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Searching for the soul of town meeting in Starksboro

By Sally Pollak, Free Press Staff Writer

STARSBORO — The issue before the people of Starksboro on Saturday was whether to borrow \$127,000 for the purchase of a replacement loader. There was a considerable amount of discussion about this issue at town meeting, conducted during the morning in the local elementary school.

Melissa Bryan, a resident of Starksboro, raised her hand to indicate she would like to talk. Soon, she was recognized by town moderator Dan Dubenetsky, who officiated with a blend of humor and order and even ensured that a Jimmy Cliff song made it into the minutes.

An hour or so before reggae was recognized, it was Bryan's turn to talk about the loader. Bryan stood up. Like much of her audience, she was wearing snow boots. "For what it's worth," she said, "my husband drove home from UVM last night. It took him an hour and a half, and he said the best road was Big Hollow."

Melissa Bryan's comment drew laughs and light applause from her fellow Starksboro residents. And from her husband, University of Vermont political scientist Frank Bryan, she earned a small smile and a nod of assent. Those are high marks: Frank Bryan, 69, may have heard more town meeting comments than any other Vermonter.

He is an expert on this form of democracy — in which citizens, and not their elected representatives, debate issues and make decisions.

"There's a difference between pure democracy and real democracy," Bryan said Saturday, during a break between Starksboro's town meeting and school meeting. "This isn't pure, it's real. That's what's so neat about it."

Bryan's town meeting scholarship dates to 1969, when he began collecting data from meetings across the state. Thirty years of his research, and analysis, is collected in his book, "Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How it Works."

The fundamental question informing Bryan's scholarship: "What if you held a democracy, would anybody come?"

The answer, he said, is “yes.”

“They’ll come, especially if there’s something to decide,” Bryan said. “If there’s an important issue on the warning, people come to town meeting.”

“Real Democracy,” published by the University of Chicago Press, draws on data Bryan and his students collected from 1,435 Town Meetings in 210 Vermont towns.

Saturday, two Bryans — Frank and Melissa — gathered data at the Starksboro meeting. Monday and Tuesday, when towns across Vermont hold their town meetings, about 75 of Bryan’s students will attend meetings and collection information. Their task, like the Bryans’ on Saturday, is to track the proceedings and document the event in a 17-page booklet provided by Bryan.

Information that is collected ranges from weather and road conditions the day of the meeting to use of microphones when people speak. Bryan and his researchers count empty chairs; they monitor how much time is spent debating each item; and they tally how many people participate in the discussion.

Bryan and his team note the gender of the participants, and record if votes are by hand or voice.

Saturday, dressed in Levis and a denim shirt, Bryan was busy taking attendance — an arduous and rigorous assignment that requires counting people, over and over again.

He counted the crowd at least seven times, Bryan said. Luckily, it was a sedentary group, not much moving around. By the time the pizza and chili (three types, including venison), was served at 12:30, Bryan was pretty satisfied with his count.

As he counted people, Melissa Bryan documented every comment that was made on every warning item at the 4 hour and 53 minute meeting (which the Bryans also measured). At its peak, attendance at the Starksboro meeting was 156 people — 82 women and 74 men, according to Bryan. Less than an hour after the meeting had adjourned, Bryan had tallied that 72 people spoke, 42 men and 30 women.

Saturday’s meeting — at which one article on the warning was voted down — was the highest attendance in Starksboro in many years, according to Bryan. (In 1996, a comparable 148 people attending the town meeting, he said.)

The \$2,296,679 proposed school budget, to fund Robinson Elementary School, passed after a discussion of 1 hour and 12 minutes, according to Melissa Bryan’s record-keeping. This included 41 minutes of talk by the pros, and 31 minutes of general discussion.

Bryan went to his first town meeting as a seventh-grader in Newbury, with Mrs. Butson’s social studies class.

“I thought it was kind of fun,” he said. “It was fun to see the adults argue and stuff, but then you got bored pretty fast.”

Since that time, Bryan has attended hundreds of town meetings. “I’ve been to more town meetings than anyone in the history of the world,” he said.

Saturday at his own town meeting, Bryan talked about the “hard work” of attending. The folding chairs are uncomfortable, the benches are kid-size, the time runs on.

Yet he notes the “amazing” aspect of what transpires: Moderators keep things moving — “You can’t just shoot your mouth off,” he said.

And decisions that affect people, local people, are made.

In the discussion about possibly replacing the 17-year-old loader, road foreman Tom Estey put it this way:

“You need to make a decision as the people who live in the town whether you want us in the shop working on the equipment, or whether you want us plowing the roads,” he said.

The Starksboro residents voted to replace the machine.

One item was defeated Saturday, following a 41-minute debate with 18 participants (data courtesy of Bryan): Residents voted no to spending \$6,000, through a nonprofit, for an agriculture and equine scholarship fund.

This is the kind of local issue that typically brings out voters and inspires debate at town meeting, Bryan said.

“The soul of town meeting is not the deliberation, it’s the fact that you’re going to vote,” he said. “You’re going to turn over your policy to citizens. That’s why people go. As the state has been taking away the power of the towns to decide things on their own, attendance has gone down.”

Bryan, who will turn 70 in June, said he is uncertain how long he will attend town meeting with a clipboard and pencil, counting, recording, tallying and analyzing.

“I’ll do it as long as Lee lets me,” he said, using the name he calls his wife. “Which may not be long at all.”

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