

AMERICA'S FIRST MAYPOLE AND OUR OPEN TOWN
MEETING
May 1, 2006
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We in the Boothbay region can boast on this May Day, the first recorded maypole in America, almost 400 years ago. John Pory wrote in May of 1622 about watching the Damariscove fishermen dancing in a circle of equality around the maypole that spring. A mere five years later, in 1627, the Puritans railed against another maypole dance by "madd Bachinalians" in Merry Mount, now Quincy, Massachusetts where these Merry Mount residents abused their alcohol and engaged in "worse practices" of "dancing and frisking together" with Indian women. So the Puritans cut down the Merry Mount maypole; jailed and exiled to England its leader, Thomas Morton; burned down Morton's house; and changed the name of the town. Puritans exiled Morton twice and imprisoned him three times. And what became of Thomas Morton? He retired to live his last years in Maine as, perhaps, Maine's first retiree and refugee from Massachusetts.

This maypole tradition is a symbol of and connected to our real egalitarian spirit in the Boothbay peninsula, as evidenced in our rare and sacred town meeting tradition. But our open town meeting is under siege. Real democracy, where the citizens in person, in face-to-face meetings of the whole, make the laws that govern the actions of everyone within their geographic boundaries, differs from direct, plebiscite referenda democracy, where the citizens vote by referendum, as we did today for articles one through five.

Boothbay just today voted, 260-251, without debate at its referendum town meeting, to end its open town meeting after tonight and passed, by nine votes, a referendum to end open, face-to-face town meetings. True, more people often vote during the daytime referenda portion (282 today, as contrasted with a few over 100 tonight). But these open town meetings are the last vestiges of pure democracy in the world. We have in this Boothbay Harbor open town meeting a chance to freely debate pros and cons of each and every article before we decide and vote. We can choose to vote by secret ballot on any article as well in this open town meeting forum. This is real, pure democracy. Individuals can stand, speak, and be counted. And town meetings and real democracy only exist in New England, mostly Maine, Vermont, and New Hampshire; and some townships in Minnesota. Even the referenda form of democracy only exists in some New England towns and a handful of cantons in Switzerland. We must zealously defend our pure, real democracy in the form of open town meeting government. Our hybrid town meeting/town manager form of government has been a pragmatic compromise for the last half century. And town meetings in Boothbay and Boothbay Harbor stem from our first one in 1765; town meetings have occurred every year here for over 240 years. I hope that we can continue this treasured tradition of real democracy, consider points made by our neighbors, treat each other with respect, make more informed decisions, and exercise our voting rights and responsibilities.