

## Editorial

### **Binding or not, they belong on the warrant**

**Monitor staff**

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In New England, town meeting has always been the place to vent one's spleen and send a message to the summit of government and beyond. In the 1960s townsfolk debated resolutions calling for an end to the Vietnam War. Later came resolutions demanding an end to the pollution causing acid rain and opposing a federal plan to locate a high-level nuclear waste disposal site in Hillsboro.

In 2003, Madbury's town meeting passed a resolution stating that everyone deserves access to a basic, affordable health care plan. Last year, Hanover voters called for the impeachment of President George Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney.

This year, some school districts will vote on whether to ask Congress to repeal or amend the No Child Left Behind Act. The Inter-Lakes School District will decide whether to ask elected officials to reject the state's unofficial Pledge to veto any new broad-based tax. And about 180 New Hampshire towns will vote on a resolution favoring a reduction in the greenhouse gases and a federal push to find sources of clean, renewable energy.

Critics of town meeting's use as a forum for protest call such resolutions a meaningless waste of time that makes meetings longer and drives down already sparse attendance. They're wrong.

It's true that town meeting voters can't force their local representative to vote their way, let alone demand that Sen. Judd Gregg or President Bush do their bidding. But town meeting votes are more likely to get a politician's attention than batches of letters and emails. In the past, such public expressions of opinion have sparked debate and helped drive the national agenda.

Votes on issues beyond the control of local government are also a way to get to know one's neighbors, to find out that "that great guy who pulled my car out of that snow bank sure has some crazy ideas." If anything, they drive town meeting attendance up, not down.

It would get tedious if town warrants became clogged with non-binding resolutions for pet causes, but that hasn't happened. Though it only takes the signatures of a small number of registered voters to make it onto the agenda, the system has a natural check - the fear of ridicule.

The non-binding resolution also has an illustrious history, according to Jere Daniell, an emeritus professor of history at Dartmouth. The first instances of New England town meetings taking on wider, even global affairs occurred before the Revolutionary War. Among them were votes on the tea and stamp acts.

Decades later, in the run-up to the War of 1812, President Thomas Jefferson said that town meeting resolutions opposing his ban on foreign trade by American ships almost destroyed his administration. "That didn't happen outside New England, where counties were the major form of government," Daniell said. "What could you do in the South, call a county meeting?"

So this year, if you're lucky enough to have the opportunity to make your voice heard at a town meeting with a non-binding resolution, cast your vote with your head held high. You'll be in good company.