

WARNING TOWN OF HARDWICK
SPECIAL TOWN MEETING
MAY 19, 2026

There were 332 registered Hardwick voters checked by the Voter Registry in attendance.

The Moderator, Audrey Grant, opened the Special Town Meeting at 6:40 pm. After asking the Select Board to introduce themselves, the Moderator outlined the rules and procedures for how the meeting would run.

Key points included how motions must be properly made and seconded, and that the Moderator would restate them before discussion. Rules for reconsidering previously voted articles were explained, including that it must be done before the next article is introduced and by someone on the prevailing side.

The Moderator also reviewed how amendments work, including that articles can be amended and those amendments can themselves be amended once before returning to the main motion. Voting procedures for both motions and amendments were clarified.

Procedures for voting were explained in detail: paper ballots could be requested if supported by at least seven voters, and a two-thirds vote was required to call the question. Speakers must be recognized before speaking, and procedural issues could be raised through a "Point of Order," which pauses discussion.

Additional logistics were covered, including speaking rules (standing, waiting for a microphone, stating name, and limiting repeat comments until others have spoken), and the use of index cards provided at check-in for voting.

It was agreed without objection that votes would be conducted by raised hand using index cards, though paper ballots would still be available if properly requested. Further questions about voting procedures were addressed before moving on.

Article 1. Shall the Town contribute \$25,000, to be matched by more than \$700,000 of other public and private funds, toward the acquisition of +/- 329 acres of land on Buffalo Mountain to become a Town Forest to protect recreational access, fish and wildlife habitat, forestry, and Lamoille River water quality, and to provide outdoor educational opportunities for schoolchildren?

A motion was made by Paul Cillo to move the article and seconded by Eric Remick.

The Moderator opened the floor for discussion.

Rachel Kane provided background information regarding the proposal. It was explained that the requested \$25,000 contribution from the Town would be a one-time contribution toward a project valued at approximately \$810,000, with the remaining funding coming from other public and private sources.

Rachel noted that the estimated reduction in annual property tax revenue associated with the parcel would be no more than approximately \$5,000 per year.

Discussion emphasized that the proposed Town Forest would remain under the ownership and control of the Town permanently, distinguishing it from privately conserved land whose ownership or use could change over time. Rachel stated that future management decisions regarding the property would remain under local control through the Town, its committees, and the Select Board.

Additional benefits discussed included guaranteed long-term public access for recreation, hunting, community use, and educational opportunities. Particular emphasis was placed on the value of the property as an outdoor educational resource for local school children and future generations.

Rachel also commented on the scenic and symbolic importance of Buffalo Mountain to the Town, noting that the mountain is widely recognized as a defining feature of the community. She described the proposal as an opportunity to preserve the property as a Town Forest and as a resource for residents and visitors alike.

Lucy Zendzian, Conservation Commission co-chair, explained that, should the project proceed, a steering committee of approximately 17 community members would be formed to develop recommendations and plans for the property. Topics anticipated for future discussion included funding, trails, hunting access, and other permitted uses. Residents were encouraged to participate in the process and apply through the Select Board for appointment to the committee.

Orise Ainsworth requested that voting on Article 1 be conducted by paper ballot.

The Moderator clarified that a paper ballot could be requested at any time. In accordance with meeting procedure, the Moderator requested support from at least six additional voters.

Support for the paper ballot request was indicated by the following voters:

- Julie Holcomb-Gravel
- Justin Foster
- Doreen Cota
- Lynette Fontaine
- Shawn Ainsworth
- Karen Collier

The Moderator declared that the request had received sufficient support and announced that voting on Article 1 would proceed by paper ballot when the question was called.

Paul Fixx asked whether the steering committee would still be formed if Article 1 did not pass.

Rachel Kane responded that the steering committee process had already been initiated by the Select Board in anticipation of the project moving forward and that applications from community members had already been solicited. It was further explained that the Town had previously agreed to accept the land if all components of the project and associated funding were secured. The steering committee was described as part of the planning and public engagement process regarding future management of the property.

Ceilidh Galloway-Kane, Select Board Chair, further clarified that the Select Board had officially established the steering committee at a prior meeting and had issued a call for community members to submit letters of interest. A deadline for applications had been established in advance of the Select Board's upcoming meeting on May 21st. Ceilidh explained that the proposed steering committee would consist of 17 members and that any unfilled seats would remain open until additional volunteers were appointed. Residents interested in participating were encouraged to submit letters of interest and complete the questionnaire available through the Town website. It was noted that applications remained open.

Colette Foster raised a Point of Order and was questioning if a vote was needed to go to paper ballot and the Moderator clarified that procedural changes adopted at the previous Town Meeting applied only to that meeting and did not carry forward to the current Special Town Meeting.

Marie Lapre-Grabon questioned if it were possible to counter the request for paper ballot and the Moderator stated that at this point it was not.

Robin Grant requested clarification regarding the tax burden of the property should the Town acquire the land.

Ceilidh Galloway-Kane, Select Board Chair, explained that once the Town owned the property, it would no longer generate municipal property tax revenue because municipalities do not tax their own property. Rachel Kane stated that the estimated loss to the Town's annual tax revenue would be no more than approximately \$5,000 based on current tax calculations, although the total existing tax bill on the property was higher due in part to education taxes remitted to the State.

Roberta Foster spoke in opposition to Article 1. Comments included concerns regarding the public process surrounding the proposal, the absence of an Australian ballot vote on Town Meeting Day, the projected tax revenue loss, and the Town's infrastructure needs, including road maintenance. Roberta stated support for directing Town funds toward roads rather than the proposed land acquisition.

A motion to call the question and end debate was made by Andrew Gilbert and was seconded by James Kelley.

The Moderator explained that the motion to call the question required a two-thirds vote to end debate and proceed directly to voting on Article 1.

Following a vote by raised index cards, the Moderator declared that the motion to call the question had passed.

Debate on Article 1 was closed.

The Moderator then instructed voters regarding the paper ballot voting procedure.

Paper ballot voting on Article 1 commenced.

The moderator announced the results of the paper ballot vote on Article 1, reporting 234 yes votes and 89 no votes. Article 1 passed.

Ceilidh Galloway-Kane, Select Board Chair, provided clarification that the town does not currently have a formal policy regarding public engagement in real estate acquisition or sale decisions, though such a policy has been discussed. The Select Board thanked the public for attending and for their input.

Jennifer Fliegelman made a motion to suspend Robert's Rules to require a majority vote before proceeding with paper ballot. The motion was seconded by David Barnowski, discussion followed regarding Vermont law, Robert's Rules of Order, and whether paper ballot thresholds could be modified by local procedure. The Moderator stated that guidance received from procedural resources indicated that municipalities may adjust procedural rules, while others asserted that state law requires a paper ballot when requested by a specified number of voters. The Moderator clarified that any suspension would apply only to the current meeting and would not permanently alter town procedure. Public questions continued regarding the implications of the motion and voting thresholds.

The motion to suspend Robert's Rules passed by a vote of 167 to 44. The Moderator stated that paper ballots could still be requested, but future requests during the meeting would require majority approval to proceed.

Article 2 was then introduced; Shall the Town vote to require that all future voting at Annual and Special Town Meetings be conducted exclusively by Australian ballot? A motion was made by Ben Patoine to move the article and seconded by Ashton Allen.

Public discussion followed regarding accessibility, democratic participation, and the role of town meetings. Several residents expressed support for Australian ballot voting as a means of increasing accessibility for those

unable to attend in person due to work, childcare, disability, or other barriers. Others emphasized the importance of preserving in-person deliberation, amendment of motions from the floor, and community discussion as essential components of town meeting democracy.

Ron Wiesen proposed an amendment to the Article to change the meeting structure to Saturday afternoons, which was seconded by Anne Galloway. After clarification that the amendment would replace the article's language, the proposer withdrew the amendment, and discussion returned to the original article.

Andrew Gilbert made a motion to call the question on Article 2 and was seconded by David Barnowski. The Moderator explained that this motion required a two-thirds majority. The motion failed, there was not a two-thirds majority, and debate continued.

Further public comment included arguments both for and against Australian ballot voting, with some speakers emphasizing equity and access and others emphasizing the importance of deliberative democracy and in-person decision-making. Additional discussion addressed whether alternative participation models such as hybrid systems, informational meetings, or task forces should be explored. Select Board members noted that prior surveys and scheduling adjustments had been made to improve participation and that further public engagement remained possible.

David Kreindler made a motion to strike the current text of Article 2 and instruct the Select Board to study the issue and hold public engagement sessions to maximize participation and democratic process while maintaining an amendment process during town meeting. The motion was seconded by Julie Sullivan.

The Moderator read back motion to clarify wording. Proposing an amendment to strike the current text and instruct the Select Board to study and hold public engagement sessions to maximize engagement and democracy and to maintain an amendment process in Town Meeting.

Discussion followed regarding the scope and implications of the amendment, including concerns about preserving amendment rights, potential procedural limitations, and how future meetings might function.

Additional residents suggested alternative models, including special town meetings prior to Australian ballot voting and hybrid informational and voting structures. Select Board members indicated that public input had been widely received, and that continued review was likely.

The amendment to Article 2 "To strike the current text in Article 2 to instruct the Select Board to study and hold public engagement sessions to maximize engagement and democracy and to maintain an amendment process in Town Meeting."

Motion passed by a majority vote.

The Moderator then confirmed that, because the amendment had changed the article language, a final vote on the amended article was required. Mieka Riddlebarger made a motion and was seconded by Walker Wright to adopt Article 2 as amended.

Article 2: The Town will instruct the Select Board to study and hold public engagement sessions to maximize engagement and democracy and to maintain an amendment process in Town Meetings.

The motion passed, and Article 2 as amended was adopted.

Article 3 was introduced as "to transact any other non-binding business proper to be brought before said meeting."

