

TOWN MEETING 2010

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THE DAY: Town meeting scenes from across Vermont

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by anger.

Theresa Stockwell has seen it all. "You have to come to town meeting," she said. "Just to catch up with your neighbors and keep track of what's going on with the town."

7:54 p.m. Monday, Shelburne

Less than 10 minutes after calling Shelburne's town meeting to order, moderator Thomas Little gives the crowd in the Shelburne Community School gymnasium specific instructions on how to vote from the floor: Hold up green cards to indicate yes, red cards to vote no.

Trouble is, voters were given only one card as they came into the meeting, and it is kind of pink. Considering that voters are about to discuss a school budget that hasn't seen a spending increase in three years, some economic humor regarding the red-card, green-card mix-up seems appropriate.

"OK, we're cutting back," Little jokes.

6:55 a.m. Tuesday, Burlington

Diane Ballou, a night nurse, is in line before the polls open at Mater Christi School in Burlington's Ward 1.

"I always vote," she says. "I love it. I even show up some years and it turns out there isn't an election."

Town meeting in the city means just a quick trip to the ballot box — no face-to-face meeting. Here, the debate is carried on in the phalanx of signs stuck in the snow outside the school.

"Keep Voting Simple, Yes on #5," one set of signs urges. "Block the Republican power grab. No on #5," another sign shouts back. The question — whether to repeal the city's system of instant runoff voting — is the issue mostly likely to draw voters in an election with no mayor's race.

Inside, Ward Clerk Sue Alenick declares the polls open. At a table, election worker Linda Sheehy is trying out the latest in election tools. Beside her, election worker Leo Yandow is checking off voters with old technology, a red pen and ruler. Sheehy has the checklist on a computer. As she types, voters' names pop up faster than Yandow can work. As soon as a voter is given a ballot, Sheehy hits a button and a bright red bar by the voter's name announces: Voted.

9:25 a.m., Eden

Town meeting has barely started in the small Lamoille County town, but already there have been harsh words.

"People bitching, bitching, bitching," says a female voter when a visitor asks what's happened so far.

At the back of the room, Warren Whitcomb Jr. isn't happy. He wants the highway budget cut, but townspeople are unwilling. He opposes re-election of a lister. "Biggest mistake ever made in town," he mutters, loud enough to be heard in the crowd.

Then it's time to elect a cemetery commissioner. Moderator Bruce Burnor calls for nominations. David Ostrout, an appointee to the post, is the incumbent.

"Does David even live in town?" someone calls out. "No, he doesn't," another voice yells, echoing off the concrete walls and linoleum floor of the school meeting room.

A silence falls on the crowd of 80 voters. "Nominations?" Burnor asks again. No volunteers. "What does the cemetery commission do?" someone asks.

Another commissioner, Ronnie Morin, answers: "There's quite a little involved." He describes monthly meetings, the summer work mowing the graveyard, repairing fences, righting stones.

From the silence, a voice asks, "Do you HAVE to be a town resident?"

The absent, nonresident Mr. Ostrout is nominated



Voters turn out at Burlington's Ward 4 polling place at St. Mark's Youth Center on Tuesday.

ANDY DUBACK, for the Free Press

and elected by acclamation.

9:30 a.m., Richmond

A vase of bright red tulips sits in front of Marshall Paulsen, who checks in voters with last names in the A-L range.

"It's for first-time voters," he says. "I just thought they needed some recognition."

Galloway Morris, 18, approaches. He accepts a tulip, but explains he won't vote until the afternoon.

"I want to wait until everything's been discussed. I want to make as informed a decision as possible," he says.

10:09 a.m., Lowell

A camera crew from WCAX is here. A documentary filmmaker is here. Three officials from Green Mountain Power are here, and the Lowell school gym is packed.

Everyone is waiting for the expected hot debate on whether the town should endorse the big commercial wind farm GMP has proposed for Lowell Mountain. The company has campaigned hard for the 18- to 24-turbine project, but opponents have campaigned just as hard.

The issue will be settled by daylong secret ballot, but the question is also on the agenda for floor discussion.

Moderator Alden Warner tells the crowd he will try to call on supporters and opponents alternately. "I'd like to keep it going back and forth," he says.

The floor is open for debate. Voter Pati Austin-Kirk raises her hand. "I'd like to make a motion to end discussion before it begins," she says.

Warner calls for a vote. The room votes overwhelmingly not to talk about wind turbines.

"We're just tired of it," says Austin-Kirk, who opposes the turbines. "We just want to vote with no pressure. No pressure from the Selectboard, no pressure from Green Mountain."

Warner, who as a Selectboard member helped negotiate a tax deal with the utility, agrees. "By now, 100 percent of the people have made up their mind," he says. "More debate would only escalate harsh feelings."

11:35 a.m., Richmond

Moderator Clifton Buxton calls for a voice vote on an amendment to increase the budget by \$14,000 to finance repairs to the Town Center building.

Buxton hears a two-thirds majority for the "nay" camp. He briskly asks if any-



Mary Ann Lickteig votes with her children at her side at Edmunds Elementary School in Burlington on Town Meeting Day. With her are (from left) Gracie Hasselbach, 8; twins Nicholas and Andrew Hasselbach, 5; and Jack Hasselbach, 6 (not pictured).

GLENN RUSSELL, Free Press

one wants the vote contested, hears none, and moves the meeting toward a broader vote on the budget.

A minute or two later, Lauren Esserman signals for the microphone to challenge the verbal tally. She says she and others hadn't had time to respond to the call for a challenge.

"It would be nice in the future to have a little more of a pause," she says. Rules are rules, Buxton tells her, and the meeting breaks for lunch.

Joining the throng of lunch-bound residents, Ann Cousins, the sponsor of the amendment, echoes Esserman.

"It moved so quickly," she

says. "I don't think anybody really knew they needed to speak up right then."

"But it turned out positive," she adds. "There was a consensus in the room that the repairs needed to be done. People just disagreed over what the best way to do that might be."

The end of the food line edges closer to volunteer servers positioned behind vats of soup (eight varieties), stacks of sandwiches (tuna fish and egg salad), clear plastic bags of carrots and the remnants of pie (pumpkin, pecan, apple and cherry).

A poster proclaims that Beacon Light Grange No. 557 has been "serving Richmond

since 1949."

Grange chef Darcelene Lewis-Wedge announces that she had just dished out the day's last hot dog.

Town meeting voters ate 6 pounds of wieners this year compared with 9 pounds last year, she says.

"But this year we had much more soup and chili," she says.

2:30 p.m., Huntington

After more than five hours of democracy in action, the hardcore town meeting attendees have reached the final action item — an advisory article on the town's view of Vermont Yankee's future.

The article asks voters if they want the Legislature to

deny Vermont Yankee approval to operate after its license expires in March 2012, require the nuclear plant's owners to fully fund cleanup after the plant closes and to pursue renewable energy sources to replace Vermont Yankee's power.

Terry Ryan proposes the town also request that the Legislature work to make sure the generating and power distribution infrastructure at the plant continue to be used — good-old Yankee recycling.

That appeals to the crowd for a few minutes.

Then Heather Pembroke worries the town would be sending a message of support for a new nuclear plant. That's not what she wants to convey.

Jennifer Esser proposes a rewrite — that the Legislature consider ways to best use the distribution infrastructure, especially using it with some new renewable energy source but definitely not nuclear power.

That wins overwhelming support from the dwindling crowd — but not from Ryan. His voice seems to be the lone no vote in the gym.

5 p.m., Burlington

Democrat Greg Jenkins, a tall, stout man, his ears well covered by a pull-down cap, concedes the Ward 7 council race to Republican Paul Decelles almost cheerfully, two hours before the polls will close. As he speaks, voters stream by, heading in, coming out, their votes cast.

If he comes within 10 percent of Decelles, it will have been a good effort, he says. Hard to beat an incumbent, particularly on the first go-round.

He liked campaigning, knocked on every door in the ward and, with his wife working late and his son away in college, he would have had time to be a bang-up councillor.

What had he learned? "There are streets here I'd never walked on," he says. "I'm a good walker." He grimaced, "not a stander." He's been standing in front of the Miller Center voting place for 10 hours, saying hello, holding a sign.

Will he be back? "Oh, yeah," he says. "I'm going to serve. Time's not an issue."

7 p.m., Burlington

Ward 1 Clerk Sue Alenick looks out into the hallway at Mater Christi.

"Ladies and gentleman, the polls are now closed," she calls.

At a table behind her, election worker Sheehy looks at her computer. It has tallied 327 voters with names that begin L-Z. Ordinarily, it would take workers several counts through printed sheets to make sure they have an accurate tally of voters.

Sheehy, whose computer work is a pilot project, has seen the future and likes it. "This is awesome," she says.

As Alenick and her team begin dismantling the makeshift wooden voting booths, a single voter continues to pore over his ballot. The minutes tick by.

Finally, at 7:09, Mark Paglierani, a University of Vermont junior, feeds his ballot into the counter.

"I love Burlington and I plan to live here for a long time. I figure I got to learn the issues and I got to vote," he says. "It's an important way to demonstrate my rights as a citizen."

Town Meeting Day is over. All over but the counting.

Candace Page, Brent Hallenbeck, Joel Baird, Nancy Remsen, Terri Hallenbeck, Matt Ryan, John Briggs and Dan McLean contributed to this report.

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