

Amherst Charter Commission  
Feedback Session  
April 11, 2017, 7:00 pm  
Jones Library Woodbury Room

Members Present: Andy Churchill, Mandi Jo Hanneke, Tom Fricke, Nick Grabbe, Meg Gage, Irv Rhodes, Gerry Weiss. Members Absent: Julia Rueschemeyer and Diana Stein

There were between 50 and 70 people in attendance, and 37 of them spoke. Of those, 28 either criticized or questioned the wisdom of a 60-member council, while five speakers defended it or Town Meeting. Four speakers did not offer an opinion on a 60-member council.

Hanneke opened the meeting with an explanation of the handouts and summarized the current proposal. She explained that while the number of councilors in the proposal has changed, the Commission has yet to discuss the distribution of those councilors, or their terms, or whether they would all be elected at once, or have staggered terms. She stated that by a communications mistake, this was not a formally noticed meeting of the Charter Commission, so the Commissioners will be very careful not to say anything that could be taken as deliberating. Due to the number of people wishing to speak, a three minute limit was put on speakers in order to try to get to everyone.

Rick Hood: A 60-member council is still much too large for all members to be heard and have their rationale debated, with little to no chance of minds being changed by the debate. The 13-member council proposed is a good size, although larger than I would prefer...If a 60-member council is thought to be a compromise that will somehow make this proposal easier to pass in a town-wide vote, I would reconsider that thinking.

Leo Maley: There's nothing worse than term limits. It's a bad idea for a city council to be only able to cut the budget. (Hanneke responds: state law says a council can't cut the budget without the mayor's consent.)

Cynthia Brubaker: I applaud thinking outside the box. Thank you for not dividing into factions. Is in favor of more councilors rather than fewer. Proud of Amherst's huge civic engagement.

Paul Musgrave (UMass political science professor): Larger legislative bodies usually don't increase representation. With smaller bodies, it's easier for people who don't have the time to go to every meeting but can keep track of what's going on. A 60-person council would have "all the disadvantages without any advantages." The most important civic ritual is voting.

Laura Draucker: Supports mayor/council of 10 to 15. Not everyone has the flexibility, interest or time to get so involved with a 60-member council: they may have children or elderly parents, transportation challenges, or evening jobs. It's easy to engage with citizens when there's one person representing a precinct.

Deborah Leonard: It's logically flawed for a nine-member commission to say that a group that size can't represent diverse interests. "It makes no sense to me."

Abbie Jensen: A 60-person council doesn't exist anywhere else and is a "bad idea." When voters go to the polls and are faced with either Town Meeting or "a rather bizarre model of 60," they'll choose the one they know about.

Adam Lussier: Are you truly listening to us or listening to what you want to hear? A binary vote is needed. When commission members say they won't go lower than 60, it doesn't sound like compromise. Four members said they were elected to preserve Town Meeting. "This is a joke." Some members are "clever, cunning and slick." "Stop playing us for fools." (Weiss stands up and says there should be no name-calling or disparagement of motives; Gage says "we're all trying our best." Jensen says she didn't hear any name-calling. Hanneke said she will call out speakers who go over the line; members need to take the heat, but speakers should keep it respectful.)

Niels la Cour: It's unreasonable to ask a large portion of citizens to go to meetings, but it's reasonable to ask them to pay attention to a mayor and four councilors. Town Meeting has cost the town hundreds of millions of dollars in opportunities lost for revenue. The schools have been in decline for 20 years. Amherst is not living up to its potential and doesn't need a unique form of government. Thirteen is too big, and 60 is "folly."

John Coull: 60 is not a viable option. "In the name of compromise, you may have poisoned the process." Presenting voters with no real options would make your work go for naught.

Andy Steinberg: Council/manager/mayor is the most common form of local government in the U.S.

Barry O'Connell: 60 is "grotesque and unworkable." It's "cynical" to keep a form of Town Meeting, which is inadequate to our needs. Town Meeting has stymied development, and "there's no way a 60-member council will improve on that record."

Dick Bentley: For more people involved in decision-making. At 60, "bring 'em on."

Alice Swift: Impressed with way residents are involved in government. It's a big jump to run for a council if there's only one per precinct. Liked proposal for 60-person legislative council and a five-person executive council, but was told it's illegal. There's a problem with Town Meeting listening to non-facts that don't get rebutted. It's not impossible to have back-and-forth debates with 60 councilors. Amherst has a problem with some precincts having large numbers of students, making it hard to get balanced representation.

Christiana Healey: "Appalled" by 60-person council. With 13 councilors, voters get to know candidates and hold them accountable, and get information before voting. 60 is "just a small Town Meeting."

Todd Tripp: People say Town Meeting provides greater participation, but there's an irony here: for those with young families or demanding jobs, it discourages and blocks participation. It's hard to find out what TM members stand for, but with 60 it would be hard to learn what they're doing. It's a "disturbing model."

Megan McConaughey: Doctorate in political science, moved to Amherst 18 months ago. Charter plan increases participation with petition, initiative and recall provisions. Urges finding something a majority in town can support. A 60-member council is "worse than any of the alternatives we have."

Lisa Solowiej: A smaller council would be a check on incompetence and corruption. We need an easily identifiable ombudsperson for each precinct; with 60, that constituent link is lost. A 60-member council would dilute the relationship between councilors and voters. Wants return to 13-member council.

Maurianne Adams: A 60-person council wouldn't be the only thing in town. Doesn't dispute remarks about irresponsible actions of some Town Meeting members lobbied by Yes for Amherst, but that shouldn't "tar the entirety of us." TMCC working to improve system, with meetings of candidates and more to come on social media. Sixty councilors could represent the range of views in a precinct. Neighborhood associations "fabulous."

Ted Parker: Even in New York and Chicago, which have large councils, there's only one councilor per district; in New York, each represents 160,000 residents. It's a job. It's impossible to make good decisions in a body of 60, and it would be hard for everyone to get to speak. Since the last charter proposal lost by 14 votes, there was no movement to reform Town Meeting, and only now, "with a gallows prepared in the town square," is there urgency to change. I find that...interesting. "I want to be able to question the motives of the people I vote for."

Katherine Appy: A 60-person council would have to meet more than once a month, perhaps weekly to make informed decisions. It's hard to study something for months and have only three to five minutes to explain it to Town Meeting. 60 is far too large.

Roger Vanner: Grad student in political science. Voter turnout suffers greatly if there is no way for residents to easily know who they're voting for. There was a 13 percent difference between voter turnout in Amherst and Northampton in recent local elections (Nick comment: there was a much bigger gap in previous elections). A 60-person council might give more power to the mayor than intended. Not every member would have to prepare well.

Jackie Churchill: How representative would the 60 members be?

Richard Roznoy: "Flabbergasted" at proposal for 60, which is "not that much different from what we have" and promotes "backwards constituency." Give voters a clear choice, and if it doesn't fly, it doesn't fly.

Johanna Neumann: Loss of faith in Town Meeting when it threw away \$34 million. 60 is too unwieldy, and even 13 seems too big. In response to Alice Swift, you don't have to be elected to get on the leadership ladder; it can be done through advocacy or service on a commission. I'm worried about the potential antagonistic relationship between council and mayor; some councilors would be running for mayor and might want to make the mayor look bad. But not totally opposed to a mayor. The manager should be hired by a council and all should work together to move the town's interests forward.

Jim Brissette: Regular people struggling to keep their homes. We have both a revenue problem and a spending problem. A 13-person council and a mayor would be more collaborative. Wants clear choice; a 60-person council is not accountable. Challenges people to name their 24 Town Meeting members and how they voted. We're not using money wisely.

Michael Hanke: Lived in Brooklyn for 25 years and saw councilor stand up to Mayor Giuliani. Our priorities should be public safety, education and infrastructure. Northampton has a successful mayor/council system. Wouldn't vote for 60-member council. We can't afford failure; fears charter process is "colossal waste of time."

Andrew Parker-Renga: Just got elected to Town Meeting. A 60-member council is unreasonable; we already have trouble participating in government. We need a leadership plan; I don't know who runs this town. If you want a seat at the table, you should have to earn it; with Town Meeting, you can just sign up and go make decisions. "Are we holding on to this to keep power?"

Chris Foley Pilsner: Got elected to Town Meeting easily, but faced with huge packets of material and complex zoning questions while caring for a toddler. Watched "group think" run across the room at Town Meeting. Wants evidence-based decisions. If one of 60 councilors was unprepared, no one would notice. I want people who don't know their stuff to be exposed and voted off. Wants elected officials to "sweat" because it's their livelihood. Wants experts making decisions. Juries need only 12 people to deliberate in murder cases. "To put the fate of my kid in the hands of 60 people doesn't make sense."

Matt Blumenfeld: A 60-member council doesn't impact diversity. Wants clear choice of Town Meeting or something else.

Nicola Usher: Elected to Town Meeting with 119 votes, but only knows six of them. Mayoral system not unprecedented for town this size. A 60-member council is "a really bad idea," and commission should go back to 13 or nine. Wants "fewer people hanging up on us."

Andrew Grant-Thomas: Town Meeting has "calcified and entrenched factions." Listserv involves strategizing, not policy. Wants a way to loosen the hardened battle lines.

Mary Ann Grim: Likes mayor/manager/council. 13 is a good number. Wants "true choice." Compromise didn't succeed.

Jerry Guidera: "People favor change here." Compromise is DOA. "Nobody's going to vote for this," and meetings about it will get larger and angrier.

Janet McGowan: Mayor would have to raise \$50,000. Amherst recognized as one of the best towns in the state: it's fiscally sound, has reserves, low-income housing, a strong school system, and open space. "It's not such a hellish place." We're working to make it better. What towns work better than ours? Northampton not comparable because it's bigger.

Larry Ely: Town Meeting is at the end of the deliberations and second-guesses boards that studied issues for months. It's an amateur structure run by operatives who know how to work the system. "Amherst has done very well despite Town Meeting."

David Ahlfeld: Sixty is "unworkable." Doubts there are enough candidates to give the attention required, and it's probably impractical to manage the meetings. I have one representative in the Legislature, State Senate, House of Representatives and two in the Senate, but I need six in my precinct? "It seems ridiculous."

Susan Waite: Go with something that's been tested. Don't try to create a new form of government. We're not that special.

Alex Baker: We've forgotten how to do small government.

Leo Maley: Any form will have some level of dysfunction. Give us something clearly different to put before the voters.

Grabbe presented the information he received from Newton. Weiss stated that he really appreciated all the feedback and listened to it.

Hanneke adjourned the meeting at 9:00 pm.