

Amherst Charter Commission
Listening Workshop Minutes
Jones Library
Oct. 27, 2016, 6:45 pm

Commission members present: Andy Churchill, Tom Fricke, Meg Gage, Nick Grabbe, Mandi Jo Hanneke, Julia Rueschemeyer, Diana Stein. Members absent: Irv Rhodes, Gerry Weiss. About 12 members of the public attended.

Comments from Group 1, as reported by Meg Gage:

Participants said they like Amherst's rural character, academic focus and development in village centers, though some described implementation and details as problematic.

They identified problems as taxes, schools, insufficient money, losing middle-income families, erosion of trust and leadership. They agreed that zoning does not work.

They want to balance the legitimate concerns of neighbors with the long-term needs of the community.

Town Meeting: how can it be more representative? Are its members just whoever wants to be there? Would it be better if voters could vote members out?

On the Select Board and town manager, there were concerns about how they interpret their jobs, who sets priorities, and why one planning director seems more focused than another.

Participants wondered how the Charter Commission will come up with a proposal without winners and losers.

Everyone in the group remembered a time when there wasn't so much distrust.

Comments from Group 2, as reported by Nick Grabbe:

What is working well? An involved citizenry, having a professional manager, public works, competent people, prioritization by Finance Committee.

What isn't working well? Polarization, unanimous decisions by committees, business owners feeling unsupported and subject to inconsistent regulation, Town Meeting members not doing their homework, factions, ugly high-end student housing, government not thinking about the future, a transient population, communication between government and citizens, planners ignoring sentiments of neighbors, UMass not contributing enough money to town, citizens not knowing Town Meeting candidates or what they believe; no interaction between Town Meeting members and constituents, "charade" of Town Meeting as representative, Town Meeting sessions too long, superintendent buyout.

Comments from Group 3, as reported by Diana Stein:

What is working well? Police and fire departments, decent and caring people at Town Hall, access of regular people to Town Meeting seats. One person still in Town Meeting likes it because she is not a lawyer or a professor, but still as a "humble" person can participate.

Moved back to Amherst after 20 years due to this.

As a Town Meeting Member, another person likes it. She compared Amherst with Northampton--her husband worked in Northampton—and both felt Amherst's system of Government was better.

Most staff at middle and high schools genuinely want what is good for the students.

What isn't working well? Lack of people of color on committees, uniformity of opinion—Select Board used to have divided votes, now they, the Finance Committee and the Planning Board all have unanimous decisions. Proposition 2 and a half changed things—can't ask for more money for say LSSE easily; Town needs more money, needs to press State representative for more money for roads (students use roads and don't pay taxes—we should not have to borrow money to fix our roads). Downtown noise affects residents trying to sleep, “people who live in \$600,000 homes don't understand impact of students downtown,” 350 nights of noise now down only to 255 nights—hard on downtown resident like her; one restaurant owner told her he could play music as loud as he wants (after 11p.m.)—now Police helping more. “Corrupt” decision-making: Planning Board following the wishes of the Town Manager etc. Nonprofit organizations like UMass and Amherst College are not contributing enough to pay for roads and schools, committees make decisions before receiving public input, lack of a place to go for teenagers, Senior Center not having advocacy at the highest level for needed space. Need integrity of the “actors” in Town government—need election of some committees—Hadley has elected ZBA. Was told if you don't like the decision take it to court. Teen agers should have a place to go that is a community center—not the library. Processes have to involve the public earlier and not when the process is far along or already decided.