

Amherst Charter Commission
 Listening Session - Minutes
 Amherst Regional Middle School
 September 20, 2016, 7 pm

The Charter Commission held a listening workshop at the Regional Middle School Sept. 20. About 25 citizens participated. Members in attendance: Andy Churchill, Tom Fricke, Meg Gage, Nick Grabbe, Mandi Jo Hanneke, Irv Rhodes, Julia Rueschemeyer, Diana Stein.

In the introduction, Churchill said the commission is working on a “constitution” for the town and will propose an alternative and voters will decide “if they think it's better than what we have.” Rueschemeyer called the listening workshop like “brainstorming.” Gage said that although the workshop is being held in a school, and feelings run high on actions of the School Committee, the commission wants to focus on the the governmental process, not personalities.

Nick Grabbe wrote the following summary of the discussion at his table. Participants were Jean Schwartz, John Coull, Bernie Kubiak, Clare Bertrand, Phoebe Hazzard and Michael Aronson. Hanneke was the facilitator.

What is working well?

Schwartz: town-gown relations, especially in the last few years with attention placed on drinking and noise.

Coull: police and fire departments; cited young assistant chief declining to apply for chief job.

Kubiak: government is well managed; collaborative spirit.

Aronson: professional department heads; parks and recreation

Hazzard: People in Amherst care a lot about the town; moved here because heard Amherst was place where there are people like us.

What Isn't Working?

Schwartz: Anti-business climate; residents shouldering most of tax burden; Town Meeting “extraordinarily toxic” and “divisive” with some members “oppositional.” She sometimes gets so upset she has to leave early.

Aronson: Lack of development; cites '60s cluster development plan in Philadelphia; profligate spending, especially in schools.

Kubiak: School expenses are higher than in Belchertown, which has similar outcomes...Town Meeting “posturing” ...He always worked with open Town Meetings and “never looked at Town

Meeting as an obstruction before.” Town Meeting “place you go to say no.” Taxes “unconscionable.”

Coull: accountability; a mayor could be reelected or voted out; Town Meeting supermajority requirement makes it difficult to change things; system doesn't work “organizationally, politically, management-wise or psychically.”

Bertrand: The next generation is priced out of housing; Government structure “atrophied and old-fashioned.”

Hazzard: When I joined School Committee, I “became cynical really quickly.” Town Meeting not welcoming to parents of young children.

Kubiak: Participants at Massachusetts Municipal Association conferences “laugh hysterically at Amherst Town Meeting.” “It's a joke if you go outside the community.”

What Would You Change?

Bertrand: Would like to see conversation on values; would like every official elected.

Kubiak: Residents need to know who to talk to if they have problem.

Aronson: Reduce Town Meeting size to 30 and let members pick mayor.

Bertrand: Doesn't want “crazy, only-in-Amherst specialty form of government.”

Aronson: Would like someone with “gumption” to approach Amherst College and ask to use some of \$2.1 billion endowment on town services.

Kubiak: Town Meeting “a giant sponge that absorbs everything.” Huge cost of operating Town Meeting is hidden from view.

Coull: Could support having a manager but prefers mayor. Notes that Amherst's divisiveness parallels national mood, yet nationally, “we practically vote as a bloc.”

Schwartz: Whatever model the commission proposes, it's important to reach out to the wider community, not just the “upper class.”

Tom Fricke summarizes his table: Police/fire works.

What doesn't? Town-gown relationship; zoning; division between haves and have-nots; Town Meeting inability to bridge divides; narrow participation.

What changes? Town Meeting more representative or accountable by being smaller; growing tax base; confusion about where School Committee fits in government; Town Meeting role in approving budgets.

Andy Churchill summarizes his table: What works? Schools, town services, Select Board, “freakishly active” citizenry; college environment; libraries, ability to join committees, block party, ambience of a small town.

What doesn't? How to resolve conflicts over land use; decisions get blocked; expensive housing excludes young families; declining school enrollments; Why not same revitalization as Easthampton?; Lack of connection with UMass students; few competitive races for School Committee; revolving door for school administrators; working through conflict; an incomprehensible zoning bylaw.

What changes? Multicultural schools, transparency; accountability; how to seek common ground; representation based vs. participation based; term limits; smaller Town Meeting; common vision; balancing competing interests; disagreements about master plan; capital plan so four projects don't come up all at once; reacting to problems rather than vision. Diana Stein added that a member of our group believes that people of color generally feel that they are not included in town government.

Meg Gage summarizes her table: What works? Responsive government; schools, senior center, LSSE, community theater; libraries, backyard chicken bylaw.

What doesn't? Uncompetitive school elections; Sense of professionals being undermined at Town Meeting; TM not good for long-range planning; polarization; places to come together and mediate differences; tax rate; tight money, service cuts, fewer literature courses; “time bomb” of taxes; no long-term planning; In Singapore, people are elected to hire the professionals to run government. People run for office and don't know what they're getting into.

Participant Todd Tripp adds that residents with families or intense careers don't have the time to participate in government, and don't know what candidates stand for; system is not nimble. If there were a mayor, candidates would explain their vision and voters would have something concrete to go on.