

Minutes
Amherst Charter Commission
Listening Session
Nov 9, 2016
Survival Center

The Charter Commission held a listening workshop at the Survival Center on November 9, 2016 at 6:30 pm. Four citizens participated. Members in attendance: Tom Fricke, Julia Rueschemeyer, Diana Stein, Andy Churchill, Irv Rhodes, Nick Grabbe.

Tom Fricke wrote the following summary of the discussion at the lone table. Participants were John Coull, Matt Blumenfeld, David Markland, Claudia Brown, and Adrienne Terrizzi (filming).

What Works:

- civil servants, boards, roles for volunteers, public safety
- general commitment and effort
- town meeting works and goes deep into issues; variety of people in it; serves as checks and balances; democracy is messy but still good; loves town meeting as it is; why is Northampton held up as the gold standard? appreciates walkable neighborhoods
- town is managed well

Concerns and Areas for Improvement:

- town meeting is broken
- maintaining neighborhoods, small town character, avoiding reckless development
- university-student distortions: of demographics, local issues votes - town meeting is more representative of the true permanent population than a general election
- participation in government is underwhelming
- town meeting doesn't represent accountably - term limits would help forge stronger institutions
- coalition of "no" is too easy - especially regarding planning and zoning
- there's too much rubber stamping of developers plans at the Board level, so town meeting is forced to play a role that looks unfairly obstructionist but which is really critical
- would be better if citizens could be more participatory at policy formulating level instead of just yes/no at the end of policy process
- planning board listens but then "goes its own way."
- one thought that building new residences (even for students) downtown is good for business and the tax base; another thought that better would be new, attractive businesses-and not students living downtown.
- need to push Amherst College to do more for the Town—like Williams does.
- strong town manager could work with town meeting at a lower level.
- a town council would give constituents a point person at a moment in the policy process where it makes sense and matters most
- a town council would be a better forum for deliberating the trade-offs of policies for issues like growing the tax base and schools - a more efficient structure for complex issues if that's what you want
- would prefer either an open town meeting or a smaller legislature, but not current size
- legislature meeting more than twice a year would be better