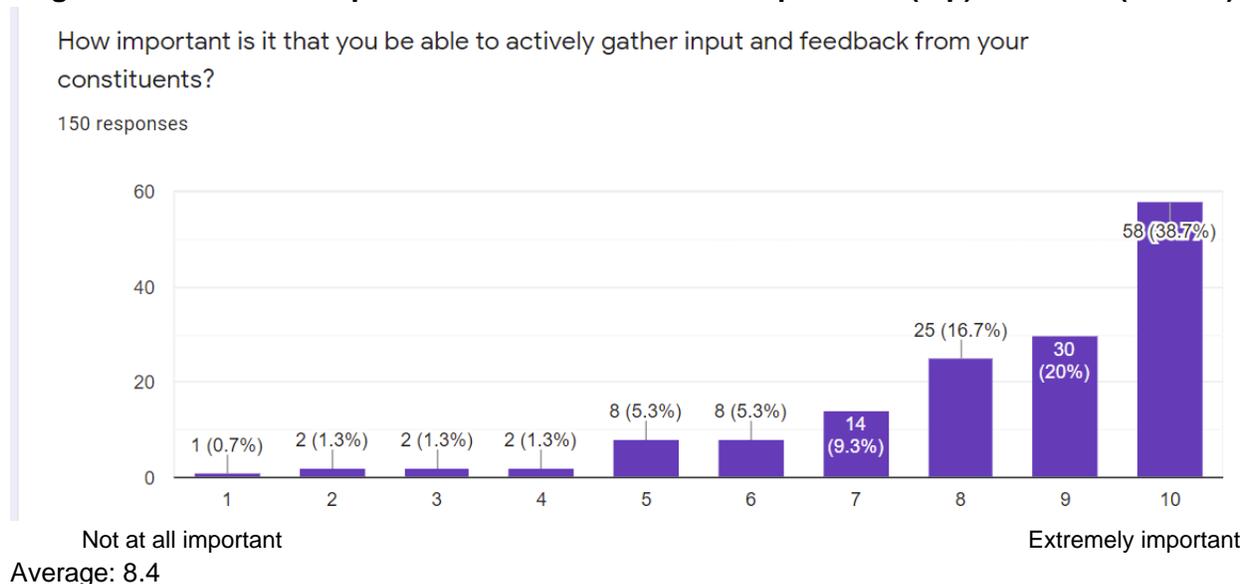
Note: See Appendix B, Questions 3 and 4 for full list of “other” responses.

## Communication from TMMs to Constituents

### Highlights and Conclusions:

TMM respondents believe it is very important to be able to actively gather input and feedback from constituents (avg 8.4), but find that it is quite difficult now (avg 4.1), showing again a need to facilitate gathering feedback from constituents.

**Figure 5. Constituent Input and Feedback to TMMs: Importance (top) and Ease (bottom)**



*"... I don't know a good way to reach out to the constituents in my precinct without posting something to the whole town." - TMM member*

TMM respondents were willing to use new tools and methods for gathering input and feedback from constituents.

- Zoom meetings with constituents by precinct: 62% checked that it would help
- In person "meet your member" event: 45%
- Online discussion groups like Google Group, Slack or Signal: 42%
- Online office hours for 1:1 discussion: 21%
- Using the "other" category, 9 (6%) said email.

## Communication regarding warrant articles

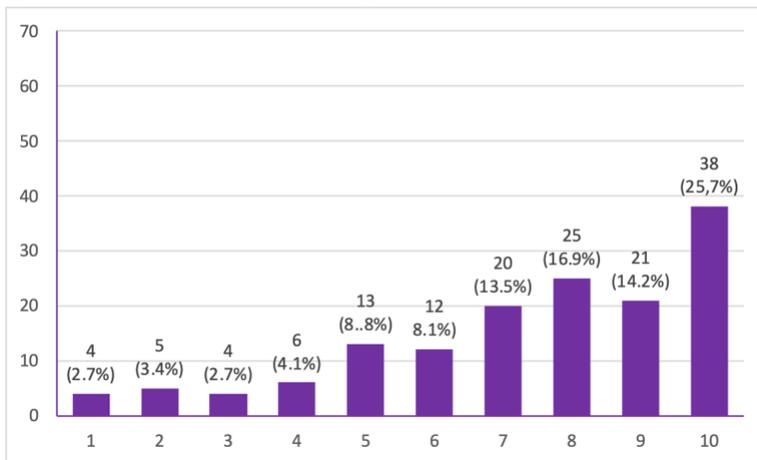
### Highlights and Conclusions:

Respondents rated many tools as having high value (average rating score out of 10):

- Printed warrant article: 9.1
- LWVN Warrant Meetings: 8.1
- Issue-specific forums: 7.9
- Facebook: 3.7. This option was the only controversial item, as 30% rated it the lowest possible score but the remaining responses were dispersed and showed that many TMMs find it moderately helpful.
- Pre-recorded presentations: 8.4. Respondents felt strongly that pre-recorded presentations instituted during COVID times should continue, with 46% of members rating this the highest possible score of 10.
- Live presentations during Town Meeting: 7.4

**Figure 6. Communication Regarding Warrant Articles:  
Pre-Recorded (top) and Live (bottom) Presentations**

Live presentations during Town Meeting from proponents/select board/finance committee  
(as we do in non-COVID times)

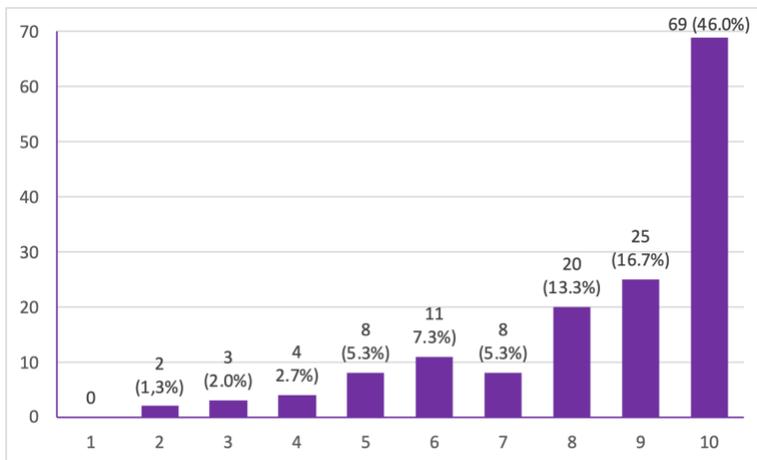


148 responses; Average: 7.4

Not very helpful

Extremely helpful

Pre-recorded presentations from proponents/select board/finance committee (as we have done in COVID times)



150 responses; Average; 8.4

Not very helpful

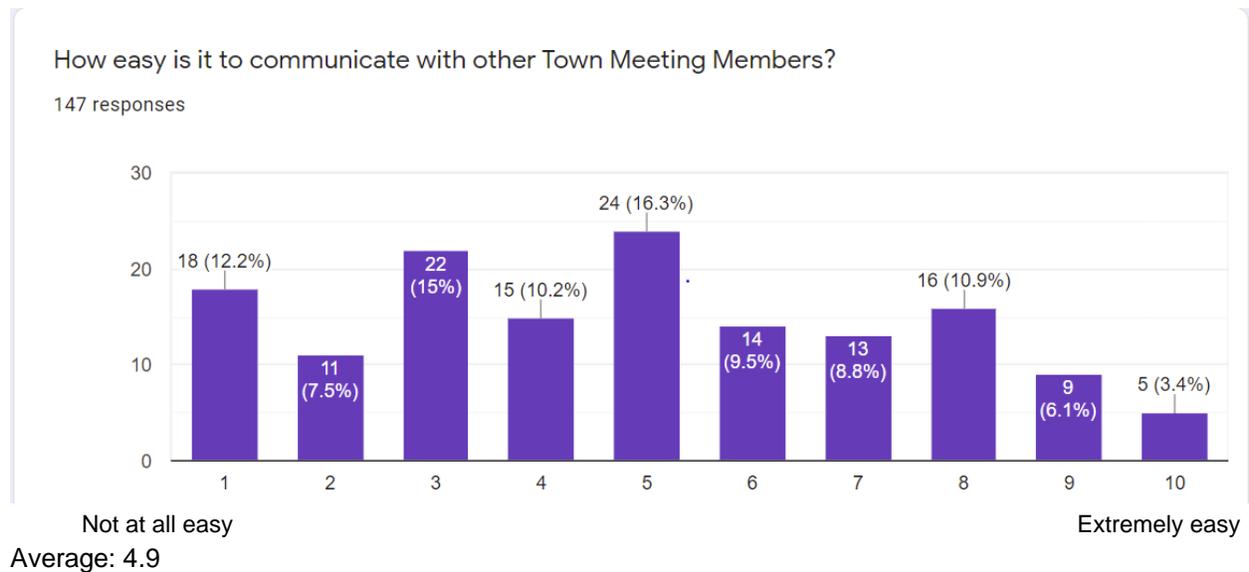
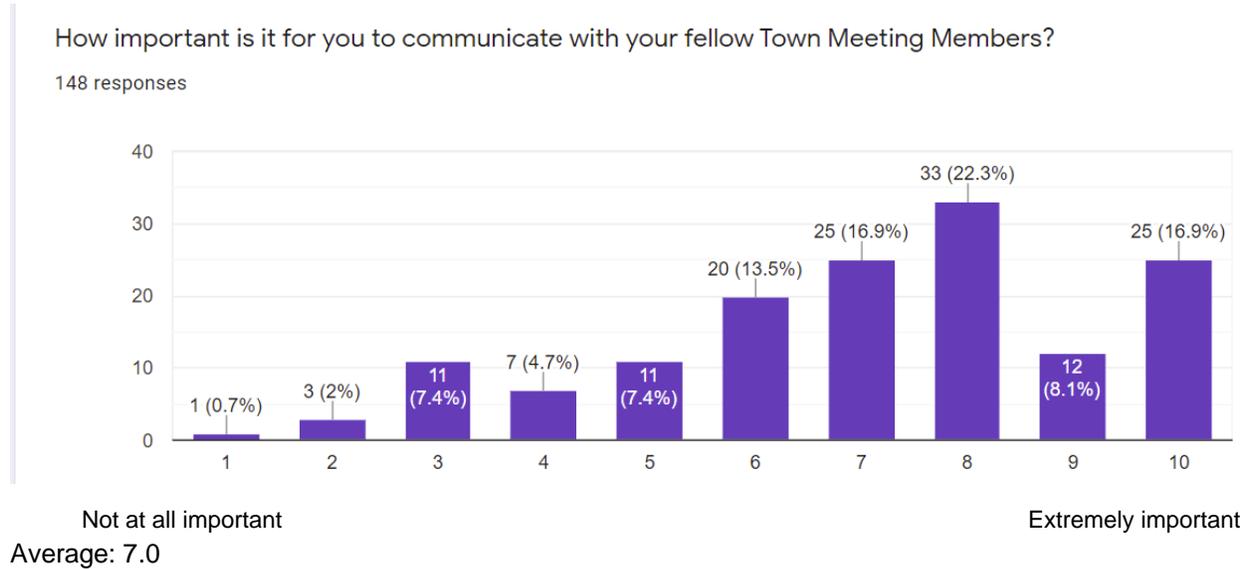
Extremely helpful

# Communication among TMMs

## Highlights and Conclusions:

Respondents thought it was fairly important (avg 7.0), but not very easy (avg 4.9) to communicate amongst themselves.

**Figure 7. Communication Among TMMs: Importance (top) and Ease (bottom)**



The majority of respondents are interested in TMM-wide (61%) and precinct-specific (67%) online groups such as Slack, Signal, or Google.

## Discussion

Needham TMMs who responded to the survey clearly think it is important for constituents to be able to easily contact them. Their assessment of how easy it is to contact them currently is less clear, with about a third of respondents choosing codes 8-10 (very to extremely easy), and the average in the middle (avg 5.8). Even so, it is noteworthy that many of the respondents feel it is not easy, and therefore we believe the town should consider ways to improve how constituents can reach out to TMMs beyond the current name and street address available on the town website.

The best way to improve communication to TMMs is to provide a way for constituents to contact TMMs through email, and the favored method is the "distribution list." One way to implement the list is for each TMM to provide the town with an email address for forwarding. The website would include a link to "Email TMMs from Precinct A," "Email TMMs from Precinct B," and so on. These emails would be forwarded to the appropriate TMMs. If a TMM replies, the response would come from their personal email address, which might be a special address created for this purpose. Other distribution systems may be possible as well and should be considered. Circling back to the Town Moderator's comments on the dual responsibilities of representing both constituents and the whole town, residents should also be able to email all TMMs, not just those representing their own precinct, if desired.

In the area of communication from TMMs to Constituents, we heard from respondents that this is very important but currently not very easy. TMMs are interested in using online tools to hear from constituents, but also in having in-person opportunities. The pandemic has opened our eyes to possibilities such as online discussion groups or Zoom precinct meetings that could improve communication in this direction.

Another pandemic innovation has been the use of pre-recorded videos for each Town Meeting article, which are available prior to Town Meeting. These videos are quite popular, but so are the in-person presentations. Perhaps a continuation of the videos, with some in-person presentations to supplement them would have the greatest benefit for TMMs' understanding of the articles.

Communicating with other TMMs is a little less important than with constituents, but still very important for the majority of respondents. Assessing how to easily do this was less clear, with 2/3 in favor of an on-line method. Right now, there is nothing stopping a TMM or group of TMMs from holding a zoom precinct meeting, but there is no way to easily contact the other TMMs in the precinct to "advertise" the meeting. The town could help in these areas.

It is important to point out that, although our 60% response (150 of 250) is a fairly good response to a survey, it does not include the opinions of 40% (100) of TMMs. We must consider that those who did not respond may be less interested in communication than those who did respond, and the non-responders may be less willing to accept more communication. Of course, providing e-mail addresses and participating in discussion groups would not be mandated, just as reading the warrant, watching the videos, and even attending Town Meeting are not mandated.

Our survey shows that many TMMs are interested in improving the flow of information and feedback to and from constituents and one another. There is interest in digital tools, notably email distribution lists and online discussion groups, to facilitate the role of elected representative TMMs.

The pandemic has opened our eyes to new possibilities, such as online meetings, increased use of email and other digital communication, and pre-recorded warrant article presentations. Using some of these options to improve the functioning of our representative town meeting could have a lasting impact.