

Statement from Commission Minority

Only 5 members of the 9-member elected Charter Commission support the Charter proposal, which would convert Amherst from a town to a city form of government. We regret that this Commission was unable to create a consensus document that might have bridged deep divisions in Amherst. The majority refused to consider improving our current Town Meeting and Select Board. Nonetheless, we in the minority participated with integrity, creativity and commitment to the process, and continue to be invested in Amherst's future. Here is why we oppose the Charter proposal.

Amherst is already a well-governed and managed Town, with a Town Manager, elected Select Board, and elected Town Meeting:

- Amherst finances are stable, with an AA+ bond rating with large reserves.
- We have an efficient and responsive professional Town management.
- Amherst's rich and feisty political culture is characterized by exceptionally high citizen participation in government through Town Meeting and dozens of Town committees. Town Meeting continues to develop mechanisms of accountability and transparency, such as recently adopted electronic voting, direct public e-mail access to members and annual forums to meet candidates.
- Our public schools are very highly rated.
- Amherst is ranked the 4th best college town in the United States (September 16, 2016; CollegeRank.net).
- Our community is culturally and educationally rich, with our state's flagship university, two colleges, concerts, museums, libraries, lectures, etc.
- We are enriched by an engaged multicultural and demographically diverse community.
- Amherst has a long and proud history of protecting our historical residential neighborhoods and open spaces—farmland and conservation areas.
- Amherst is one of the few communities in Massachusetts with over 10% affordable housing.

The proposed Charter involves drastic changes with uncertain consequences. The majority has presented no evidence to support its claims that a council-manager form of government would work better than Amherst's current government. Only 10 of the 351 Massachusetts towns and cities use a council-manager form of government. The Charter poses real risks, without corresponding benefits.

1. No checks and balances:

- This proposed Charter would eliminate our current system of checks and balances. We currently have a 5-member Select Board (executive branch) and a 240-member Town Meeting (legislative branch). Although Town Meeting approves the vast majority of proposals it considers, it can check unpopular bylaws and modify spending.
- The Charter proposal collapses these two bodies into one 13-member Council, effectively creating a powerful 13-member Select Board with no check on that power.
- The proposed 13-member Council would have more challenges supervising the Town Manager than the current 5-member Select Board already has.

2. Decreased democratic participation:

- The proposal dramatically reduces participation by 95%. 240 elected Town Meeting members and 5 Select Board members are replaced with only 13 paid Council members.

- Campaigns for Council seats would be expensive, limiting the likely participation to those who have connections to money.

3. Decreased representation and diversity:

- The Commission majority has not been able to support their extraordinary claim that a 13-member Council will not only be more representative, but will also be more diverse than the current 240-member Town Meeting and 5-member Select Board.
- Unlike Town Meeting, the proposed Council might not represent every precinct. Each new district, comprised of two precincts, elects 2 members. One of the two precincts could end up with two Council members while the other would have none, resulting in a loss of demographic diversity and representation in town government.

4. Reduced civic involvement:

- The proposed Charter limits residents to advisory roles in government, replacing the governing power we now have through Town Meeting.
- Eliminating Town Meeting removes what has been the primary incubator for leadership development and residents' involvement, a pathway into government for residents.
- Through participation in Town Meeting, citizens become intimately knowledgeable about Town matters and government. The Charter will eliminate this educational process.
- With no meaningful citizen participation in governing, Amherst is likely to be run by a small group of political insiders.

5. Increased power of money and special interests in politics:

- With only 13 paid members, the proposed Council emphasizes campaigns and privileges those with the money and resources to run campaigns. They may have narrow objectives, such as inappropriate development.
- Important decisions and bylaws could be made by as few as a 7-person majority.
- Zoning bylaws that affect us all could be decided by only 9 of 13 Councilors.
- With the high cost of elections, a likely result of a 13-member Council will be virtual parties with slates of candidates that have undue influence on elections.

6. Increased costs of Town Government:

- At the beginning, the 13 Council members would be paid a total of \$67,500, with an option for increases in the future. Our current Select Board on the other hand, will rise to a total of \$8,000 in the future.
- School Committee members' salaries would increase from zero to a total of \$16,000.
- A new Community Engagement Officer would be hired at an unknown salary to compensate for the vastly reduced citizen participation in the proposed Charter.

Beyond these negative consequences, the proposed Charter does NOT address or solve the existing challenges Amherst faces:

- The proposal does not create a leadership voice or political vision for the Town.
- The proposal would not reduce taxes or enhance revenue.
- There is no evidence that the new Charter would increase voter turnout. Our neighbor Northampton, with a mayor-council, has many uncontested seats and poor voter turnout.
- Nothing in the proposal encourages appropriate commercial development or a specific vision for development.

- There is no evidence or guarantee that the proposed 13-member Council would be more accountable or responsive than a 240-person elected legislative body.
- A 13-member Council could result in virtual parties with slates elected that do not represent our values. Greenfield’s Council just turned down a Safe City designation, despite overwhelming support from the public.

Before you vote, please read the entire proposed Charter for yourself, in the tradition of the informed citizenry we so value in Amherst.

Charter Commission Members in Minority—

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