

Amherst Charter Commission
Sept. 5, 2017
Jones Library

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

Churchill began the listening session by describing the elements of the new charter, and noting that commission members represented a variety of perspectives.

Christina Platt says she's worried about "big money" influencing politics. Hanneke said spending on at-large council races would be similar to current School Committee campaigns. Rhodes called it "ludicrous" that some "big-bucks daddy" would be able to control the council. Rueschemeyer said that the legislative and executive branches are being collapsed, and it will require only 10 people to change zoning. Churchill said that participation is intense for the 240 people in Town Meeting, who represent themselves and don't have a relationship with constituents.

Mary Hoyer said she's concerned about the loss of participation.

Janet McGowan said Town Meeting members can't be controlled and accountability is improving. Rueschemeyer said it's likely that there will be a person in one's 24 Town Meeting representatives who represents what you believe. She said there could be public forums, online statements by candidates, and a participation officer without changing the whole form of government.

Emilie Hamilton said her neighbors called her and emailed her, and many are elderly who she feels she represents. Hanneke said that some Town Meeting members have said to residents, "I don't have to listen to you."

Churchill asked the group what they'd like to improve.

Ellen Middleton suggested term limits. Carol Pope said Town Meeting is becoming more democratic and responsive, and suggested a reduction in size. She criticized the provision of requiring 150 signatures to bring an issue to the council.

McGowan said of the top 20 school districts in the state, most have a Select Board/Town Meeting form of government. Churchill said that council elections will force candidates to reach outside their comfort zones.

Rhodes said that requiring only one signature to get on the Town Meeting ballot is "absurd," and it should be 50. Amherst's high taxes are squeezing out people on fixed income, and that has happened because of Town Meeting.

McGowan asserted that the minority report was not distributed. Hanneke said that the preliminary report was voted, and the minority insisted that it be as neutral as possible. The minority distributed a preliminary report and asked that it be distributed at a public hearing, and the commission did not prevent its placement on a table.

Toni Cunningham: Asked how a voter veto would work. Hanneke explained the process.

Sue Morrello: Money in campaigns her main concern.

Gretchen Fox: Town Meeting is a known quantity and she's afraid of a new form. Suggests that the Planning Board be elected.

Middleton said she's open to change and asked why the commission didn't propose a mayor. Churchill said the commission did discuss a mayor, but decided that professional management is too important. Stein said a manager has greater understanding, training, professionalism and statewide contacts.

Hoyer asked about stipends. Hanneke said they are a recognition of the time spent. Grabbe noted that in Greenfield councilors receive \$2,000 a year and in Northampton \$9,000 a year, so \$5,000 as recommended in the charter for councilors is halfway between.

Fox said Amherst is working well, so why change?

Carol Pope said that Town Meeting members are worried about development.

Platt said council jobs will go to the retired and the wealthy, and Amherst could become a mini-Cambridge or Berkeley.

McGowan said that since the council approves zoning and appoints the Planning Board, that's "circular" and there's no balance. She asked why November elections would be in off-years if the goal is to improve turnout. Stein asked how well informed about local issues are students who vote in great numbers in presidential elections, and noted the difficulty the town clerk has in finding enough election workers when town and national elections happen at the same time. "It's better to have town residents vote on town issues." Rueschemeyer said it's "worth going through the hassle" of getting special acts of the legislature.

Respectfully Submitted,
Nick Grabbe