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# Plymouth rejects cityhood but still debates governance

 **ROBERT PREER** Aug 1, 2002

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## In its place of origin, town meeting lives to fight another day

PLYMOUTH—When the town of Plymouth voted in May to preserve its town-meeting form of government, it was a victory not only for tradition but for the grassroots group that fought to defend it. But this reaffirmation of the status quo by no means laid to rest concerns that have been channeled into arguments over governance—nor even, perhaps, settled the question of governance itself.

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Plymouth has been debating how it should be ruled for more than a decade. In 1991, a charter reform campaign produced the switch in administrator from a weak selectmen’s executive secretary to a strong town manager. Another charter reform effort, which concluded in 1999, gave more power to certain appointed officials and also imposed conflict of interest restrictions on town meeting representatives. The overall structure of town government, however, was left intact.

Almost immediately after the 1999 charter went into effect, those who would want Plymouth to become a city—led by a pair of former selectmen, William F. Nolan and Roger E. Silva—decided to launch another bid for change. This time, they collected signatures to force another charter commission vote, and also organized not one but two slates of candidates pledged to support a mayor-council government.

In a low turnout election, voters created a charter review commission. On the same ballot, the nine members of that commission were elected, including five members who were advocates of replacing Plymouth’s setup of town meeting, board of selectmen, and town manager with a mayor and council. The pro-city commissioners vowed to bring the matter to a binding town-wide vote the next spring.

The city proposal became a lightning rod for complaints.

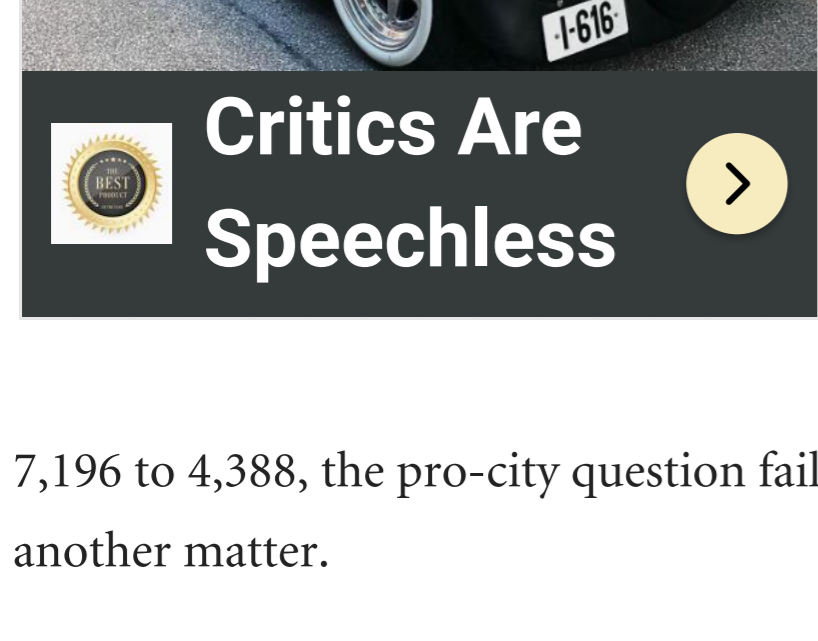
The argument against town meeting—even in communities like Plymouth that have switched from open to representative town meeting—is that it is unwieldy and unresponsive. In most towns, town meeting convenes once or twice a year. This can be a problem when a community needs to respond to a fast-developing issue. A business trying to decide where to locate often cannot wait six months for town meeting to gather. Between town meetings, government is largely run by volunteer boards and part-time elected officials, with day-to-day matters handled by administrators with varying degrees of authority. In increasingly large municipalities with ever-more complex local governments, pro-city advocates say, full-time professional management with full political authority is needed.


In Plymouth, the push to become a city also became a lightning rod for a litany of local complaints. The pro-city crowd blames the cumbersome town-meeting structure, at least in part, for Plymouth’s inability to attract sufficient taxpaying businesses, its failure to prepare for the drop in revenue as payments from the Pilgrim nuclear power plant have declined, and its inability to curtail sprawl. With dissatisfaction running high, a mix of individuals and interests was drawn to the pro-city cause, including business advocates, anti-tax activists, and former officials disillusioned by their service in local government.

The slim pro-city majority on the charter commission hammered out a plan for a strong mayor, who would appoint all department heads, as well as all municipal committees, except for the school committee, which by state law must be elected. The mayor was to serve on the school committee and also chair the panel. The proposed 11-person council could only cut, not add to, the mayor’s recommended budget.


In the summer of 2000, however, about a dozen Plymouth activists began plotting to save town meeting. The core members of the anti-city group, which called itself Citizens for a Better Plymouth, had spent much of the 1990s battling the Pinehills development, a South Plymouth planned community with several thousand homes, shopping center, and golf course. Pinehills finally got its approvals in 1998, but only after being dramatically scaled back. The activists had used town meeting to block the earlier plans and thus had acquired a fondness for the governmental form.

Citizens for a Better Plymouth began meeting regularly last fall and winter, and attendance at the gatherings grew steadily. Activists who had fought development in other parts of town were drawn to the anti-city cause, as were many of the 126 elected town meeting representatives, whose posts were slated to be abolished in the city proposal. Town employees, wary of change, also enlisted in the effort.





Critics Are Speechless



By early spring, a well-funded, sophisticated campaign, with scores of volunteers, was in full swing. Citizens for a Better Plymouth used lawn signs, phone banks, radio and newspaper ads, letters-to-the-editor, and mass mailings, including an eight-page, color tabloid newspaper sent to every home. The organization outspent the pro-city group, Plymouth Charter Review Committee, by a margin of nine-to-one.

The effort paid off in the May 11 election, which had a turnout of about 35 percent—high for a local election in the town. By a vote of

7,196 to 4,388, the pro-city question failed. Whether the vote settled the question of Plymouth’s future is another matter.

With 52,000 residents, Plymouth is the third most populous town in Massachusetts, after Framingham and Brookline. In sticking with its traditional form of self-government, Plymouth has fallen out of step with the march by large towns toward the city system. Boston was the first to switch in 1822. Forty-eight others have followed, the most recent being Weymouth, in 1999, and West Springfield in 2000. Greenfield, which has had a hybrid government with a board of selectmen and “town council,” a legislative body equivalent to a city council, voted June 11 to become a full-fledged city, replacing the selectmen with a mayor. Besides Plymouth, several other communities south of Boston—including Braintree, Milton, and Scituate—have been debating the effectiveness of their town meetings.

But if New England’s distinctive form of local rule had tradition on its side anywhere, it was in America’s Hometown. Town meeting can be traced to the early gatherings of settlers here under Gov. William Bradford, starting in the spring of 1621, and its modern-day Plymouth loyalists played history to the hilt. Their signs, bumper stickers, and buttons depicted a British crown with a slash across it signifying “no.” Denouncing the city-charter proposal as undemocratic, Citizens for a Better Plymouth also invoked a different sort of history—the memory of urban machine politics—as it warned that Plymouth could wind up with a throwback big city boss at the helm.

A month after the election, former selectman Nolan, a leader of the pro-city forces, was still upset by the opposition’s campaign. “They used negative tactics,” says Nolan. “You would think it was Darth Vader they were talking about.”

But William S. Abbott, a leader of the anti-city group and a town meeting member from South Plymouth, says it was the pro-city forces who tried to go too far. “What was being proposed was too extreme, and we got the message out,” says Abbott. Enzo J. Monti, an anti-city activist and town meeting member from North Plymouth, concurs. “The one thing I heard everywhere was, ‘Not this charter,’” he says.

Nolan also complains about a \$10,000 contribution Citizens for a Better Plymouth received from the Washington, DC-based International City/County Management Association, which represents appointed managers. The outside money, combined with local contributions, gave the anti-city forces over \$27,000. “With that kind of money you can buy an election,” says Nolan, whose group raised about \$3,000.

The fact that all current elected officials—selectmen, planning board, and school committee—opposed the city plan demonstrates that the other side was mainly interested in protecting the status quo, according to Nolan. “It has nothing to do with good government,” he says.

Abbott counters that the selectmen, planning board, and school committee did not jump on the bandwagon until late in the campaign, and that the strong mayor proposal defeated itself. “They alienated a broad spectrum of people” with the plan, he says.

“There’s some comfort in keeping what you know.” Town Clerk Laurence R. Pizer, who was neutral in the charter debate, believes one reason the city proposal failed was that Plymouth’s government has not been as troubled as some others that have made the switch. In nearby Weymouth, the drive for reform arose after disclosures of financial mismanagement and corruption, which sent one top official to jail. For all its controversies, Plymouth has not experienced these sorts of problems.

“I think one interpretation of the vote that seems to make sense is that the people of Plymouth think the present situation is going along reasonably well,” suggests Pizer. “There’s some comfort in keeping what you know.”

“The present system really isn’t broken,” adds Abbott.

But that interpretation of the keep-town-meeting vote may be a bit sanguine. For 10 years now, a sense has persisted in some quarters that Plymouth, one of the fastest-growing communities on the South Shore, and its dilemmas—growth, revenue, planning—have outgrown the creaky structure of town meeting. Even some opponents of the city proposal acknowledge that it might make sense to replace the 126-member town meeting that gathers a few times a year with a town council of 11 members or so that would meet a few times a month. (The towns of Barnstable and Franklin have this arrangement.)

So the debate over Plymouth’s governance has not ended altogether. Town moderator F. Steven Triffletti is establishing a new study committee to examine whether the charter could use some fine-tuning. The committee likely will consider such matters as reorganization of town departments or how often town meeting should assemble. More substantive changes, such as replacing town meeting with a council, would require a charter commission—again.

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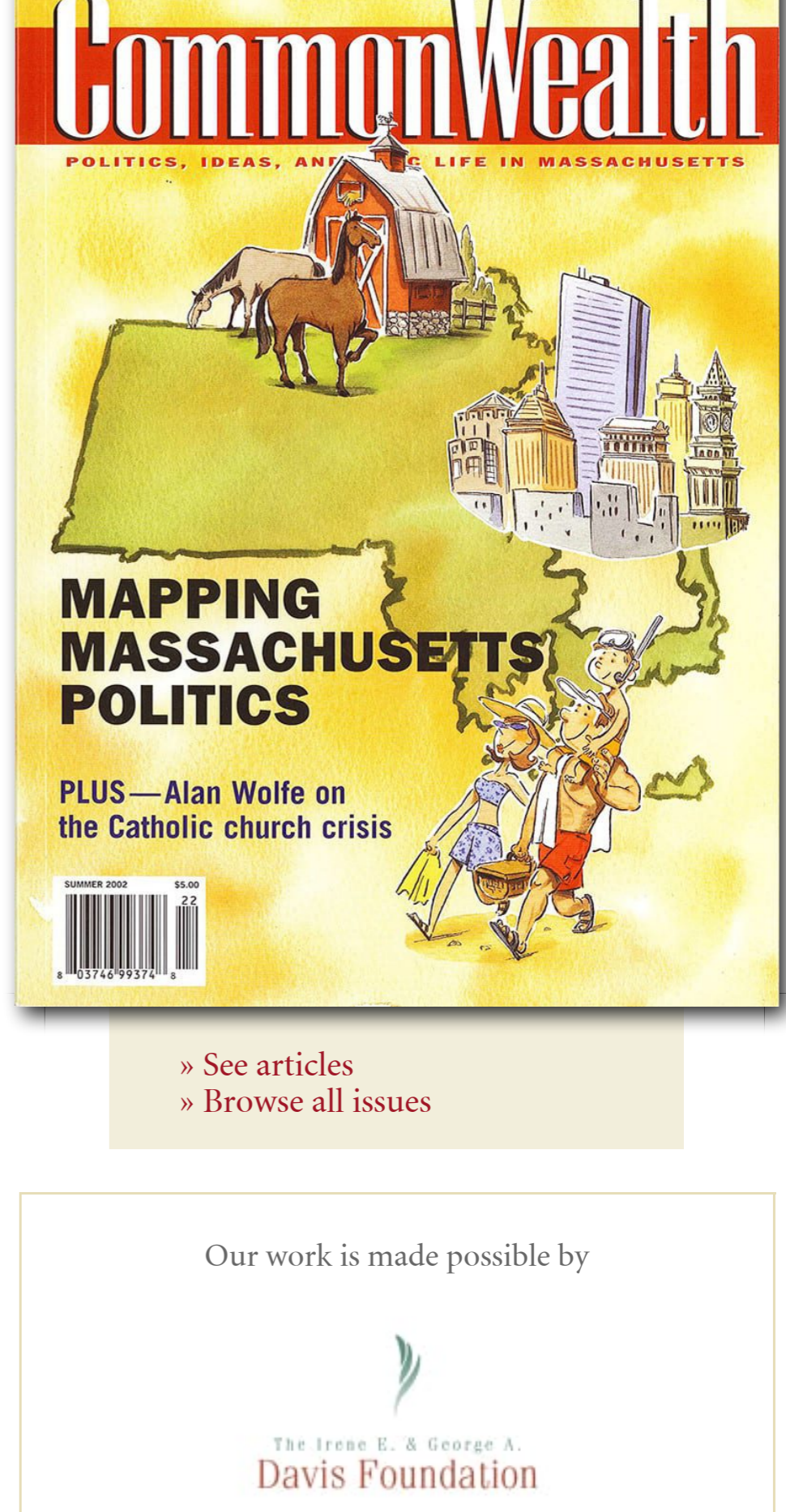
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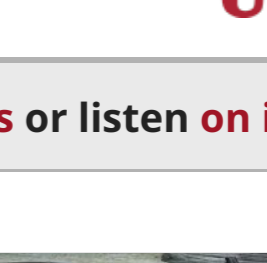
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
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
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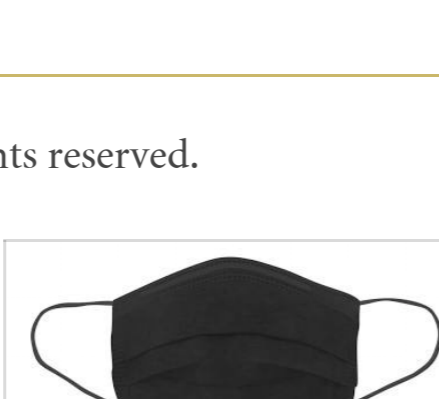
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