

Amherst Charter Commission Minutes

Feedback Session – April 5, 2017

10:00 am, Jones Library Woodbury Room

Members Present: Diana Stein, Mandi Jo Hanneke, Nick Grabbe, Meg Gage, Julia Rueschemeyer; Members Absent: Irv Rhodes, Andy Churchill, Tom Fricke, Gerry Weiss
Approximately 25-30 Members of the Public were present

Call to Order at 10:06 am

Hanneke gave an introduction to the handouts and the proposal as it currently stands.

Elissa Rubinstein: There are problems with a 13-person council. Would the race for mayor be a popularity contest? What about character and expertise? There should be more than one councilor per precinct. In terms of accountability, there's no difference between 13 and 60. One person per precinct would be a huge burden.

Bernie Kubiak: Professional management is crucial. The schools, the Housing Authority and Jones Library have a professional person in charge. I don't understand the different terms for district and at-large councilors. Teddy Roosevelt said, "Depoliticize government," but this is highly politicized. Two year terms would put councilors in "constant campaign mode." Participatory budgeting is troublesome; it should not be a "grab bag" for councilors. Two-thirds of towns our size are run by a manager.

Joan Burgess: Likes Town Meeting. Framingham set the mayor's pay at \$187,000, councilors at \$5,000, the chair \$7,500. Would like more elected committees and term limits (for committees).

Adrienne Terrizzi: Doesn't want to deepen divisions. Likes web page. Likes a number of aspects of draft proposal like additional options for elections, the public forums, etc.

Johanna Neumann: Initially liked Town Meeting, but now it doesn't serve public interest. Town Meeting overreached on school building project; the vote was on bond authorization. She called members and some hung up on her while others yelled at her. Wants more accountability. In Baltimore, there was a mayor/council system and big ideas were on the agenda. We need bold action. Likes term limits and public financing to defend against corruption, and ranked choice voting. The devil's in the details.

Maurianne Adams: Feedback form was biased. Sees Amherst as town, not like Northampton. A mayor would have no more ability to talk to UMass and Amherst College than now exists. Favors smaller Select Board with 60-person legislative council and separation and balance of powers, and coordinated problem-solving. Can't imagine broad participation unless it is meaningful—one councilor is not helpful and 6 per precinct is manageable.

Mike Hanke: What's Amherst's population? 38,000 total residents, 28,000 full-time, with 9,000 to 10,000 students living in the community 9 months per year. But downtown looks like a town

with only 10,000 people. Town Meeting is cumbersome, with no place where the buck stops. Wants partnership with UMass. There aren't enough firefighters or police officers, and the high school needs to replace the track Potholes are bad. Accountability needed to vote out of office. I know of six people who could be mayor. Right now, the most powerful person in town is not elected.

Marilyn Denny: Hates current form of government. There's no ability to move things forward and do the things residents need. Cites 25 year old study of septic systems and sewers. Tried to talk to Town Meeting members, and not one called to offer help. There's no oversight, and politics is driven by NIMBYism. We need radical change.

Lee Edwards: Town Meeting members see no need to represent the town. Need political responsibility with respect for expertise. Amherst does not have a huge population and has an insufficient forum for representation of the entire town.

Heather Sheldon: There's no way to figure out which Town Meeting candidates to vote for, even when motivated to do so—the information is just not there and each voter has a finite amount of time. I can research only two candidates.

Karla Rasche: Town Meeting older and whiter than general population. Those with children or night jobs can't participate. Notion of politics entering the debate is a “scare tactic.” Representative Town Meeting is neither representative nor town meeting. Open Town Meeting is a “beautiful mess” that is pure democracy. RTM strips it of that – it lacks accountability and connection between TM members and residents.

Lisa Solowiej: Schools are falling apart. She emailed and called Town Meeting members and was repulsed. We're driving out parents because of high taxes. Leverett and Shutesbury are looking better for parents of young children. Wants a strong mayor, responsive council.

Richard Roznoy: There was a Planning and Zoning Commission in the town that I lived in in Connecticut. Worried about “tyranny of the minority.”

Ellen Brout Lindsey: Can you please explain what Participatory Budgeting is and how it works?

Gage gave a brief explanation.

Janice Ratner: What about the operating budget?

Mandi Jo Hanneke: It would mimic the current procedure.

Adam Lussier: What is the commission listening for?

Alisa Brewer: The Select Board will make recommendation on Charter Commission's proposal. I got elected to Town Meeting and it was easy to get involved. I opposed last commission's proposal. Town Meeting is not always accessible to everybody.

Michael Alpert: There's no consensus in the public at large.

Michelle Spirko: There's an animosity to professional skills. Mayor on School Committee could depoliticize it. Town Meeting is not debating, and can't adequately respond to misinformation. It's not an appropriate forum for dialogue.

Kursten Holabird: Appalled at Town Meeting action on schools; misinformation not corrected. Too many members to educate. One said, "I don't represent Precinct 6; I just vote on what I want."

Elissa Rubenstein: Committees are a brick foundation, with town meeting reacting to what they come up with.

Meeting was adjourned at 12:04 pm

Respectfully Submitted,

Nick Grabbe and Mandi Jo Hanneke