

Amherst Charter Commission Feedback Session

May 11, 2017

Bangs Community Center

Members Present: Andy Churchill, Tom Fricke, Meg Gage, Nick Grabbe, Mandi Jo Hanneke, Irv Rhodes, Julia Rueschemeyer, Diana Stein, Gerry Weiss. Members Absent: None.

Approximately 40 people attended the session. Thirteen speakers spoke for a mayoral system, five for a manager system, five for continuing Town Meeting, and five did not express a clear preference.

Churchill opened the session by recounting the commission's meeting May 6 at which it agreed to seek comments on a manager/council system, or “run it up a flagpole and see who salutes.”

John Coull: I was for a mayoral system long before my daughter was of voting age. Greenfield, Northampton and Easthampton seem to do well with mayors. Either way we will rely heavily on department heads, have a good layer of administrators. Sometimes a mayor doesn't have experience, such as the mayor of Holyoke, but does well. If we have a manager, we choose someone based on what they have done; with a mayor, it's what he or she will do.

Elisa Campbell: Wants mayor. Our neighboring towns are doing very well with their mayors. Amherst has an inability to make decisions and act on them. We need a clear process after deliberating issues, so that people know where decisions are made. Council and mayor is a clear structure, accountable.

Michael Hanke: Priorities should be public safety, schools, infrastructure, housing for all incomes, and appropriate built environment. Concerns like the library, land preservation and affordable housing are more elective. Northampton's per-pupil costs are \$12,500 compared to Amherst's \$18,000, and Northampton has more police officers and firefighters. The sidewalk at Wildwood is crumbling, but the manager focuses on the light at Starbucks. An elected mayor would set the agenda and voters could vote him or her out, while a manager is “a step away from the public.”

Stephanie O'Keeffe: A strong mayor is the best way to channel the community's priorities, and his or her job security would be dependent on that. Benefits of putting staffing authority with elected position. If an employee is retained after losing public confidence, as has happened with a manager, there are “huge repercussions” – loss of confidence in Town Hall, how responsibly \$ are being spent. These types of staffing issues are holding back the town.

Paul Musgrave: The political science literature does not show much difference in outcomes between a mayor and manager. Mayoral systems tend to have more citizen participation, while manager systems tend to have more innovation, comprehensive policies, and evenness of services. Manager systems have significantly lower turnout than mayoral systems, and this matters in terms of enabling lower-incomes and people of color to participate. For council, recommends fewer councilors, district-based; not at-large.

Connie Kruger: Favors council-manager. Doesn't like manager/mayor hybrid. Mayors aren't bad; just has more confidence in professional manager. Managers are supervised, bring professionalism, and are more apt to take risks than mayors. Would a mayor have supported the Beacon Communities' development plan in North Amherst with the neighbors against it? Not having to run for reelection frees a manager to take initiative. A mayor wouldn't have produced a different result in the elementary schools project.

Bernie Kubiak: Prefers manager, Nov. elections. I've never been thrown out of a manager's office. A manager doesn't have the same political stake. Set up the government to meet the majority of challenges towns face. Is okay with proposed council, mostly district-based.

Andy Steinberg: Manager systems are most common around the country because of the need for education, experience and knowledge of finances. Doesn't see distinction between accountability and professional management. Elected officials in council produce political and policy guidance, approve budget. In State College, Pa., there's a manager system with a part-time mayor who presides over the council. Lists other college towns with managers.

Megan McConoghey: The council in a manager system should be smaller than 13. Larger boards give the administrator more power, less oversight. Try for 9, or maybe 11. Don't be too specific in the charter; it needs the ability to breathe. Don't think you'll find consensus; do what you think is best.

Larry Ely: We need a ribbon-cutter and baby-kisser who can be the face of the town and "cohere energy." A manager is "a guy in the basement." TM warrant process – by the time something gets to TM, "the sausage has already been made."

Amy Gates: Shocked at change by commission. I want a real choice: someone I can elect, hold accountable, and vote out if necessary. All the challenges now happened under the status quo. With so many capital needs, "what's been going on for the last 20 years?" It's time for real change, and the next generation is frustrated with the status quo. The town is ready. Do what's best for the town.

Johanna Neumann: Sees pros and cons of both, but supports manager. We need steady leadership, professionalism and rigor. I'm worried the mayor and councilors could be antagonistic. With a manager, everyone has an interest in seeing him or her succeed. A manager is "insulated from whims." Schools effort failed due to legislative side, not executive.

Jerry Guidera: People I talk to are frustrated with the back and forth of the commission, and "a three-legged elephant would be better than Town Meeting." I want a mayor-like authority.

Abbie Jenson: Favors mayor – someone accountable, who could negotiate on behalf of the town without always going back to the council for approval. Manager manages day-to-day business; with a mayor we can vote on a vision. Amherst has had good professional management the last eight years, but hasn't always. Government needs to be nimble and provide vision. A mayor might have been able to avert the school "fiasco."

Jim Brissette: Doesn't want "Town Meeting Lite" and wants clear choice, without which I'll vote "no." Greenfield and Easthampton have seen a whole new interest and life after choosing a mayor. A mayor allows everyone to vote, while Town Meeting doesn't represent Amherst's diverse demographics. Leadership is too diffuse, and residents don't have the time to deal with all 24 Town Meeting members. A mayor could close the separation between town and schools. Give us a clear choice; keep it simple.

Janet McGowan: It's a fantasy that with a mayor there would be no potholes or problems with sidewalks and schools. There's a fantasy that "someone will come in and save us from ourselves."

Chris Riddle: It isn't fair to blame Town Meeting for the school failure, because the percentage support was similar to that in the referendum. Town Meeting functions well, and has been positive and civil. It represents the will of the people.

Rob Crowner: Wants a compromise to appeal to as many people as possible. The most recent iteration comes closest to something that can appeal to a wide swath.

Alice Swift: I prefer a smaller Town Meeting, and also a manager who isn't concerned with the next election and can think long-term. Worried about money in politics. Chair of council can be spokesperson, negotiate, kiss babies.

Alisa Brewer: Council of 13 too parochial. Might support mayor/CAO depending on lines of authority, or mayor/council, depending on the composition of the council; couldn't support manager/council. Can't vote for this proposal – gives manager too much power. Manager will do what he wants. It's tough enough to evaluate manager now, with 5 SB members.

Ted Parker: Amherst needs an opportunity to discuss vision, and draw in people who have found the current system difficult to understand.

Leo Maley: The department heads are professional managers and have expertise. Top person doesn't need to be a manager – needs to be an elected executive. We need a clear choice. Mayor and management support, but manager not in charter.

Joan Burgess: Focus should be on making existing system better.

Jacqueline Maidana: Town Meeting is the finest form of democracy. A mayor represents the power elite, whereas Town Meeting is an exchange of ideas.

Lil Kravitz: Town Meeting is done. It's composed of people with time on their hands, people who can attend evening meetings, and doesn't reflect the population. Need everyone to have input on issues, not just people with time. Town will support a change.

Amy Mittelman: Town Meeting is the most democratic system, and advocates for people no one else will advocate for, like school library paraprofessionals. It's citizen action.

Hanke: If there's no mayor, I won't vote.

Jenson: Town Meeting members are older than the median age. Younger adults want to be represented in the government.

Brissette: Open Town Meeting is the only true democracy. Ordinary citizens can't keep track of issues, and a manager is unelected. Managers have acted as unelected mayors, and the superintendent is also unaccountable.

Brewer: I reject the notion that councilors would be all male, because Amherst's history tells us differently. So the mayor won't fix everything; a manager doesn't either. "A mayor wouldn't let four capital projects back up." We went years not evaluating department heads. Exceptionally uneven responses to public requests for sidewalks, etc.

Steinberg: The town is trying to do a lot without the available money, and it would still be a problem with a mayor.

Musgrave: Managers have better performance than mayors on many things, while mayors are more likely to reflect community values. Voting is the way most people participate in government. If this were the South and someone suggested moving local elections from November to March, he'd be accused of trying to suppress turnout.

Jackie Churchill: Not completely excited about council-manager. Voters want a clear choice, not the second choice. Focus on the voters. Voters means mayor. Previous charters suffered from weaknesses of compromise.

Kubiak: Holyoke schools are in receivership. Mayor is not Superman. Northampton, Greenfield and Easthampton are not well managed.

Oliver Brody: There's a limited amount of bandwidth. Shrink government.

Coll: Town Meeting doesn't do what people think it does. It expends thousands of person-hours, and we're not getting our money's worth. It wastes a lot of compensated time of town employees. Members could be better informed by going to committee meetings.

Gates: I want to get excited about something new, in which everyone has a say. Younger people in their 40s and 50s want something that makes paying exorbitant taxes worthwhile.