



TOWN OF NEW LONDON, NEW HAMPSHIRE

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MEMORANDUM

To: New London Board of Selectmen

From: The Elections Team

Re: SB2 Thoughts

Date: November 18, 2025

The SB2 (ballot referendum form of Town Meeting, hereafter “SB2”) issue isn’t really one that was even on our radar at all. In fact, the first and only time the Elections Team has ever discussed the issue was in front of this SB2 Committee (hereafter, the “Committee”). That’s important to note because generally, when issues come up in town it’s because of a groundswell of citizen feedback to whatever department is relevant. That didn’t happen with this issue. While we are thankful to have the opportunity to weigh in on this issue as we’ve got over 100 years of experience running New London’s elections and town meetings, it comes at a time when the report has already been presented putting us in a very awkward position between the Committee and Board of Selectmen.

Historically, New London conducted a “traditional Town Meeting” and held their elections and Town Meeting on the second Tuesday in March. It was an all-day affair. Meeting and Polls would open at noon and Meeting would recess at 12:30 and reconvene at 7:00 P.M. for the consideration of the remaining warrant articles. The polls would close at 8:00 P.M. the ballots counted, and the results announced when the count was completed.

In 1983, the Town bifurcated the meeting into polling on the second Tuesday, and the meeting recessed until the following Saturday at noon for the consideration of the remaining articles. Saturday has given way to the Wednesday following for continuation of the meeting, beginning around 6:00 PM. We feel this system has served the Town well over the years. Nevertheless, here’s some of our thoughts on the traditional bifurcated Town Meeting versus the ballot referendum form.

We do very much appreciate the work of the three citizens on the Committee on what we know is a very complex issue! In a very short period of time, the Committee was able to boil a lot of information down to the report submitted.

While the Committee was set up to look at solely the SB2 form of government, we think it’s important for people to realize that those aren’t the only two choices. Our school district, KRSD, operates a ballot referendum form under a Charter, which is slightly different than the statutory

scheme prescribed for towns. The differences were not part of this discussion at all, yet the familiarity with the ballot referendum form for most voters comes from their experiences with KRSD.

When we met with the Committee, we learned the primary concerns giving rise to consideration of an alternative form of conducting town business were low voter turnout at Town Meeting, and voters needing to be better informed about the issues to be considered.

In discussing the origins of SB2, we think it's important to acknowledge that there are many origins and reasons people could want or not want SB2. Some of those reasons are budgetary in nature and about who is responsible for making the default budget. Some of those reasons are because towns didn't have places big enough to hold their meetings. For those who want some deep reading, here's the House and Senate documents from when the bill was introduced:

SB2 Senate Docs: https://gc.nh.gov/BillHistory/SofS_Archives/1995/senate/SB2S.pdf

SB2 House Docs: https://gc.nh.gov/BillHistory/SofS_Archives/1995/house/SB2H.pdf

In terms of voter engagement and the chart presented, no one is debating that more people come to the polls than Town Meeting. It's also accepted that fewer people come to a deliberative session than a Town Meeting. Here's a link to a past study that helps show the lack of voter engagement at deliberative sessions:

<https://www.scribd.com/document/361665198/SB2-Towns-Summary>

So, then one question becomes, is it better to have more people vote on something that less people had input on crafting? It's very possible that a deliberative session with a small number of voters could be hijacked by a particular interest. It is clear from the reporting, under SB2 form, fewer voters will be engaged in discussion of the subjects to be put to a vote. The purpose of the deliberative session is to decide the wording that will appear on the paper ballot to be presented to the voters on election day.

The chart also shows that for the most part Town Meetings are attended at consistent levels unless there's a hot topic. We know that this form of government has been effective and worked for hundreds of years. There are many reasons people might choose to not attend Town Meeting. This attendance problem is not one that's unique to New London.

It's also unfortunate to take what is one of the last bastions of true democracy and split the deliberation and voting into two parts to be conducted weeks apart. Debate and voting happening together is where true democracy happens. This is a huge difference and makes it hard to say that a deliberative session and a town meeting are similar. They truly aren't. It's hard to believe that when the founding fathers were envisioning democracy, they were picturing people voting at home on their couch or people voting all alone in a voting booth.

When one has a deliberative session weeks before voting, there are other issues that will come up. We will likely see a proliferation of signs such as "Vote no in #3" which has happened in other towns that have adopted SB2. We're steadily seeing more need to enforce sign regulations

for signs put in incorrect places. This gap between deliberation and voting also increases the likelihood of there being misinformation to the voters that can't be corrected. If someone said something incorrect at a town meeting, that could be corrected before the vote. On the multitude of social media platforms, not so much and the real possibility exists people will vote on incorrect information.

The SB2 form is a much less nimble process for making changes in a warrant article up until the time of the vote. In several instances in our recent past, Town Meeting has decided to indefinitely postpone items on the warrant the day of town meeting. From the Stahlman Building (2021) to Marianne McEnrue's house (2024), we have benefited from the town meeting form of government being quick to react to information leading up to Town Meeting. Under SB2, the ballots would have been printed following the deliberative session weeks prior, and could not be changed.

Also important to understand is that SB2 is a law that can be amended and has been many times since its enactment. We'd sign on for both what SB2 is now and what it could be in the future. For example, on the national level, there seems to be strong headwinds against mail-in voting. Would SB2 still be as appealing without the mail-in voting aspect? In the next town election, voters wishing to vote absentee will now need to provide ID or a notarized request form. Last state legislative session was one of the most active for election law and that promises to continue this year.

There's a fairly light mention of the tradition of Town meeting in New London and we definitely feel that aspect deserves more than a passing mention. Among our group, we have over 100 years of experience when it comes to running New London's elections and Town Meetings. From the first meeting in 1779 at Will's mother's house to now being within a stone's throw of our 250th meeting, Town meeting has always been a focal point of the year for residents. It's really the only remaining time where townspeople get together to conduct the business of the town. The ability of a town to do this is extremely important in this day and age. We feel it's vitally important in a world that's becoming more about "me" that New London still maintain this "we" tradition and strong sense of community that town meeting provides.

The default budget was certainly mentioned in our meeting. Sunapee was used as a local recent example but there's certainly other towns in the same situation and have been for long periods of time. Imagine trying to run a town on an 8 year old budget! Even the possibility of that happening should give people pause about SB2. There's also the possibility of holding a special town meeting if the budget were to fail. There would be increased costs to the Town for that meeting if it were to happen. The present cost to conduct a town meeting approaches \$10,000, and, since we have begun holding our Town Meeting at the CSC Hogan Center gymnasium, in order to accommodate a larger number of voters, we are confined to those periods when the college is not in session in order to hold a special town meeting.

One of the things that didn't appear in the notes on our discussion is the elections teams' comments that switching to SB2 would likely cost us team members and elections volunteers. We very much feel that the rich voting and town meeting traditions in New London contribute positively to residents desiring to volunteer with our elections team.

The costs, both in time and dollars, will be significant. If we look at our 2024 Town Report, it took 4 pages just to print the Warrant. It took 5 pages in 2025, and those tallies do not include the ballot space to vote for elected offices. The best-case scenario is that we only add one page to our ballots which would double the amount of time everything having to do with the ballots would take. This includes things such as the initial count of the ballot when they are received by two different people. The absentee ballots all need to be folded by hand and assembled into absentee packages. These absentee packages are verified and counted at a minimum twice a week from the time they are received until the day of election.

On the day of the election, we'll need to be careful collating the multiple page ballots when giving them to voters which complicates what used to be handing someone a single page. It will take voters longer to vote them as well as put them through the machines. It will also take longer at the end of the night to do any hand counts that need to be done. We are already pushing up against the limits of Whipple Memorial Town Hall as a voting venue. Changing our voting venue would be a very big deal and would likely add significantly to costs. If it takes people longer to vote, we are likely to need another ballot machine and all the associated expenses with that (programming expenses for elections, support contracts, time spent testing the two machines rather than one, etc.). This doubling of all these things assumes only the doubling of our ballot pages. There are some towns that have over 70 articles covering 6 full pages so the longer the ballots, the bigger the costs.

Recall, earlier, the Committee expressed their concern voters needed to be better informed. They suggested we publish a voter guide, as some other towns have done. It would be nice to be able to do this for our voters even with the town meeting that we currently have but with SB2, it would become almost required. The problem with this guide is whether there is currently an employee on the payroll who has the time and bandwidth to take on such a major project. This project would also involve the Selectmen and Budget Committee members doing pro and con write ups for each article. There's also a significant cost in editing, labor, printing and mailing.

In the committee summary section of the report, there is a statement that says, "Do we want to deny our neighbors the right to vote for nostalgia?" In this day and age, to imply that we deny anyone the right to vote just isn't right. The statement also indicates that we do so for nostalgic reasons which couldn't be further from the truth. The voters of New London have chosen how they'd like their government to be run and we follow all applicable RSAs to ensure that happens. There are a lot of people in Town who work very hard to make sure that many people participate and vote in our elections and town meeting. From having wheelchairs and accessibility devices at a Town Meeting to running absentee ballots to people the day of elections at their homes, we go the extra mile to make sure that no one is denied their right to vote.

One of the interesting things about this coming to a vote at town meeting (if it ever does) is that in order for it to pass, it would require a 3/5 majority vote, there would need to be a large turnout of voters who had never been to town meeting before and came to vote against it. We'd very much encourage all residents to attend a town meeting before voting against it. The reason that we can see that would necessitate New London moving to SB2 would be if we didn't have a

venue big enough to hold town meeting but with Colby-Sawyer being able to accommodate up to 2,400 voters, we don't see outgrowing that venue anytime in the near future.

In addition, as has been shown from statistics from other towns, adopting the provisions of SB2 would likely reduce the number of participants involved in debate and deliberation about the warrant articles, which is where the information exchange is most complete, and the questions of voters can best be addressed. It also shifts the burden of the duty to keep voters informed to some employee of the Town, whose responsibility it would be to prepare a "voter guide" in advance of the voting day. Are these "voter guides" electioneering materials? Would the voters be allowed to take their guides into the voting booths? Election workers would have to be vigilant about making sure no guides were left behind in the booths after the voter had left the booth. It's hard to believe the guides would be any shorter in length than the warrant ballot itself, which means increased printing costs.

The town has a lot of very important issues before it at this time and we feel that town meeting gives us the best way to deal with those issues together as a community. The Elections Team is unanimously against us converting to an SB2 form of government and would recommend to the Selectmen against going that route.