



Guide to Citizens' Petitions Lancaster Town Meeting

- 1. A petition article** is an article brought by a citizen or group of citizens (rather than by a Board or Committee of the Town) to Town Meeting for discussion and possible action. Any registered voter of the Town may bring a petition article on any topic that is relevant to action by the Lancaster voters at open town meeting, the town's legislative body.
- 2. Before beginning the petition process**, it is strongly recommended that petitioners meet with the board or committee that has jurisdiction over the subject matter to seek feedback, advice, and support. The board or committee may agree that the issue needs to be addressed and may decide to undertake the process of proposing and supporting it. This outcome will make a petition unnecessary. If the board will not propose the idea itself, submitting a petition is an option still available. The process of consulting the jurisdictional board or committee should be started early enough to leave sufficient time for review and modifications before the article is submitted. (This may be as much as six months before Annual Town Meeting, depending on the complexity of the issue.) Submitting a petition at the last minute is usually not a good idea if the material has not been discussed with those having jurisdiction over the subject matter or if the petitioner has not had time to write and refine the language. Enough time should be allowed so that the board or committee can adequately research the topic and assess the effect of the proposed change on existing laws and regulations. In any event, Town boards and committees with jurisdiction will typically comment on petition articles at Town Meeting.
- 3. The warrant** is the agenda for the Town Meeting, it tells the citizens what topics will be discussed. Each topic or item is an **article**. The article provides formal notice to people what is to be discussed and what action is being sought. For any matter to be discussed at Town Meeting, it must come within the scope of the published article. In other words, someone reading the article must be able to tell what is going to be addressed. If a subject is brought up at the Meeting which a person would not reasonably know was going to be discussed by reading that article, it cannot be discussed and will be considered as being beyond the scope of the article. For example, if the article proposes purchase of a new vehicle for the Council on Aging, discussion of repair of the playing fields would be "outside the scope" of that article.
- 4. A motion** is a formal proposal that is presented before the voters at the Town Meeting for action on a particular article. It must be within the scope of the article, using the same principles discussed in the preceding paragraph. The motion is typically a more formal and

precise statement of the action to be approved by the Town. The motion need *not* be submitted at the same time as a citizens' petition for a warrant article, but it is often a good idea for petitioners to have a well-developed draft of the motion by that time. *See further discussion of timing at Paragraph 8 below.*

5. **To submit a warrant article** for consideration by the Annual Town Meeting, ten (10) registered voters of the Town must sign the petition in accordance with Massachusetts General Laws. Signatures of one-hundred (100) registered voters are required to insert an article into the warrant for a Special Town Meeting that has already been scheduled by the Board of Selectmen. (Two-hundred (200) signatures are required to call a Special Town Meeting.) Proponents of an article are encouraged to secure more signatures than the minimum required in the event of illegible signatures or signers not qualified as registered voters. Articles must be submitted by the deadline established by the Board of Selectmen.

To obtain a form for collecting petition signatures, please visit the Town Clerk's office or [click here](#) to download.

6. **Appropriate subjects for Town Meeting** action under a warrant article include: (1) adopting, repealing, or amending Town bylaws; (2) authorizing the filing of home-rule legislation; (3) accepting or revoking the acceptance of local-option legislation; (4) making and amending budgetary appropriations; (5) authorizing the acquisition or disposition of interests in land; and (6) making resolutions that advise or request a Town Board or Committee to consider some action (so called "advisory resolutions.")
7. **Care in the writing and the timing of articles** is very important. Petitioners should ensure that the action the article proposes conforms to State law, Town of Lancaster by-law, and is within the purview of Town Meeting. An article should be phrased to accurately accomplish its intended purpose. Depending on the subject matter of the article, it may require further review by the Selectmen, the Finance Committee, the Planning Board, and/or other Boards and Committees. In some instances a public hearing may be required. Articles must be initiated early enough to allow all legal and procedural requirements to be met before it can be included on the Town Meeting Warrant. Petitioners should consult with the Town Administrator early in the process to establish a reasonable time line for the article's inclusion. ***Be aware that any changes to the wording of an article will require you to re-collect signatures.***
8. **Care in the writing and timing of the accompanying motion** is also important. The wording of the motion could but need not be exactly the same as the warrant article. If the motion does not change the wording in the article, the motion could request that the article be adopted as printed in the warrant. Petitioners should submit the text of the proposed motion to the Moderator at least one week prior to the Meeting. The text of the motion will be printed by the Town, along with the motions for other articles.
9. **Assistance in the writing of articles and motions** is available from Town officials. The Town Administrator, Town Moderator and other officials and staff are available to discuss and, if

necessary, to assist a petitioner in the drafting of a warrant article and its accompanying motion. Town officials should be consulted as early as possible before the closing of the warrant to resolve any misunderstandings on the part of the petitioners.

*WARNING: While various elected or appointed Town officials and employees can provide informational assistance, **petitioners themselves are responsible for deciding the final wording of the petition article and accompanying motion for ensuring that all legal requirements are met.** Petitioners may wish to consult their own legal counsel knowledgeable in municipal law.*

- 10. Submission of petition articles** must be made to the Town Clerk no later than the deadline established by the Board of Selectmen.
- 11.** Once it is submitted, **the article will appear on the Town Meeting Warrant** exactly as submitted including spelling and punctuation. **Improperly written articles submitted too late for necessary modifications must still be printed on the Town Meeting warrant but may be “passed over” at Town Meeting.** The Board of Selectmen is responsible for determining the order of the articles on the warrant.

RESOURCES

[Citizen Petition Form](#)

[Text](#) of Massachusetts General Laws, Ch. 39: Section 10. Warrant; issuance; contents