



Town of Amherst, Massachusetts

Charter Commission

Preliminary Report and Charter

July 2017

Dear Amherst neighbors,

The Charter Commission is pleased to present its preliminary proposal for a revised form of government for our town. We are looking for feedback from **you** as we continue to refine our proposal.

Sixteen months ago, the voters elected a Charter Commission of nine people with widely varying perspectives on how government should work in Amherst, and on how much change was needed. In that sense, we are a good representation of the diversity of viewpoints in our town on this topic. Some of us wanted to keep Town Meeting. Some of us wanted a Mayor and a Town Council. Some of us wanted to keep a professional Town Manager.

But rather than just fighting things out from our respective corners, we decided instead to go out into the community and listen. We asked people what they liked about our government, what they thought could be improved, what challenges our town faces, and how our government could be better structured to handle those challenges.

We heard a lot, and we distilled it into the following key values that guided our work:

- Citizen participation
- A clear voice for Amherst
- “Representativeness” (demographics and interests)
- Effective, deliberative, and efficient structures
- Accountability and transparency
- A culture of tolerance and respect
- Strategic and long-term planning
- Avoidance of big-money politics

We explored various proposals, reached some dead ends, and changed directions a few times. This isn’t easy work! But we persisted – and we believe the result is a set of recommendations that reflect the varied interests of our residents.

After more than 60 Commission meetings, workshops and feedback sessions, 400 written submissions, 200 in-person responses, and hundreds of emails, Facebook comments, and

conversations at the supermarket, a majority of this Commission endorses the preliminary proposal that follows, by a vote of 5 in favor, 3 against, and 1 abstaining.

None of us got all that we wanted, but we came together to put forward a proposal that keeps the professional management that many of us value, gives us a legislative body that operates regularly and year-round, builds stronger constituent relationships between voters and their representatives, adds new ways for residents to participate and be heard, and improves communication about what we want our town to look like going forward.

We will be collecting additional feedback between now and September 29th, including a public hearing at Town Hall (Town Room) on Thursday, August 31st at 7pm. We also welcome your feedback via our online feedback form, available at the Charter Commission’s webpage (go to www.amherstma.gov and click on Boards & Committees, then Charter Commission), or via email at charter@amherstma.gov. Additional public feedback sessions will also be scheduled – check our webpage for more information, and to sign up for email notifications.

Following this letter are text and graphic summaries of the preliminary charter, and then the full text of the preliminary charter itself. It will be up to the voters to decide, on March 27, 2018, whether to stay with the government we have or to put their faith in our proposal. Thank you for your interest in this process. We look forward to hearing from you!

Sincerely,

Andy Churchill
Chair, Amherst Charter Commission

Members of the Charter Commission

Andrew Churchill, Chair
Thomas Fricke
Margaret Gage

Nicholas Grabbe, Clerk
Mandi Jo Hanneke, Vice Chair
Irvin Rhodes

Julia Rueschemeyer
Diana Stein
Gerald Weiss

The Preliminary Charter at a Glance

PROPOSED FORM OF GOVERNMENT	CURRENT FORM OF GOVERNMENT
<p>Town Council</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 13 members: 3 at-large, 2 per each of five wards (1 ward = 2 precincts) • Elected to 2-year terms; all elected at once • Meets at least monthly, year round • Exercises policy leadership and legislative powers; able to set its own agenda for ongoing discussions • Calls Public Forums three times a year • Writes and passes bylaws (including zoning changes, which require 2/3 vote) • Votes on budget prepared by Town Manager and makes recommendations on budget • Votes on citizen initiatives and acts on topics requested by group petition • Hires and evaluates Town Manager • Sets priorities for Town Manager • Appoints Planning Board and Zoning Board of Appeals • Approves Town Manager's appointments • Has Finance Subcommittee and creates other subcommittees as necessary <p>Town Manager</p> <p><i>Continuing Duties</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administers Town's daily operations and implements Town Council policies • Appoints department heads and most committee members • Supervises municipal employees • Coordinates budget process and proposes budget to Town Council <p><i>New Duties</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chief Executive Officer • Delivers annual State of Town address with Town Council President • Appoints Community Participation Officer 	<p>Town Meeting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 240 members: 24 for each of 10 precincts, 14 ex-officio • Elected to 3-year staggered terms • Two regular meetings per year (10-13 nights total) with Special Town Meetings as needed, convened by Select Board • Serves legislative role approving proposals, but can't set own agenda • Votes on items presented by Select Board and citizen petitions after substantial warrant process • Votes on bylaws (including zoning changes, which require 2/3 vote) • Votes on budget prepared by Town Manager and recommended by Select Board • Moderator appoints Finance Committee <p>Select Board</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chief Executive Officers • Exercises policy leadership • 5 members elected at large to 3-year staggered terms • Presents warrant items to Town Meeting • Makes recommendations on budget • Hires and evaluates Town Manager • Sets priorities for Town Manager • Approves Manager's appointments and makes appointments to other boards <p>Town Manager</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administers Town's daily operations and implements Select Board policies • Appoints department heads and most committee members • Supervises municipal employees • Coordinates budget process and prepares budget recommendations to Select Board

Other Highlights of the Preliminary Charter

Local Elections

- Moved to November (from March)
- Held in odd-numbered years only; biannual elections reduce costs
- Voting on “Election Day” makes it clear when local elections happen
- Fewer, more competitive races intended to improve voter attention and turnout
- First Town Council election in November 2018; preliminary election at least five weeks earlier
- First election for other offices in November 2019
- Ranked-choice voting to be studied for implementation by 2021, to ensure majority vote for elected officials

Resident Participation

- Ward Councilors provide point of contact for residents regarding government
- Ward meetings with Councilors at least twice a year for regular communication
- Annual public forums on budget, master plan and schools; opportunity for residents to engage with Town officials on these key issues
- Community Participation Officer promotes and supports diverse resident participation in government
- Ward-level elections and webpage for all candidates support entry-level access to office
- Residents continue to serve on boards and committees
- Residents can petition Town Council, force meetings, and veto Town Council actions
- Town Council to consider participatory budgeting – residents suggest and vote on capital projects to fund

Planning and Zoning

- Master plan adopted by Town Council as foundation for planning and zoning decisions
- Planning Board reduced to 7 members, appointed by Town Council
- Zoning Board of Appeals increased to 5 members, appointed by Town Council
- Redevelopment Authority: 4 members appointed by the Town Manager (currently elected)
- New Board of License Commissioners appointed to reduce licensing tasks for Town Council

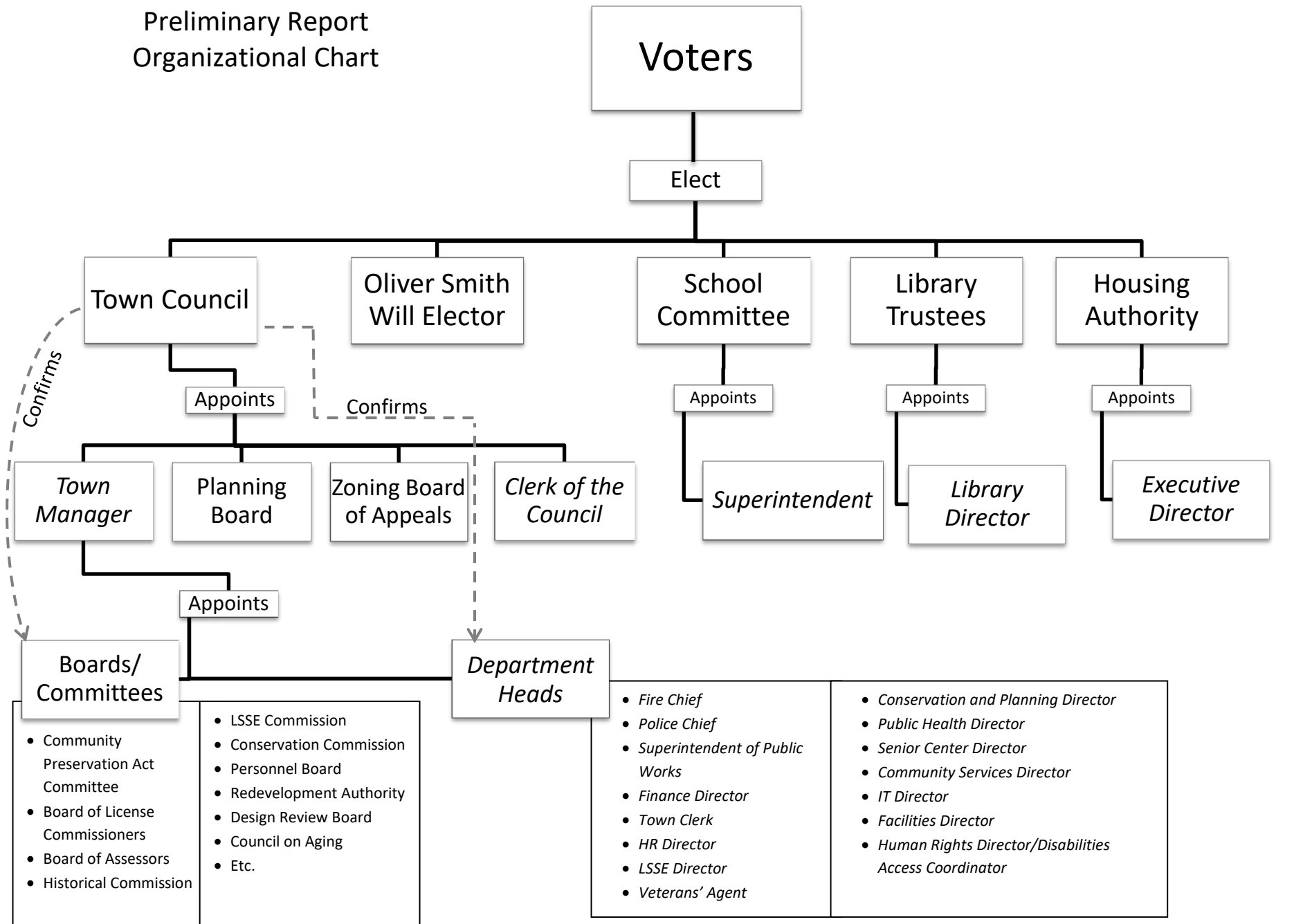
Other Elected Offices

- School Committee: remains 5 elected members; terms reduced to 2 years (from 3)
- Library Board of Trustees: remains 6 elected members; terms reduced to 2 years (from 3)
- Housing Authority: remains 5 members; elected members reduced to 3 (from 4), with 1 tenant member appointed and 1 governor appointee; terms reduced to 2 years (from 5)
- Oliver Smith Will Elector: term increased to 2 years (from 1)

Finance and Fiscal Procedures

- Retain Budget Coordinating Group and Joint Capital Planning Committee
Finance Committee becomes Finance Subcommittee of the Town Council; may include non-Councilor members

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 Organizational Chart



Italics = Town employees