It could be said that democracy in America is decreasing overall for the nation, but from what I have researched in the small township of Warminster, in Bucks County, democracy is thriving. This paper will look at how democracy works in a small town such as Warminster, discuss some of the major theories of democracy and how they relate to Warminster, and give a brief overview of the social and economic conditions there.

First, I will discuss the social and economic conditions that exist in Warminster as stated in the 2000 United States Census and give some general information about its size and location. First off Warminster was founded in 1711. The township is a small area approximately twenty miles north of Philadelphia in Central Bucks County and is about 10 square miles in size. The total population of Warminster is 31,383 made up of 28,558 whites, followed by 1,454 Hispanics, then 1,038 blacks, and the rest is made up of Asians and other races. As for sex, there are 15,347 males and 16,036 females and the average age for someone in Warminster is 37.9 years old. In the
education category there are 18,246 high school graduates and 4,863 people with a college degree or higher. The median household income for a citizen of Warminster is 54,375 dollars a year and the per capita income is only 22,285 dollars. There are also 1,651 people who are living below the poverty level. Finally the average value of a family owned home is 160,500 dollars. As you can see from this data Warminster has a relatively small population and is a mostly white area. Living very close to Warminster I can say that the average household income and the value of homes is brought down by a few areas within Warminster that are where the poorest people of Warminster live and bring down these values and they are not very representative of most families living there. This area is for the most part an upper middle class area with those few area that brings down these values.

The main issues in Warminster are the putting up of billboards in the area and the making of a park instead of continuing construction for Ann’s Choice, which is an old person community. I found out about these two issues while
I attended a town meeting on February 24 and saw some resolution to one of these issues when I attended a second meeting on March 10. The meetings I attended consisted of a few residents from the community and the five Township Supervisors that run the local government; there is no mayor in Warminster. On the first occasion I also talked to Township Supervisors Leo Quinn and Supervisor/Chairman Richard Luce Jr. This first time I talked to them and told them about the project I was doing. I also just asked if I could talk with them more after the meeting of March 10th and ask them a few questions relating to my project and both of them agreed. First I will discuss some of the characteristics I noticed when I attended these meeting. One of the first things I noticed was a low turnout of citizens during both meetings. In the meeting room there are about fifty chairs for residents to sit and standing room for at least another fifty people. Both times I attended there turnout was very low and the room seemed so empty for a town meeting. On February 24 I counted 13 people and on March 10 I counted 16 people not including
myself. Of these people I noticed that almost all were the same people that had attended the previous meeting that I had been to. It seemed to me that the people I encountered at the meetings were regular attendees and wanted to be active in the community politic. For most of the meeting the supervisors went over a lot of financial things and other topics that myself and probably the others in attendance knew little about and could not raise questions about. When they started talking about the billboard dilemma and what they were doing, then questions started to arise out of the residents in attendance. When I asked Township Supervisor Leo Quinn, “Why the turnout was so low and if there was usually a good amount of questions raised and discussion on them?” he replied that, “Turnout depends on the subject we are discussing. If it is something that will affect the people then they come to the meetings and express themselves, if not then they stay home. As for questions usually we get some questions that raise eye brows and start major discussions, but sometimes no one brings up anything that really starts a good discussion.”
Another reason I believe turnout is low is due to the fact that the meetings are televised live to all residents of Warminster Township that receive cable service and also televised a few other nights during the week. I also found out from Supervisor Quinn that the first meeting of February had a high turnout because of the subject. This was the issue of the putting up of enormous billboards on one of the main roads of the township, Route 132 or Street Road. I asked Richard Luce Jr. exactly what the problem was and this is what I got out of his explanation. The billboard company Interstate was buying up small piece of private land and putting billboards on this land. This was done in three places in less than a week and hit the residents of Warminster as a surprise and sent many to the town meeting on February 10 to express their dismay. The three billboards were put up on the land of a church, small auto repair shop, and on a business park. The local government was shocked when they found out about these billboards because there was an ordinance prohibiting billboards from going up. When the township finally got a
hold of Interstate and sat down to talk with them, the company had apparently used a loop-hole in the ordinance to construct these billboards and they planned on putting up another four to come to a total of seven billboards along a two mile stretch of Street Road. They got the billboards up by actually buying the small piece of land from the owners and then erected their billboards. This was a loop-hole because the ordinance said nothing about private land owners putting up the billboards; it was only township lands that couldn’t be bought up for the use of billboards. The supervisors finally struck a deal with Interstate and the company agreed to stop putting up billboards in the township. When I asked Richard Luce Jr. what deal they struck with Interstate he said, “I am unable to disclose that information because all the details are still being deliberated.”

The second issue being debated in Warminster is the topic of Ann’s choice, an old person home that has bought up land around it to expand its facilities. Again Richard Luce Jr. filled me in about what the main issue was here
and here is what I got from it. These lands were bought from the township and were originally designated to become a park. The selling of this land was actually decided in the 2004 vote when the idea of making it “Warminster Park” was voted down by a small margin. However, many people are still fighting to make this area a park and the issue is still debated in the town meetings but each time the supervisors have to reiterate the fact that it was voted down in the 2004 elections. When I talked to Richard Luce Jr. and asked him, “What was being done about this issue?” he said that, “There is little Board can do about this problem however, Ann’s choice did seem to listen to the resident’s outcry for a park and they set aside some land for both residents of the housing community and the public.” He also told me some of the details of what they are expecting to be done. They plan on making a two mile paved walking path around the grounds of the community, set aside a forested area to be left alone, and also will create and maintain three artificial ponds around various parts of the community lands. When I was at home for
Easter break I actually went to the park to see if Ann’s Choice had followed through with their promise. The did put up a paved walking path around the grounds, there was a forest area still there, and there were 3 artificial ponds with fountains in them around the area.

One of the theories of democracy I would like to look at with Warminster is the idea of participatory democracy. Dewey’s idea that participation avenues need to be expanded could be seen here with the advent of live telecasts of the town hall meetings and having it shown throughout the week. This however is more of an indirect way of expanded participation but nonetheless it allows people to see what is going on at the town meetings even when they cannot attend them. This also allows for people to see the meetings and if they are affected by the discussions of that meeting then they can attend the next meeting and voice their opinion or since the community is so small they could even drive to the meeting during the live telecast to voice their opinion if it really strikes a chord with that person. This next passage from Barber says exactly what I
have researched. “Participatory politics deals with public disputes and conflicts of interest by subjecting them to a never-ending process of deliberation, decision, and action. Each step in the process is a flexible part of ongoing procedures that are embedded in concrete historical conditions and in social and economic actualities. In place of the search for the prepolitical independent ground or for an immutable rational plan, strong democracy relies on participation in an evolving problem-solving community that creates public ends where there were none before by means of its own activity and of its own existence as a focal point of the quest for mutual solutions. In such communities, public ends are neither extrapolated from absolutes nor “discovered” in preexisting “hidden consensus.” They are literally forged through the act of public participation, created through common deliberation and common action and the effect that deliberation and action have on interests, which change shape and direction when subjected to these participatory processes.” (Tercheck and Conte pg. 175) This passage says exactly what I saw
happen in Warminster. The public had a conflict with the billboard company putting up billboards in their community and they went to the town meetings. The supervisors and residents deliberated over the subject, made a decision, and took action to resolve the problem. What I saw according to Barber is an example of participation in a strong democracy.

Through doing this project I have seen how democracy works in the real world. These town meetings were my first exposure seeing how democracy works in small town America. From this experience I have learned that if you have an issue with something in your community then you should attend these meetings and try to make a difference.
Dan Roberts

Democracy in America: Warminster Township

April 1, 2005
Resources

Information gathered in Warminster Township meetings February 24 and March 10

Information from interviews with Township Supervisors Richard Luce Jr. and Leo Quinn