

Amherst Charter Commission
Listening Session - Minutes
Bangs Community Center
September 14, 2016, 2 pm

This Charter Commission's listening workshop of Sept. 14 was called to order at 2:10 p.m. in the Bangs Community Center. Chair Andy Churchill explained what the commission is doing and introduced the eight members attending. He showed the town government organizational chart. He said the commission wants to engage in two-way communication with the public, and said there are other ways for the public to comment, such as the web site, a survey form, and the listserv.

Commission member Meg Gage noted that the fact that only one commission member is absent "indicates how committed to listening to people we are."

One group included Adam Lussier, Marilyn Denny, John Magarian and Adrienne Terrizzi. Commission members Gerry Weiss, Irv Rhodes, Nick Grabbe and Andy Churchill were there.

What's working well? Lussier: the police and fire departments, conservation and land stewardship. Magarian: town manager and Select Board, police and fire. Denny: schools, town manager, Select Board. Terrizzi: civic engagement, citizen involvement (though not as inclusive as it could be). "I love the opportunity to participate."

What's not working? Denny: Town Meeting isn't representative, and is designed for people who can donate the amount of time required, and expecting that level of expertise in the general population is unreasonable. She decried NIMBY groups and an anti-development attitude, relating problems of Chapel Road residents with a sewer extension. She also said there's a resistance to building elderly housing. Zoning is antiquated.

What's not working? Lussier: NIMBYism, a small sector of individuals can determine policy. "The personal interest of a few can negatively impact a benefit for themany." There's a "dark shadow" cast on the business community, with experienced people wanting to do positive things but don't want to go through the process. Town Meeting as "deterrent." The current structure of government has gone on so long that it's become stale. "I'm embarrassed by what I've seen by the actions of some" Town Meeting members. Town government has gotten less civil.

Denny: Criticized Town Meeting on Guantanamo detainees, saying such petition articles use up valuable time. Terrizzi said she likes the citizen provision provision.

Denny: Wants government to be responsive to citizen concerns, but citizens can't spend hours and hours on them. She suggested a town ombudsperson.

Magarian: A mayor might be more effective than the current structure, but wondered about investing all that power in one person. Denny: In Northampton, residents like the mayoral

system. "If the government isn't working, you can vote the mayor out of office, but you can't do that here."

Churchill brought up participation vs. representation: do we need to participate deeply to feel represented, or do we feel represented regardless of whether we participate.

Denny: People with concerns should be listened to and respected, and shouldn't have to come to Town Meeting or file a petition article or appeal to the state. "Too many feel the theory of Town Meeting is a lovely idea but a lot of people feel it's not fair." Terrizzi said it's a collaboration no matter what kind of government you have.