

Amherst Charter Commission Minutes

Feedback Session – March 30, 2017

7:00 pm, Jones Library Woodbury Room

Members Present: Diana Stein, Andy Churchill, Mandi Jo Hanneke, Nick Grabbe, Meg Gage, Tom Fricke, Julia Rueschemeyer, Gerry Weiss (at 7:15); Members Absent: Irv Rhodes

16 Members of the Public were present

Call to Order at 7:05 pm

Churchill began the Feedback Session (cross posted as a Commission Meeting due to a quorum of Commissioners present) with an introduction to the three handouts presented. He described the handouts and the purpose of the Charter Commission. He summarized the current proposed changes and the values identified by the Commission. He also spoke about potential structural options that the Commission has also discussed.

At 7:28, he ceded the floor. Gage stated that she had spoken with Rhodes, who wanted to emphasize that other proposals are being considered and this is a preliminary proposal subject to change. Gage also stated that she believes the fracturing/divisiveness in town is as problematic as the Town Meeting style legislature.

At 7:31, the Commission opened up the floor to feedback, comments and questions.

Richard Roznoy: He's happy to hear the proposal is not set in stone. He asks about the background behind the 5-4 legislative vote. He believes a 13 member council is too large— it would be inefficient, self-defeating. His preference is for a 7 member council - -5 precinct and 2 at large.

Hanneke explained the 5-4 vote for legislative represented a preference for council over town meeting. The 13 member size was a more consensus vote that represents a recognition that the loss of town meeting is a loss of a lot of public participation and that a smaller 7 or 9 member council might be a bridge too far.

Roznoy encouraged the council to go smaller and give a clearer choice to the town. Larger wards might also bring more of the town together, as smaller precincts encourage parochialism.

Rueschemeyer corrected Hanneke that the 5-4 was for a “mayor-council with robust citizen participation”

Weiss commented that the 5-4 vote reflected a desire to give voters something clear to accept or reject. He also stated that another way to look at it is that the best thing for the town would be if the commission could do a hybrid government that doesn't create winners and losers. He does agree that a smaller council (below 13) is probably better.

Churchill talked about his conversation with UMass professors that said that a larger council in a mayor form could work, but if a manager was the head executive with the council overseeing the manager, a 13 member council would be too big.

Hilda Greenbaum: This discussion is upsetting. She doesn't see checks and balances in this proposal, she wonders whether the mayor and council will get paid and how much, and she doesn't see how this proposal helps transparency. She came to support the underdogs and wants to know what the town will do if the charter passes with a bare majority. She worries people won't have a say in anything getting done in town. The proposal is much too autocratic. It needs more citizen input. She also doesn't like term limits.

Kurt Wise: He's not interested in a plan that only a bare majority supports. He believes the town can do much better, with a plan that would garner higher approval—there must be a middle ground. He feels like the Charter Commission process started with minds made up already and that all of the "listening" is for show, not to actually listen and change minds. Urges the Commission to move to a middle ground. Town Meeting is currently too large, but 13 is too small. Maybe 3-6 councilors per ward, with 10 at large councilors. He states the system already seems weighted to those who have the time and it seems like there are tweaks to Town Meeting that could be made to make it more efficient.

Rueschemeyer stated she was thinking the same thing and that the Commission is still trying.

Ted Parker: He is equally passionate about a mayor council. Town Meeting is not representative of town at large. It doesn't give a voice to all residents of Amherst, especially those who don't have time to participate. The schools issue showed Town Meeting's ineffectiveness: Town Meeting should be voting on the merits of bonding out, not the merits of the plan. He stated that with Town Meeting, the town ends up with decisions made from parochial interests vetoing the public good. There are a lot of people whose only opportunity to participate is to vote.

Judith Seelig: She's contacted a lot of her Town Meeting representatives over the years, and has never gotten a response. Town Meeting is an opaque unit. When she lived in Cambridge, they had rank choice voting for all 11 candidates. She hopes we look at that option. In Cambridge, it was easy to reach out to council members, and she would get an answer and information from them. It was a functional system with lots of give and take.

Rueschemeyer asks whether the Cambridge mayor had a lot of leadership clout.

Seelig states that it depended on the personality of the mayor.

Ginny Hamilton: She is heartbroken over the school vote. Her experience of Amherst government results in a distrust in democracy. Democracy is 50%, but the town just failed to go forward with a project that had over 50% support in town. What she's seen is that town meeting representatives never get calls or never return calls of residents. She believes trust in town boards, committees and volunteers is totally lacking – volunteers get hung out to dry. The Town has poor resource management. Town meeting was a great process for a different era but for today, with 30,000+ residents, it is not.

Jaqueline Maidana: When she lived in Northampton, she didn't feel "heard" As a Town Meeting member, she feels heard; she doesn't think a mayoral system works in a lot of towns. It's erroneous to blame Town Meeting over and over again for the school vote. The problems is boards who rubberstamp things that need to be looked at more closely.

David Ahlfeld: Favors mayor/council. Town Meeting is dysfunctional and like a club. Distraught by school vote; Town Meeting overrode the will of voters. In his precinct, there were only three candidates for eight Town Meeting seats, so he wrote in his own name. "How crazy is that?"

Marilyn Blaustein: Election to Town Meeting is mostly determined by name recognition. Boards and committees should be trusted more. Those not in Town Meeting don't have a voice. It's a broken system.

Steve Schreiber: At the TMCC forum, it was the first time as a Town Meeting member he's had to state his positions before voters. Many candidates don't understand Town Meeting, or the fact that if elected, they have an obligation to be informed on the issues. He sees the biggest problem of Town meeting as not needing to pay attention; being on a much smaller council would obligate councilors to pay attention to all issues in town. In a large legislature, some legislators can pass the "being informed" to others.

Adam Lussier: Proposal is "potentially great solution" and is excited to get chance to vote on it.

Hilda Greenbaum: Town Meeting is contested where there are homeowners. Where there are renters or students, the residents aren't involved in local government. Committees aren't doing their homework—they never explore the opposition.

Richard Roznoy: He got elected as a write-in. Planning Board is too big. Please reduce it to 7 members. It is important to have a Finance Committee-like body.

Steve Schreiber: Agree with Roznoy—planning board should be reduced in size. Large Committees and Town meeting uses a lot of volunteer capital.

Gerry Weiss: Email addresses should be mandatory for Town Meeting members. "I'm not happy with what we have" in town government now. A large size creates the likelihood of representing constituents.

Meg Gage: Town Meeting "a red-hot cauldron." Wants "leadership development," or the opportunity for new people to get involved in government. Worried that if there's no Town Meeting, those making decisions will be more disconnected and elite.

Jaqueline Maidana: TMCC is working to fix what's broken.

Ginny Hamilton: Has lived in Cambridge, Somerville and Boston, all with mayor/council systems, and there were multiple ways to get involved. There are many people who don't have the availability to do town meeting, that would like to have a say and be involved.

Ted Parker: planning is contentious and complicated.

Steve Schreiber: Planning Board members should be appointed, but the person appointing them should be elected.

Kurt Wise: What about a survey? Wants more responsiveness; worried about winner-take-all system. Supports a larger legislature because a larger group is more responsive than a small group. Questioned how responsive elections are.

Ed Wilfert: Hopes that if the commission is not unanimous, that both a majority and a minority report will be issued.

Hilda Greenbaum: Important to have intellectual and ideological diversity; where is policy be initiated—questions why the town isn't following the master plan, if it said: "we like old Amherst"

Gerry Weiss: The warrant process doesn't allow for quick enough decision-making. a 60-person council would be more participatory.

Meeting adjourned at 9 pm.

Respectfully Submitted,

Mandi Jo Hanneke & Nick Grabbe