


Bethel, Vermont 2015 Town Meeting Survey Results

**Prepared by the Bethel Town Meeting Committee
April 9, 2015**

The Bethel Town Meeting Committee drafted, administered and analyzed a short survey in March, 2015 to better understand who attends Town Meeting in Bethel, why people do or do not attend, and what issues matter most to them.

The results of that survey are presented in the pages that follow, along with the conclusions of the Town Meeting Committee. The Committee looks forward to processing the results further and expects to share recommendations with the Town in the coming weeks.



How can we make the exchange of ideas a good one and not a hostile one?

The Town Report is much improved!

As a person in my mid-30's...I feel it is hard to learn about what's going on in Bethel...

Thank you for the work being done to create community...
+ for pie!

Perhaps a time certain for major votes?

About the Survey

The Town Meeting Survey was drafted by the Town Meeting Committee and approved by the Selectboard prior to the 2015 Town Meeting. Responses were collected from February 27- March 17, 2015. The survey consisted of 11 multiple choice and open-ended questions, designed to gather feedback about the demographics of Town Meeting attendees as well as their opinions about Town Meeting. The original survey is attached at the end of this document.

The survey was available in hard copy, with a copy placed on every chair at Town Meeting. Additional copies were available at the door, and hard copies were also available at the Bethel School, Bethel Public Library, and Bethel Town Office from March 3-17. The anonymous survey was also offered online through SurveyMonkey. The survey was publicized through the Town Report, social media (Facebook and Front Porch Forum), and through an editorial and an article in the *Randolph Herald*. The Town Meeting Committee offered two \$25 gift certificates to downtown businesses as a survey incentive, with winners chosen by random drawing.

The Town Meeting Committee collected 131 total responses: 9 online, 2 from the Bethel Public Schools, 5 from the Bethel Town Office, and 116 at Town Meeting. Lisa McCrory compiled and recorded the data from the paper responses and Rebecca Sanborn Stone analyzed the results and produced the analysis here. We ran two primary comparisons: 1) Between people who are frequent attendees of Town Meeting (attend all or most years) and infrequent attendees (attend occasionally or never); and 2) Between residents over 60 years of age and under 60 years of age. The Town Meeting Committee evaluated the results together and agreed on the conclusions at the Committee's April 6, 2015 meeting.

Overall Conclusions

Several major areas emerged as key opportunities for further study and discussion:

- a. Need for more input about Town Meeting from people who did not respond to the survey and do not typically attend
- b. Finding ways for people to offer more input and get involved in town affairs throughout the year (not just on Town Meeting Day)
- c. Making logistical and practical improvements to the Town Meeting experience (minor suggestions around moderation, sound quality, etc.)
- d. Improving communications and information sharing with residents around town issues and decisions
- e. Making Town Meeting more of a community event & considering how it relates to School Meeting
- f. Involving more people – and people more representative of Bethel's demographics – in Town Meeting

Survey Results

The Town Meeting Committee shares the following results from the 2015 Town Meeting Survey. In many cases, the results align with common sense and practical observations, but we now have data to support those observations and help inform recommendations for improvements.

- 1. The 2015 Town Meeting Survey did not adequately capture opinions from people who did not attend town meeting this year or those who do not regularly attend town meeting.**

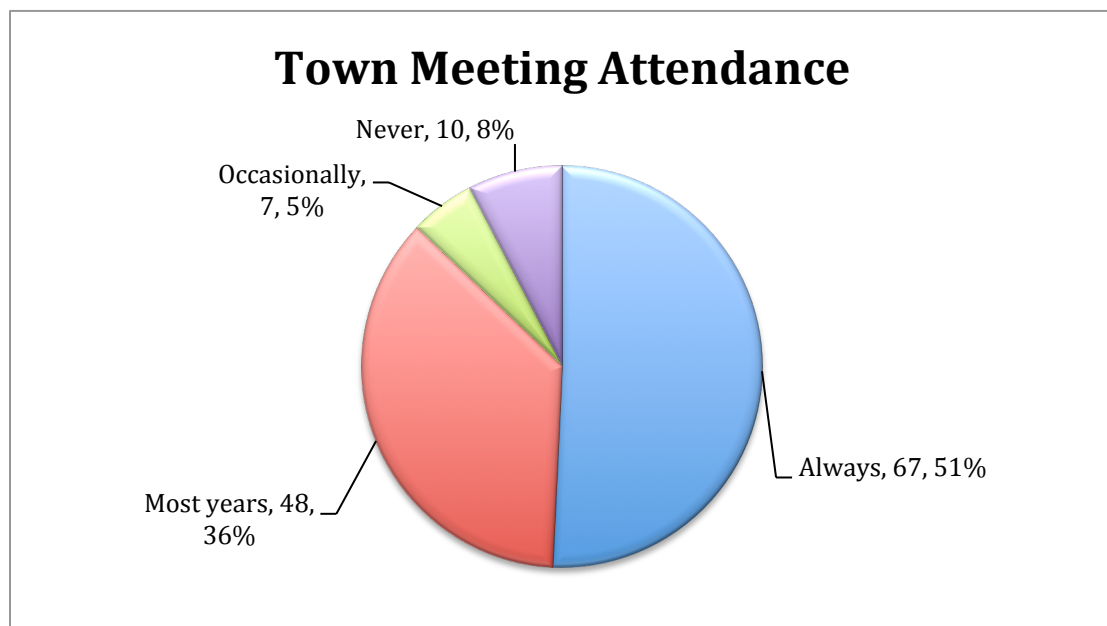
Town meeting attendance typically ranges from 100-300 people, which is roughly 5-10% of Bethel's total population.

In contrast, **87% of survey respondents said they attend town meeting "most years" or "always."** These two categories are lumped together as "frequent attendees" in future comparisons.

Only **13% of survey respondents attend occasionally or never.** These "infrequent attendees" represent the vast majority of Bethel residents, but are significantly under-represented in the survey responses. While we can learn from their responses below, the number of responses in this category is so low that we cannot reasonably assume their responses represent the views of most Bethel residents who infrequently attend Town meeting.

- 2. Most Town Meeting attendees are "regulars."**

The vast majority of people who attend Town Meeting do so all or most years.



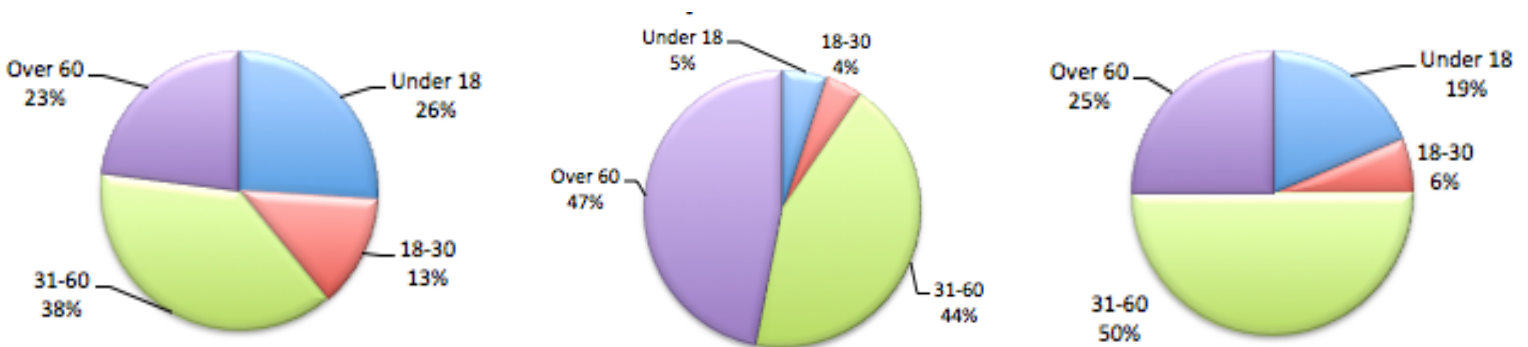
3. Bethel’s frequent Town Meeting attendees - and survey respondents – are older and have lived in Bethel longer than residents overall.

Survey results show that the typical pool of Town Meeting attendees is not demographically representative of Bethel’s residents overall.

- The gender balance among frequent Town Meeting attendees is skewed slightly in favor of females (54% female/46% male, compared with a roughly 50%/50% balance among residents overall.
- Frequent Town Meeting attendees are significantly older, on average, than Bethel’s citizens overall and than infrequent attendees. **47% of frequent attendees are over age 60, while only 23% of Bethel’s population is over 60.**

Gender	All Survey Responses	Frequent TM Attendees	Infrequent Attendees
Male	61	52	9
Female	71	63	8
Age			
Under 18	9	6	3
18-30	6	5	1
31-60	58	50	8
Over 60	58	54	4
Length of Time in Bethel			
< 1 year	6	3	3
1-5 years	13	10	3
6-10 years	16	14	2
> 10 years	96	87	9

Age



All residents, 2010 census

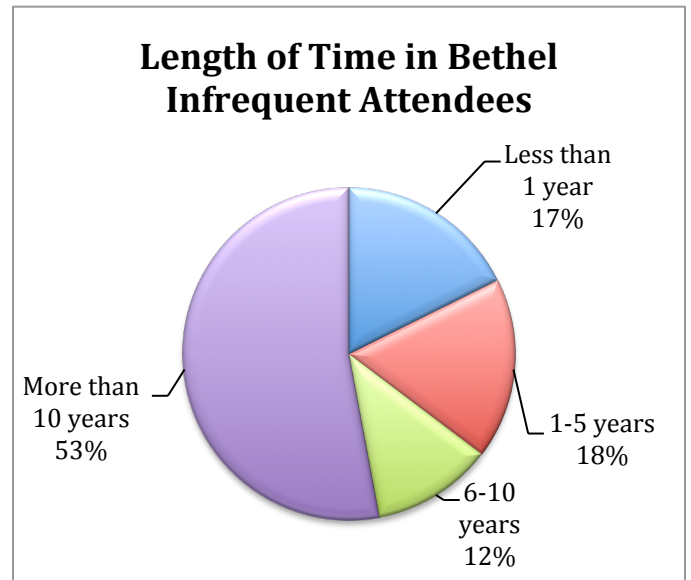
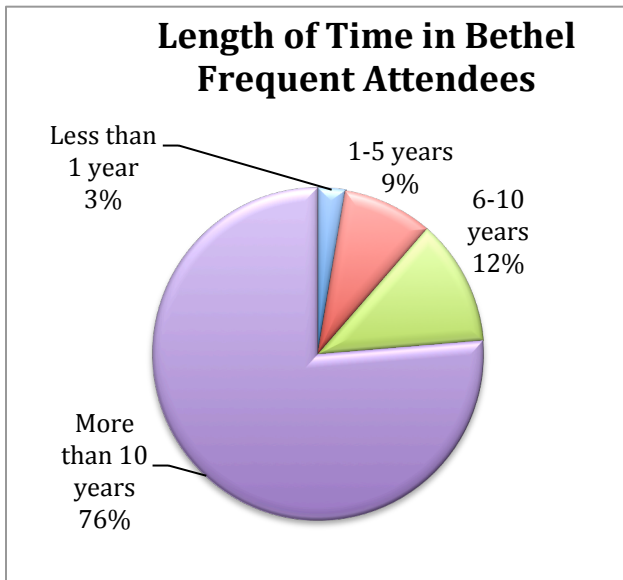
Frequent TM Attendees

Infrequent TM Attendees

4. New residents are less likely to attend Town Meeting.

Frequent Town Meeting attendees have lived in Bethel significantly longer than infrequent attendees. We believe that Town Meeting attendees have also lived in Bethel significantly longer than residents on average, though this is based on anecdotal evidence. We are not aware of any data on how long residents have lived in Bethel.

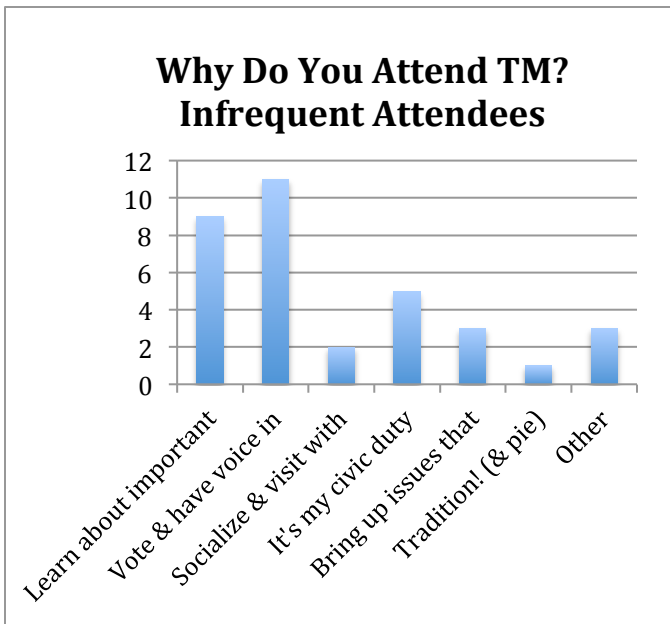
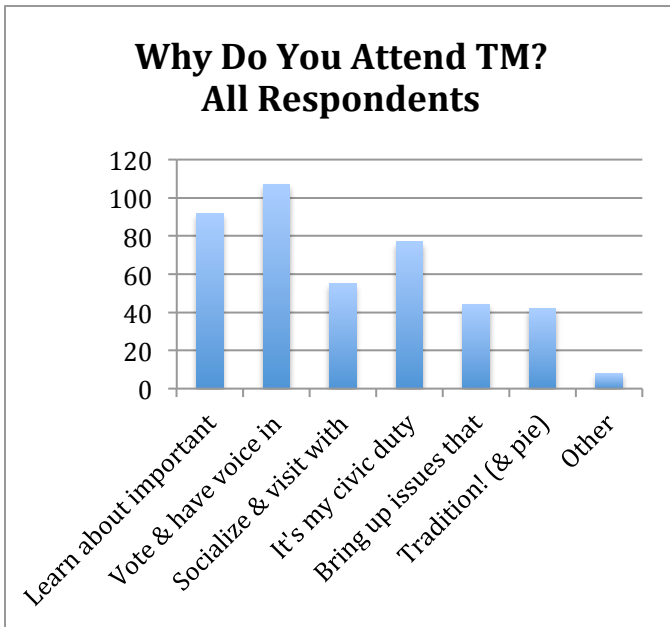
76% of frequent attendees have lived here more than 10 years, and infrequent attendees are twice as likely as frequent attendees to have moved to Bethel in the last 5 years.



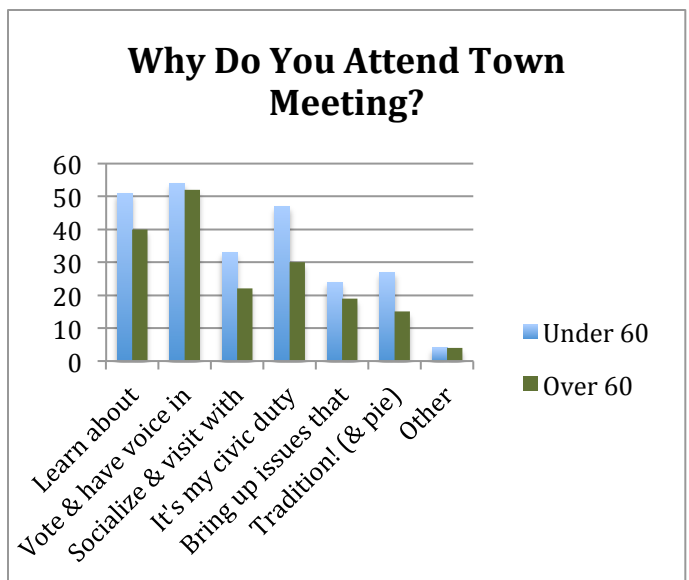
How often do you attend TM?	All Survey Responses	Frequent TM Attendees	Infrequent Attendees
Always	66	66	0
Most years	48	48	0
Occasionally	7	0	7
Never	10	0	10

5. People attend Town Meeting to learn about important issues, vote and have a voice in town affairs, and because it's their civic duty.

Survey respondents affirmed most of the reasons we offered for attending town meeting. Infrequent attendees are less likely to attend for social reasons, to bring up issues, or because of civic duty.



Why do you attend TM?	All Resp.	Freq. Att.	Infreq. Att.
Learn about important town issues	91	82	9
Vote & have voice in town decisions	106	95	11
Socialize & visit with neighbors	54	52	2
It's my civic duty	76	71	5
Bring up issues that matter to me	43	40	3
Tradition! (& pie)	42	41	1
Other	8	5	3
Why don't you attend?			
Don't have time	19	15	4
Not important	3	2	1
Not interested in TM	3	1	2
Don't think vote matters	8	8	0
Don't understand issues/information	3	3	0
Don't understand/ uncomfortable	5	3	2
Can't get out of work	22	14	8
Don't have transportation	2	2	0
Don't have childcare	6	6	0
Physically unable	7	7	0
Other	24	19	5



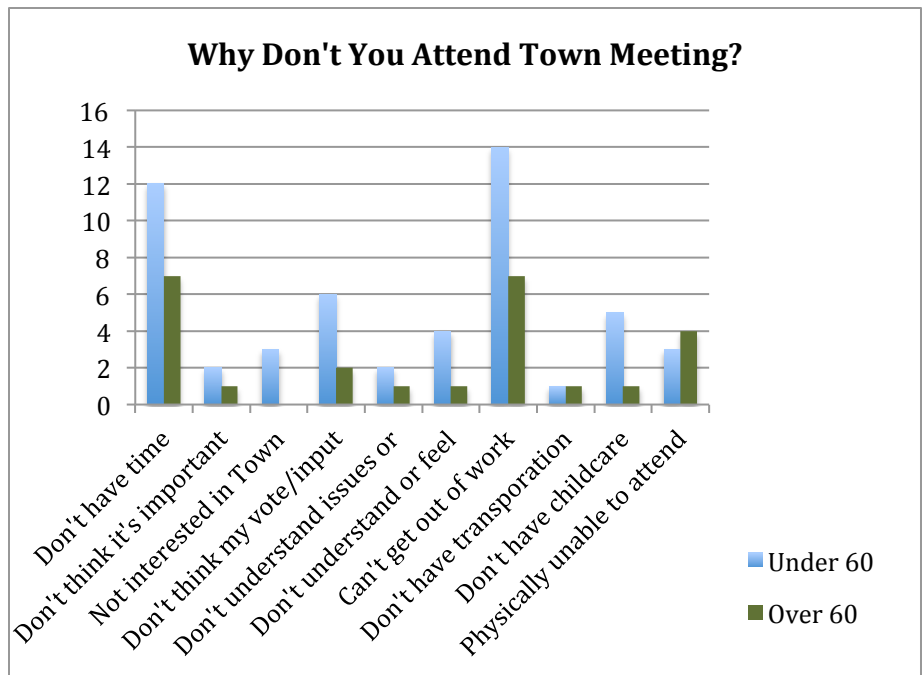
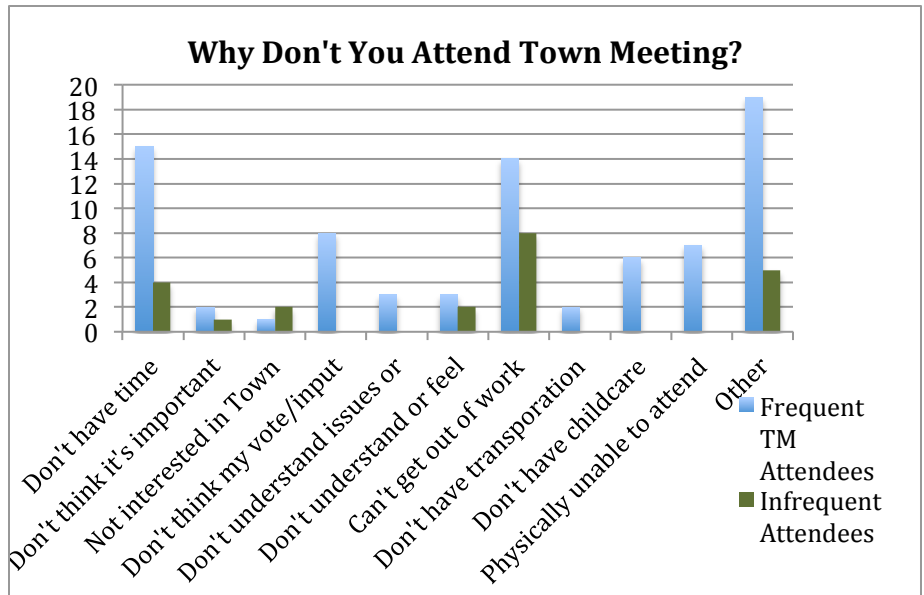
6. People do not attend Town Meeting because of time constraints, work, physical limitations (mobility, illness, or being out of town), and because they don't think their vote & input matters.

Survey respondents noted that, when they do not attend Town Meeting, it is usually for practical reasons (time limitations, work, or physical inability to be at Town Meeting). 23 respondents listed "other" reasons for not attending, and a significant number referenced negative impressions of Town Meeting, including distrust, boring discussions and the same people always talking.

Younger and older residents differed in their reasons.

- Younger residents disproportionately reported time constraints, lack of interest, thinking vote/input doesn't matter, discomfort with format, work constraints, and childcare.
- Older residents disproportionately reported transportation and physical limitations (illness or mobility) as reasons for not attending.

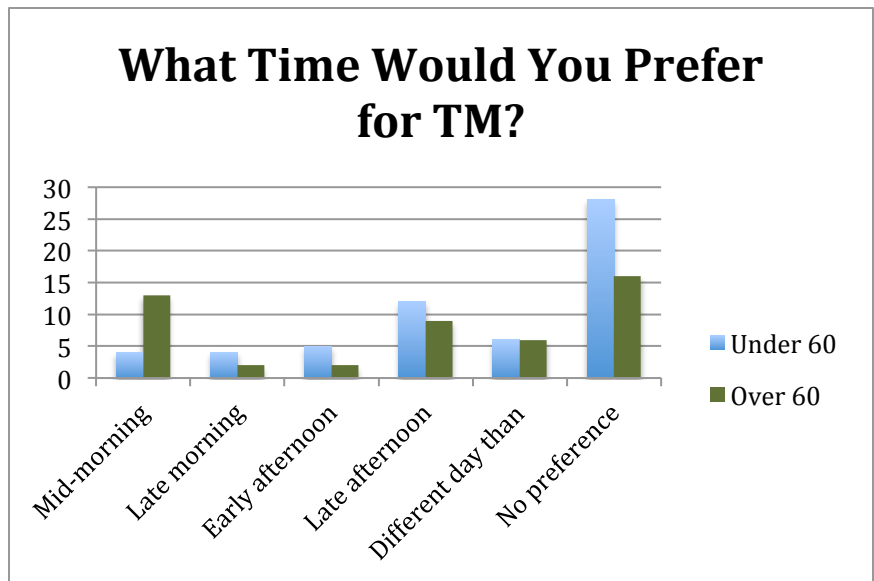
It's essential to note that the vast majority of respondents *do* usually attend; so we not have comprehensive information about why most Bethel residents overall do not attend Town Meeting.



9. Most respondents have no time preference for Town Meeting. There is strong interest in combining it with social events & School Meeting.

Most respondents (who are older and are regular Town Meeting attendees) indicated that they could attend at all times or had no preference. Among the alternative choices offered, the strongest interest was in a late afternoon meeting.

Older residents expressed stronger support for a mid-morning meeting, while younger residents were more likely to indicate no preference. Those who wrote in responses suggested: no change (10); afternoon, with school meeting after (8); Saturday/weekend (5); evening (4); morning, with school meeting following immediately after (4); combined with school meeting/school budget vote (2).



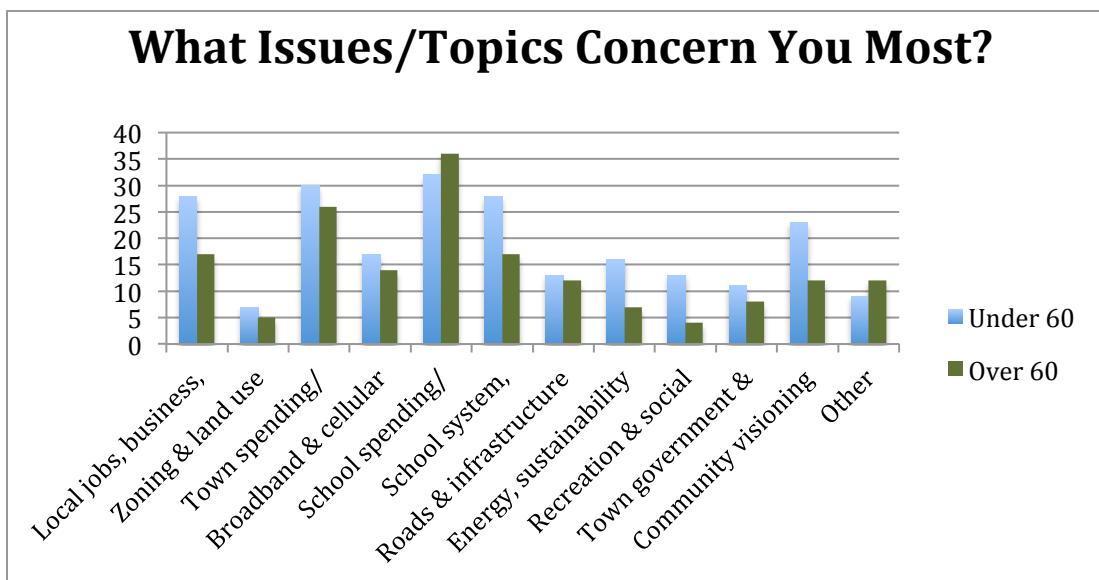
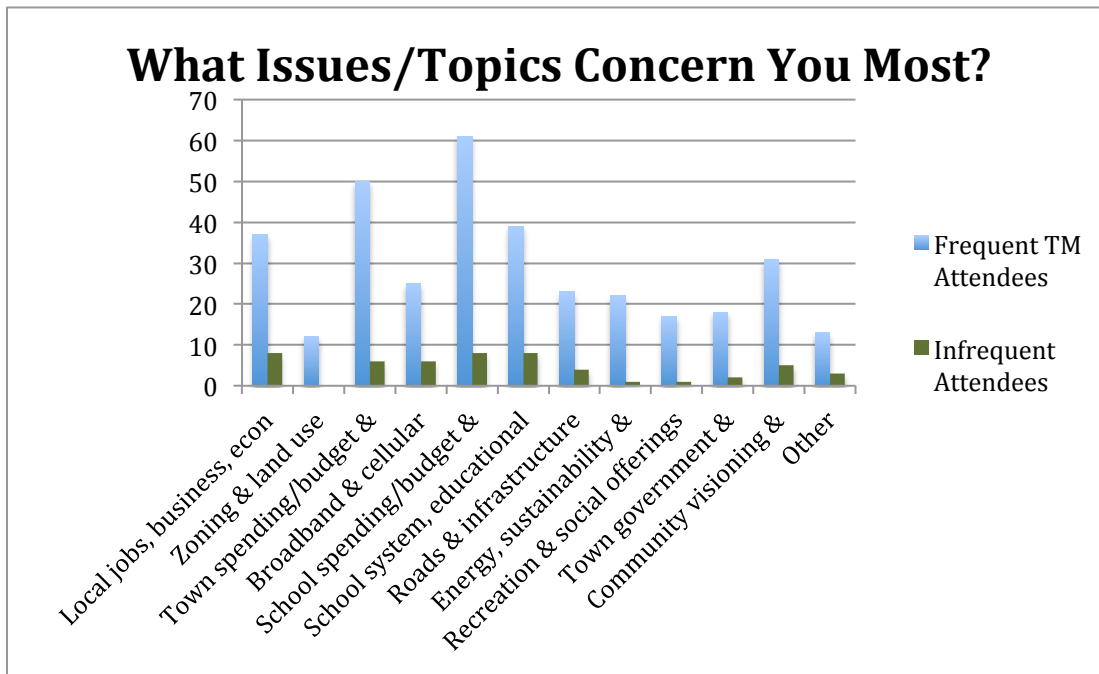
Many respondents indicated a strong preference to adjust the overall shape of Town Meeting Day. Many expressed strong support for moving Town & School meetings closer together, having a meal in between, and finding a time that works for parents and working residents.

It is again essential to note that this survey does not adequately capture the opinions of people who were not at the 2015 Town Meeting and who do not attend Town Meetings in general.

If we could move TM, what day/time would you prefer?	All Survey Responses	Frequent TM Attendees	Infrequent Attendees
Mid-morning	17	17	0
Late morning	7	6	1
Early afternoon	7	5	2
Late afternoon	21	19	2
Different day than School Meeting	12	9	3
No preference	44	36	8
Other	33	30	3

10. Respondents are most interested in/concerned with: 1) School spending/budget/taxes; 2) Town spending/budget/taxes; 3) School system/educational quality/offerings; 4) Local jobs/business & economic growth; 5) Community visioning & planning for future.

Older respondents were relatively more likely to express interest in Town & School spending/budget issues, broadband/cellular access; and roads/infrastructure. Younger respondents were more likely to express interest in local jobs, school quality/offerings; energy/environment; recreation & social offerings; and community visioning. Drug use was mentioned in “other” responses. Other write-in responses included community policing and speed limit enforcement, citizen engagement, dog ordinance and sidewalks.



What Topics Interest/Concern You Most?	All Survey Responses	Frequent TM Attendees	Infrequent Attendees
Local jobs, business, econ growth	45	37	8
Zoning & land use	12	12	0
Town spending/budget & property taxes	56	50	6
Broadband & cellular accessibility	31	25	6
School spending/budget & school taxes	69	61	8
School system, educational quality & offerings	46	38	8
Roads & infrastructure	26	22	4
Energy, sustainability & environment	23	22	1
Recreation & social offerings	17	16	1
Town government & management	19	17	2
Community visioning & planning for future	35	30	5
Other	16	13	3

Selected Comments and Highlights

- Thanks for taking this seriously!
- Town Meeting should be in town hall
- Town Meeting NEEDS to be at the school
- Thank you for the work being done to create community (+ for pie!)
- Need to have the ability at the meeting to sign up for, join or participate in other community areas needed to pull the town forward.
- Pie is good!
- How can we work to make the experience of the exchange of ideas a good one and not a hostile one?
- I wish the select board would share their work with the citizens a bit more. Not just that citizens should attend their meetings.
- Report is not easy to understand
- The town report is much improved Thanks.
- Perhaps a time certain for the major budget votes
- Thank you for all your efforts to make Town Meeting Day work well for all.

A full list of comments and open-ended responses is available in a separate document. Complete survey data is also available in Microsoft Excel format.

1. ____ Male ____ Female (check)
2. What is your age? (Circle one)
 - a. Under 18
 - b. 18-30
 - c. 31-60
 - d. Over 60
3. How long have you lived in Bethel? (Circle one)
 - a. Less than 1 year
 - b. 1-5 years
 - c. 5-10 years
 - d. More than 10 years
4. Do you attend Town Meeting...? (Circle one)
 - a. Every year
 - b. Most years
 - c. Occasionally
 - d. Never
5. If/When you DO attend Town Meeting, why do you attend? (Circle all that apply)
 - a. To learn about important town issues
 - b. To vote and have a voice in town decisions
 - c. To socialize and visit with neighbors
 - d. It's my civic duty
 - e. To bring up issues that matter to me
 - f. It's tradition! (And there's free pie)
 - g. Other _____
6. If/When you DO NOT attend Town Meeting, why don't you attend? (Circle all that apply)
 - a. Don't have time
 - b. Don't think it's important
 - c. Not interested in Town Meeting
 - d. Don't think my input or vote matters
 - e. Don't understand the issues and information
 - f. Don't understand or feel comfortable with the Town meeting format
 - g. Can't get out of work
 - h. Don't have transportation
 - i. Don't have childcare
 - j. Physically unable to attend (mobility issues or illness)
 - k. Other _____

Town of Bethel 2015 Town Meeting Survey

The Town Meeting Committee would like your input on how well Town Meeting works. Please take 5 minutes to share your anonymous opinions. All who fill out the survey can enter a drawing for two \$25 local gift certificates. Results will be made public and will inform the Selectboard and the Town Meeting Committee in facilitating discussion about Bethel's future.

Thank you!

More on back!



7. What do you like about Town Meeting?

8. What would you change or improve about Town Meeting?

9. If Town Meeting could start at a different time of day to accommodate people's schedules, what time would you prefer? (Circle up to two preferences)
 - a. Mid morning
 - b. Late morning
 - c. Early afternoon
 - d. Late afternoon
 - e. Different day than school meeting
 - f. No preference
 - g. Other _____

10. The Town Meeting Solutions Committee would like to identify a few issues that Bethel residents are particularly interested in discussing and addressing in 2015. Which issues interest or concern you most? (Circle up to 3)
 - a. Local jobs, business growth & economic development
 - b. Zoning and land use
 - c. Town spending/budget and property taxes
 - d. Broadband & cellular accessibility
 - e. School spending/budget and school taxes
 - f. School system, educational quality and offerings
 - g. Roads and local infrastructure
 - h. Energy, sustainability and environment
 - i. Recreation and social offerings
 - j. Town government and management
 - k. Community visioning and planning for the future
 - l. Other _____
 - m. Other _____
 - n. Other _____

11. Please feel free to share any other comments or feedback about Town Meeting, the Town Report, or ways citizens can participate.