

Robert Wechsler's Nomination Speech
May 8, 2006 North Haven Town Meeting

My name is Robert Wechsler. I am a former lawyer, and my current job is Director of Research for City Ethics, a nonprofit organization that helps municipalities set up or improve ethics programs. I am registered as an Independent. I used to be a Democrat.

I am running for Moderator because I see the duties of this position extremely differently than recent Moderators selected by the people who run this town. I feel that North Haven residents should be given a choice between these two different visions of the job.

In my view, the Town Meeting is a nonprofessional legislature consisting of people who do not know Robert's Rules and do not know legal and bureaucratic jargon. I see the role of the Town Meeting Moderator as not only facilitating discussion, but also helping town residents accomplish what they want to.

Here is what I would do differently:

1. At the September 21, 2005 Town Meeting, Moderator David Monz said that town meetings are not question-and-answer sessions. I disagree. I will allow town meeting members to direct questions to any town official.
2. After the August 25, 2003 Town Meeting, Moderator Richard Connors wrote in a letter, "It is not the duty of the moderator to suggest procedural devices by which votes other than those on the main issue may be had." Translating from lawyerese, Mr. Connors doesn't believe moderators should help unprofessional legislators do what professional legislators do. Other Moderators have also been unwilling to help Town Meeting members do what they want to do in the appropriate way. I will help people who do not know how to make a motion or request.
3. At the August 18, 2005 Town Meeting, Moderator Don Halloran refused to consider a motion made by a resident. When the resident asked where in Robert's Rules it said that the motion was not allowed, the Moderator

- refused to answer and stuck to his decision. The Town Meeting was forced to overrule the Moderator's decision. In fact, I have never seen a Moderator consult Robert's Rules when making an important procedural decision. I will consult Robert's Rules whenever there is a question about the proper procedure.
4. At the October 24, 2005 Town Meeting, Moderator David Monz would not let the Town Meeting discuss an issue because the Board of Selectmen, in an illegally held meeting, had put the issue aside for the time being. If the Town Meeting is called to discuss an issue, I will allow discussion, no matter what the town's executive branch does or thinks.
 5. At the August 8, 2005 Town Meeting, Moderator David Monz allowed debate to be closed when there were people who still wanted to speak. The most important value to preserve in a Town Meeting is the right to speak. I will discourage any attempt to use Robert's Rules to prevent reasonable debate or motions by members of the Town Meeting.
 6. I will summarize or explain speeches that are complex or full of jargon. If I do not understand what someone has said, I will ask the speaker to repeat what he or she has said in a more understandable way.
 7. For important votes, I will suggest voting by secret paper ballot, so that no one feels intimidated into voting a certain way in the presence of supervisors, party leaders, or friends. We are not representatives and therefore need not be accountable to anyone for our votes. It is just like voting at the polls.
 8. Unlike other moderators, my role will not stop when the meeting is over. I will be an ongoing advocate for the Town Meeting before town boards and officials. I will create a Town Meeting website, to provide full and current information on issues coming before the Town Meeting. I will go over the minutes and ask for changes where the minutes seem incomplete or inaccurate. I will work with NHTV to make sure that every Town Meeting is filmed and shown in full.
 9. I will select a younger resident to be the Town Meeting parliamentarian, to take notes, to check Robert's Rules when there is a question, and to be available to replace me if I am unavailable or if I have a conflict of interest. This is the responsible thing to do.

10. And finally, I will be impartial. It will be my responsibility as an elected town official to act in the interests of the Town Meeting, not in my personal interests or in the interests of any party or other group of people, including the town's executive branch.

This is not about me. I would rather be out there speaking on the issues. I am willing to relinquish that right because I think the position of Moderator has been seriously abused. Having a moderator committed to fair and open debate is more important than whatever I have to say.