



**State of the Town Address – Council President and Town Manager**

**[Charter Sec 2.2(c)]**

**State of the Town Address**

**It is an Honor and Privilege to serve as the First President of the Amherst Town Council. *I wish to thank my colleagues and assure them that I am still of sound body and mind although among my family and friends the idea that I retired is a standing joke.***

**Actually, the opportunity to serve as the first President of a new legislative body is both a rare opportunity and a challenge. Every day I find myself digging deep into my 50 years of education, professional experience, and life lessons learned. It is a good feeling, and I am grateful.**

**Let me start my remarks by stating something you have probably already concluded: the first Town Council of the City, otherwise known as the Town of Amherst, is an outstanding group of 13 very talented, dedicated and independently minded people. Perhaps more important, we deeply respect each other and focus on how our individual talents can contribute to an effective team. Experiencing that spirit is a real treat.**

**Tonight we are well represented and I ask you to stand and remain standing as I state your name and whom you represent:**

**Our three at Large Councilors are Alisa Brewer, Mandi Jo Hanneke, and Andy Steinberg.**

**Representing District 5 are Darcy Dumont and Shalini Bahl-Milne (who may be rushing back from Boston where she was a speaker at the Massachusetts Women's Conference).**

**District 4 representatives are Evan Ross and Steve Schreiber.**

**District 3 is represented by Dorothy Pam and George Ryan Pat De Angelis joins me in representing District 2.**

**In addition, Sarah Swartz and Cathy Schoen, who is not able to be here tonight, represent District 1.**

**And while each brings a valuable perspective, each strives to represent the voices of those who are not apparent in the body of the Council. Please recognize your first**

**Amherst Town Council.**

**Thank you.**

**Here at the one-year mark of our new government, it is appropriate to recognize the members of the Charter Commission. It is to you that we say thank you – most of the time!**

**The Charter is a thoughtful document reflecting the values and expectations of the residents of the Town. It includes a prescription for the type of responsive government that we all want and Councilors have embraced that challenge in ways even experienced elected officials could not predict. Of course, in the course of putting theory into practice, we have discovered some things that do not work so well...so, WE ARE keeping NOTES.**

**Thank you for all the thought each of you put into crafting our Town's Charter, fighting hard for the issues you felt were important, and moving forward with the residents as they voted after 80 years to change our form of government to the Council Manager Form we now know.**

**I am very happy to report that as of December 2<sup>nd</sup>, the Council has fulfilled all of first year and annual requirements of the Charter:**

- **We have held the required recurring Public forums on the Budget (2), Capital Projects, and the Master Plan; and the Schools have held their Public Forum.**
- **We have convened other Forums as required when we intend to spend money off cycle: -- for example, Station Road Bridge and Centennial Water Treatment Plant,**
- **We have conducted numerous hearings: - for example on the Regional School Budget and the Town's FY20 Budget**

**Each District Councilor has held no fewer than 3 District Meetings and some Councilors have held them as often as every other month; the at-large Councilors are often part of the District meetings as speakers and resources.**

**The number of office hours, neighborhood association meetings, and public events are too numerous to count –**

but a few examples are worth noting. Our town is well served, when 8 Councilors stand on the steps of Town Hall in recognition of the diversity of our Town, to read the proclamation for Tibet Day or Puerto Rico Heritage Day; or when Councilors are dispersed around the tables at the First ever Veterans Day Breakfast, in recognition of those who have served our country protecting the freedoms we cherish.

One of the most consistent comments we hear from residents is “we truly appreciate knowing who to call about issues in our district.” Therefore, we are working hard to learn constituent services and advocacy – it is not without its challenges and we will continue to work with the Town Manager to bring an ever more responsive government to the residents of the Town.

- **We formed 5 Standing Committees, several Ad hoc Committees, and other Committees including those required by the Charter -- such as Ranked Choice Voting and Participatory Budgeting**
- **We adopted Interim and then Permanent Rules of Procedure which we keep updating**

**We have complete the review of all our Zoning Bylaws and we will complete the review of our General Bylaws within the required one year of appointing the Councils Bylaw Review Committee, chaired by the very able Bob Ritchie.**

**Let me pause with this and reflect on how fortunate we are to have right here in Town, leading experts on many issues critical to the success of our town. They bravely apply to be on our many Town Committees, share their expertise in areas such as water supply and contaminants; energy and climate action; and housing; to name a few. On behalf of**

**the Town Council and the Town of Amherst, we thank you for your past and ongoing service; your willingness to provide us with sound advice; and put up with our sometimes far ranging – or even naïve – questions.**

**Looking across the audience, I recognize many people who served on Town Meeting; Committees; and special advisory boards. You make Amherst the kind of community it is, whatever the form of government.**

**Another example of successful continuity in transition is the first ever appointed Board of License Commissioners – formerly the job of the Select Board. It is chaired by former Select Board Chair, Doug Slaughter. Not only are we all fortunate to have Doug lead this talented group, but all noticed, when, with the significant assistance of our Police Department earlier this year, the newly appointed**

**Board was required to use its enforcement authority to initially suspend and then ultimately revoke the liquor license of a business that was in egregious violation of both the law and our community's expectations.**

**Some other notable accomplishments of the year include:**

**Establishing the Energy and Climate Action Committee on January 28, 2019, and on November 18, adopting the recommended ambitious goals by a unanimous vote of the Council.**

**With regard to affordable housing, we have transferred the East Street School to the Amherst Affordable Housing Trust with financial support from the Community Preservation Act Money. We also voted to support the property at 132 Northampton Road for 28 affordable studio apartments.**

**The second action allowed us to test Section 8.1 of the Charter, and call a four-hour Open Meeting of the Residents at which there were no fewer than 125 people.**

**While this issue continues to engender strong feelings, it also served to demonstrate how essential it is to listen and learn, and to do everything it takes to let all voices be heard.**

**We voted to continue to improve our roads and sidewalks – an ongoing challenge; install a temporary (use quotation marks) bridge on Station Road; open the Mill Street Bridge; and begin the process of bringing the Centennial Water Plant located in Pelham back on line – thus sustaining access to our third water source. Other purchases of land with CPA money helped secure our watershed.**

**Our recreation facilities continue to improve and grow. In addition to improvements at Groff Park, a recent grant**

**from the state to build a playground at Kendrick Park helps us meet our commitment to focus our energy on the vibrancy of our downtown.**

**The Council was prominently in attendance at the 6 listening sessions regarding the School's proposal to the Massachusetts School Building Authority and unanimously endorsed their vision for a 600 Student new or renovated schools. We are enormously gratified that, just two days ago, the MSBA approved our application, opening the door to millions of state dollars to benefit generations to come.**

**These accomplishments are all important. But as we move forward, we are facing several significant Challenges:**

- **Long-deferred capital Investments in town facilities requiring the Council, School Committee, and Library Trustees to work together as the Council develops a**

**plan to meet our community's needs, now and in the decades to come. More than 150 residents attended the 4 recent listening sessions, and comments are still being solicited through December 20. Please make sure we hear from you: just go to [www.amehrstma.gov/capital](http://www.amehrstma.gov/capital).**

- **The Urgency of Climate Action and the Implementation of the Climate Action Plan to achieve our ambitious goals. This includes realizing the promise of our own Zero Energy Bylaw for Town buildings as we develop our capital plan.**
- **Continuing to pass responsible Capital and Operating Budgets that respect the difficult balance between our aspirations and the circumstances of all our residents.**
- **Master Plan modifications and Bylaw Revision.**

- **Finally, attempting to make the Councilors' jobs more manageable, so it will be attractive to other in future Council elections. Maybe I should have put that first...**

**Having said a great deal about the Council, let me now focus on the Town Manager and our outstanding town staff. The change in government represented by the Charter is predominantly that of a change in the legislative body. What has allowed us to make this transition without totally disrupting our community is the extraordinary skill and dedication of our Town staff. During this entire transition, you were still protected by our first responders – Police, Fire/EMS, and The Department of Public Works; the streets were plowed, you received water and sewer services, you were able to vote, pay your taxes, get a dog license, or a building permit. In other words, our Town staff kept the place moving forward while we have been transitioning to this new legislative body.**

**In August, we evaluated the Town Manager's performance with input from residents, committees, staff and all Councilors. Paul Bockelman was hired in August 2016, not knowing what form of government he would be working under 2 ½ years later. He has been key to the transition to our new Legislative Body, and to the overall excellence of Town services. We recognized this both in his recent evaluation and in his contract extension to August 31, 2023.**

**As a Council, we wish to recognize the Town Manager and the staff for their outstanding work on behalf of the Residents of Amherst. Will all the Town staff present please rise and be recognized.**

**In closing, please allow me to make some final observations about The Charter, the Community**

## **Response to the new form of Government, and being President of the Council**

- **The Charter is a remarkable document, but no document is perfect. We are taking notes and at some point will file some changes to the Charter, but we are not there yet. A Charter review is required every 10 years AND YEARS ENDING IN four – That is 2024.**
- **The Community Response to the new form of government includes some strong advocates and others who are “waiting and seeing.” Nevertheless, the level of interest in local affairs and the commitment to build a better community together remain strong, and we are grateful for the active involvement of so many residents. It is what makes Amherst... interesting.**

- **We have our “regulars” who attend every Town Council meeting, but we also get a full house when there is a neighborhood issue on the agenda, like a new bridge or a proposal for 28-mixed income Studio Apartments in a neighborhood. We constantly have people talk to us about some agenda item or the length of a meeting because they have watched it on Amherst Media. In addition, I want to specially recognize the tireless efforts of Amherst Media, the League of Women Voters and Stan Rosenberg in producing Byline with Stan.**
- **Leading any organization means balancing one’s democratic ideals with the need to come to closure and move decisions forward. This is certainly true on the Council, where the President has few powers but many obligations. I want to thank my colleagues for**

**their forbearance as I have taken the first stab at defining this role. They are more than willing to let me know when they feel that as President I have overstepped my bounds! They are, however, always gracious about it, often saying such things, as “I am not concerned about this President”; however, “we are setting precedent for the future.”**

**After one year, we have barely scratched the surface, of course, but I hope that all future Presidents will find the right balance, always remembering one thing: Everyone is elected. We stand as equals.**

**Leadership means hearing everyone and weaving what you have heard into potential solutions that you are willing to have tested and amended along the way. And if you cannot do this, your colleagues can pick a replacement at any meeting.**

**Please join me in recognizing the boundless energy  
and deep commitment that the Council has brought  
to this important transition for our community.**