# **Electronic Voting - Frequently Asked Questions**

The Electronic Voting Study Committee has compiled a set of questions about electronic voting. The answers to these questions are based on the assumption that the policy and procedure recommendations made by the Electronic Voting Study Committee are adopted by town officials. The actual policies and procedures applicable to electronic voting will be determined by the Town Moderator, Select Board and/or Town Manager. However, the Town Moderator, Town IT Director, and Town Manager have reviewed and support these recommendations.

## **General Questions About the Electronic Voting System**

**Why is the town considering Electronic Voting?**

The town meeting is being asked to consider Electronic Voting as a method to enable anonymous voting at town meeting and to document actual vote counts. Anonymous voting should minimize “go with the flow” voting and result in a truer representation of votes.

**How can you assure attendees that their votes are anonymous and not recorded and traceable?**

While each handset has a number, that number is not recorded with the user. Voting will not be displayed as votes are taken. Only the vote totals will be announced by the Moderator after a voting window has expired. Further, after each vote, it is being recommended that vote detail be deleted.

**How is vote detail data handled? How long is it kept?**

After each vote, it is being recommended that vote detail be deleted. Only the vote totals will be retained. Please remember that handsets are not associated with individuals, further preserving anonymity.

**Can Electronic Voting be used in town or state elections?**

No. The system can only be used for in-person voting at town meeting. It does not replace, and cannot be used for, voting at the polls on election day, early voting or voting by mail for elections.

**Can Electronic Voting be used to vote absentee or vote remotely for town meeting?**

No. There are no provisions in statute for town meeting absentee voting or remote voting. Electronic Voting cannot be used in these ways.

**What do the 70 or so Massachusetts towns using Electronic Voting think about it?**

Committee members contacted 15-20 towns to assess this question. No committee member received negative feedback. In fact, all feedback was very positive for ease of use and reliability. To the committee’s knowledge, no town has discontinued use of Electronic Voting.

## **Using Electronic Voting During Town Meeting**

**How do I know when to vote?**

It will be very similar to what happens now. The Moderator will state that we will now vote on a motion and will describe the motion being voted on and what proportion of votes need to be yes votes in order for the motion to pass. He will indicate the length of time that the voting period will be open. He may do this once at the start of Town Meeting for all votes or at the start of an individual vote. He will then say something to the effect that the voting period is now open. At this point you may cast your vote. At the close of the voting period, the Moderator will say something to the effect that the voting period has closed. At this point you may no longer cast or change your vote.

**Can I change my vote during the voting window?**

While the voting window is open, you can change your vote by pressing the yes or no button on the handset. You can do this more than once. The last vote received by the system is the one that counts.

**If I hit the wrong button accidentally, can I change my vote?**

You can change your vote on a motion for any reason as long as you do it before the end of the voting period for that motion. The system will use the last vote you cast.

**What if I press Yes or No and then decide I want to abstain?**

If you have pressed yes or no and wish to abstain, you may press the Abstain button on your handset. You must do this while the voting period is open. Only yes and no votes will be counted.

**I pressed a button on my handset during the discussion of a motion and it didn’t respond. What’s going on?**

You will only see a response to a button press while the voting period is open. That is the way the system is designed to work.

**What if I don’t want to vote on a particular motion?**

If you don’t want to vote on a motion, you can simply do noting or you can press the Abstain button. Only yes and no votes will be counted.

**What if the moderator has called the results of a vote and I wish to change my vote?**

Once the Moderator calls the result of the vote, that vote is confirmed. Just as with the manual voting process, a voter may ask for a vote to reconsider a motion. This would follow the same rules currently established for a vote to reconsider.

**Will individual votes be displayed?**

At the discretion of the Moderator, vote totals may be displayed after he/she announces the vote. Individual votes will never be displayed. Please also remember that handsets are not associated with a voter.

**Will Electronic Voting be used for all voting at town meeting?**

Yes. All votes will be conducted using the same voting system.

**What will happen if there are more attendees than handsets?**

The recommended policy is that all voting take place using the same method. If there are not enough handsets for all attendees, voting will be by the current voter card system.

**Will the use of Electronic Voting speed up Town Meeting? How much time will it take?**

Unlike the use of voter cards, voting is not instantaneous. Electronic Voting uses a defined “voting window”. The voting window time would be determined for Groton by the Town Moderator, but is typically set for 30 seconds with towns that currently use these systems. That means that each vote would take 30 seconds (the voting window). However, since each vote is an accurate count, there would be no requirement for “tellers, please!” and a hand count of votes too close to call by the Moderator. It is expected that the use of Electronic Voting will not materially change the time required to vote at town meeting.

**Will Electronic Voting increase town meeting attendance?**

The experience of the towns contacted by the committee suggests that attendance in not increased nor decreased when using electronic voting.

**What’s to prevent a group from coming at the start of Town Meeting and leaving their handsets with friends to vote for them so they can leave early?**

Giving your vote or voting device to another person is called proxy voting. This is not allowed under any circumstances, whether we’re voting by voice, cards, a show of hands, printed ballot, or electronic device. If proxy voting is observed , it should be promptly reported to the Moderator.

**Won’t Electronic Voting change the nature of our town meeting to not see who and how many people are voting for an article?**

Electronic Voting will change the nature of voting at town meeting, but not the discussions that precede voting. With anonymous voting, public pressure on individuals, real or perceived, to vote a certain way on an article will be minimized and result in a truer representation of votes.

## **Electronic Voting Security and Reliability**

**How reliable are the electronic voting systems?**

Electronic Voting is being used in over 70 towns throughout Massachusetts, as well as well recognized political, religious and commercial organizations. The vendors under consideration have stellar performance ratings from their users. Each vendor will warranty their hardware for 10 years. Software support is available from each vendor under each’s contract terms.

**From a technical standpoint how does the system work?**

Each electronic voting system vendor has their own proprietary protocols and system configurations. They all involve handset used by each voter and a receiver with which the handsets are paired. Each handset sends an encrypted radio signal using a channel in the 2.4 Ghz band to a receiver plugged into a USB port on the voting computer. The receiver polls the handsets which have been paired to it. When it detects that a handset button has been pressed, the receiver sends a confirmation message to the handset indicating that the vote has been received, and that response is displayed on the handset screen.

**What assurance do I have that no one can interfere with or alter a particular vote?**

The voting computer is not connected to Wi-Fi, Bluetooth or the Internet. The only way to get control of it would be to sit at the computer and use its keyboard or mouse. There will be an operator at the computer during Town Meeting so this computer will always be attended. The only connection from the computer will be via cable to one or more display devices so that the results can be viewed by the Town Meeting Moderator and/or attendees.

The connection from the handsets to the voting computer is by an encrypted radio signal. Although it is theoretically possible to intercept, decrypt, change, encrypt and resend a signal, it is extremely difficult to do so. We have heard of no cases where this has occurred where this technology has been used.

In an extreme situation it is possible to overload the radio band used by the handset-receiver system. However, since Town Meeting takes place indoors, we can detect and control usage of devices which might interfere. That is the reason that we will prohibit the use of hotspots during Town Meeting, for example.

**Can someone bring a handset from the same vendor and use it on our system?**

There are many ways in which a person could obtain a handset which is compatible without our system. However, each handset we will use must be individually paired with our receiver. The receiver will not respond to a handset which has not been paired. If we discard a handset for any reason, it will be unpaired first.

**If I bring my handset home, can I use it at the next town meeting?**

No. Prior to each town meeting, handsets are inventoried and paired to the system. “Missing” handsets are removed as eligible.

**What prevents the town from recording how I vote on a particular article?**

The town has no interest in an individual’s voting. Handsets are not identified to an individual, so the vote of a particular handset cannot be linked to an individual. After each vote, detailed vote information will be erased. Only the Town Moderator, Town Clerk and potentially the IT Director has access to vote totals.

**Can “someone” change my vote in the database?**

As described in a different FAQ, Electronic Voting systems rely upon encrypted radio signals to transmit over changing channels (i.e. channel hopping). The system is not connected to Wi-Fi, Bluetooth or the Internet. The system is very secure from being hacked. The Moderator, Town Clerk and IT Director have access to the voting “receiver” and vote totals. No one has computer privileges to change individual votes.

**What assurance do I have that my vote is accurately counted?**

After you press a button on your handset, the voting computer will receive your vote and send a confirmation back to the screen of your handset. That confirmation is your assurance that the system has received and counted your vote.

**Electronic Voting costs**

## **How much does a system cost?**

This town meeting is being asked to approve $25,000 to purchase an Electronic Voting system. This will purchase a redundant set of receivers, 600 handsets and redundant dedicated laptops, along with necessary accessories such as storage/transport bags.

**Aside from the cost of the system, what will the other costs be?**

There will be some administrative costs to set up, test clean and store the system. These costs appear to be minimal and manageable with existing staff. Handset batteries should be replaced every two to three years. The current cost of a battery is $.18.

## **Electronic Voting System Procedures**

**How will handsets be distributed and collected?**

Handsets will be distributed at town meeting voter check-in. The handset number will not be recorded to the person to whom it is assigned. Handsets will be returned at the end of the meeting.

**How will I know that my handset is working?**

A test will be performed at the start of each Town Meeting which will allow you to see the actual vote you send to the system.

**How will the town meeting know the electronic voting system is working properly?**

The system will be tested during each town meeting’s setup. Each handset will be exercised to insure it is performing accurately. It is anticipated that, prior to the commencement of a town meeting, handsets will be will be tested by attendees with a “test vote”. Handsets are then assumed to be working.

**What happens if the electronic voting system is not functioning properly?**

If there is a perceived problem with the system during the meeting, such as vote totals being very low or high, the meeting will be held pending resolution to the problem. If necessary, the meeting will revert to voting by card.

**What if I suspect that my handset has a problem?**

You can stand and request a new handset. A volunteer will take you handset and give you a new one.

**What if the voting computer crashes?**

There will be a backup computer available. Switching to the backup computer should take a few minutes. Note that there will be a backup computer, backup receivers (which capture the votes sent by handsets), and backup handsets. In other words, there are backups for every component of the system.

**What if the electronic voting system fails completely during a Town Meeting?**

The Town Meeting will revert to voting by card.

**How will handsets going missing be prevented?**

The honor system. Attendees will be asked to return handsets at the end of each meeting. There will be collection attendants at each exit to remind attendees to deposit their handset into the collection box.