

Amherst Charter Commission  
Listening Session - Minutes  
Crocker Farm School  
Oct. 3, 2016, 7 pm

Commission members present: Meg Gage, Nick Grabbe, Mandi Jo Hanneke, Diana Stein, Gerry Weiss. Members absent: Andy Churchill, Tom Fricke, Irv Rhodes, Julia Rueschemeyer

Participants in Group A: Janice Ratner, Deanna Pearlstein, Adam Lussier, Jon Solins, Adrienne Terrizzi, Ellen Story, Gabor Lukacs. Commission members: Gage and Grabbe

**Ratner:** Likes Town Meeting because a lot of people participate, and everyone has the opportunity to examine issues pertaining to the budget and zoning, and everything is transparent. Town Meeting is hard to influence. Members get a lot of information in packets, and speakers know the zoning bylaw. She favors professional management.

**Lukacs:** I can participate without too much preparation. I'm learning a lot, but didn't before I was elected with 72 votes. But I didn't have to know a lot. Trust in School Committee goes down when they have executive sessions.

**Solins:** Moved to Amherst a year ago from Concord, which has open Town Meeting. He's surprised there's no outreach to the public from Amherst Town Meeting members, and finds the level of discourse here uncivil and vindictive.

**Terrizzi:** No form of government is perfect, and Town Meeting is imperfect, but provides for civic engagement. I want to be involved, but don't want to run for council or mayor. Communication could be better.

**Lussier:** Town Meeting isn't representative or accountable, and it doesn't take much to be involved. In 2015, there were only 99 candidates for 92 open seats.

**Story:** I don't know whether to keep Town Meeting or change it. She's never been to a gathering in her precinct. Town Meeting is long, and parents of young children can't stay up late to attend.

**Lukacs:** There's tension in Town Meeting because the Planning Board isn't trusted because it's appointed by town managers playing an inside game. Board should be half-elected.

**Lussier:** We've had this form of government for 80 years, and we should try something new. With 240 people in Town Meeting, only 80 can decide to vote against something that's valuable to the majority of citizens. He heard of a retired person who was asked to run for Town Meeting and told by a group that they'd support him if he votes as instructed.

**Lukacs:** Residents of McClellan Street neighborhood get together for monthly potlucks and have created a land trust.

The following is a summary of the comments of Group B, as reported by Weiss:

What works well? The town clerk's office in elections; the town moderator; people with diverse opinions; Town Meeting saved War Memorial Pool; Fire and Police departments; Meals on Wheels; libraries; downtown permit parking. , people take engagement in citizenship seriously. What are the problems? It's not clear that Town Hall listens well; i.e. people get to talk but things don't get fixed or changed. Who represents citizens? We need way to introduce new residents to government; Town Meeting elections should be more competitive; bump-outs cause loss of parking spaces; not bike-friendly; Senior Center needs more space; Town Meeting a terrible way to run a business—Town Meeting says no to things that could improve the tax base; cost of living high, shutting out working and middle-income people; need for affordable housing.

Town Meeting vs. Town Council: Only five people could make a decision; council seats would be more competitive, and voters would know where candidates stand; council would mean more tax revenue from sources other than residents; Council is more constant whereas Town Meeting meets twice a year. People do contact this member of Town Meeting on important issues—even from other precincts—showing she represents them. Another pointed out that competition is not the only factor to consider since she appreciates hearing diverse points of view.

What matters? Physical beauty, schools, civic responsibility, services.