



Myth-Key: Nessy, Bigfoot, Abominable Snowman, Medusa, The Minotaur

# Town Meeting Myth-Buster: Top 10 Myths

Below are 10 inaccurate statements made by the pro-charter-change campaign that are being used to justify replacing Amherst's Town Meeting/Select Board form of government with a 13-member City Council and no mayor. Please consider these **facts** before making this major decision that will affect Amherst far into the future\*.

**Myth #1: Amherst lacks a year-round government (“the proposed Council would meet more regularly”).**

**Fact: Amherst has an effective and responsive year-round government.**

- Our Select Board meets more frequently (4x/month in 2017, 49 meetings) than would the proposed City Council (1x/month).
- Town Meeting has met on average 3-4 multi-day sessions per year over the past 10 years to accomplish all needed legislative business. The Select Board can convene a Special Town Meeting **whenever needed**.
- A year-round executive and part-time legislative branch model is common: 84% of MA towns and 14 States.
- Amherst government ISN'T broken: excellent finances, good schools, top-10 college town ranking.

**Myth #2: Town Meeting is to blame for the failure of the elementary school consolidation project.**

**Fact: Amherst-wide and Town Meeting votes never reached the required 2/3 majority.**

- **State law** requires a 2/3-majority on issues affecting municipal financing. Town Meeting votes exactly mirrored the town-wide votes, with Amherst evenly split on the issue (see myth #6).
- The fact is that neither public nor town meeting votes came near the 66 % majority that state law requires to pass a major spending bill.

**Myth #3: Town Meeting is responsible for the new 5-story downtown student residences.**

**Fact: Town Boards, not Town Meeting, are responsible for these massive buildings.**

- The **Planning Board** (not Town Meeting) approved Special Permits for Kendrick Place and One East Pleasant that allowed for increased height and lot coverage and reduced setbacks.
- Town meeting has been an important check/balance on the actions of the Planning Department and Town Hall, occasionally rejecting damaging zoning changes and uncovering unintended consequences. Recent examples include rejecting zoning changes that would have put large commercial housing in a residential district (Butterfield Terrace) and rejecting changes that would have allowed 5 story buildings to replace traditional buildings on the west side of N. Pleasant that buffer neighborhoods from the downtown business district.
- The proposed charter consolidates all power over zoning to a Council of 13 with no checks or balances, a system favoring developers wishing to change zoning for their own profit. Explore this issue at: [www.communityforsale.net](http://www.communityforsale.net)

**Myth #4: Town Meeting is responsible for Amherst's high taxes.**

**Fact: High taxes result from the exemption from property taxes of large non-profits.**

- Together, UMass, Amherst College, and Hampshire College own 16% of the land in Amherst and do not pay a fair share of taxes or payments in lieu of taxes, putting the financial burden on homeowners.
- Studies show that **residential development does not lower taxes** due to the added support services that such development requires. The biggest cost driver in Town is the Schools, followed by public safety (police and fire).

**Myth #5: Town Meeting lacks accountability (“a Council would be more accountable”).**

**Fact: Town Meeting has shown accountability equal to or greater than councils.**

- Electronic voting now allows all Town Meeting member votes on controversial issue to be seen online.
- There is an annual Meet The Candidates forum and an email system to contact your precinct representatives.
- Town Meeting elections are as competitive as MA City Council elections, where **60% of Council seats are uncontested**. In 2017, over 40 town meeting members were elected for the first time, **49% of seats were contested**, and newcomers replaced 12 incumbents. In contrast, in Northampton and Easthampton only 1 of the 12 city council seats (8%) was contested.
- In **Councils throughout MA, incumbents win 90% of the time**. Unseating Councilors is very difficult.

\* The full Myth-buster document that includes data sources can be found at [VoteNoOnCharter.Org](http://VoteNoOnCharter.Org)

*Myth #6: Town Meeting is not representative of Amherst's citizens.*

**Fact: Town Meeting nearly exactly represents the views of the Amherst voting population.**

- Town Meeting votes have mirrored town-wide votes in recent elections. For the four recent school project votes:

1 <sup>st</sup> Town-Wide Vote (override):	Y: 50.45%	N: 49.55%	2 <sup>nd</sup> Town-wide vote	Y: 53.3%	N: 46.7%
1 <sup>st</sup> Town Meeting Vote	Y: 49.5%	N: 50.5%	2 <sup>nd</sup> Town Meeting vote	Y: 57.2%	N: 42.8%

- Effective representation comes with breadth in Town Meeting membership.
- The average age of Town Meeting members is the same as the average age of those that vote in our local elections, Town Meeting members range in age from 19 to 91 and 30% of Town Meeting members have school-aged children.
- Amherst Town Meeting is comprised of 56% women, compared to 25% for City Councils in MA.
- Smaller boards and councils tend to be older, whiter, and more male than Town Meetings.
- The proposed 13-member Council would reduce representation of diverse views in town government.

*Myth #7: Town Meeting is too unprofessional and unwieldy to consider complex issues like zoning.*

**Fact: Town Meeting debate is highly informed and has uncovered by-law errors.**

- Town Meeting members are well educated on zoning issues and have uncovered substantial errors and unintended consequences in zoning articles brought by the Planning Board.
- 84% of communities in Massachusetts, including many larger than Amherst, successfully navigate complex issues such as zoning through a Town Meeting form of government. For example, Brookline has a population of 60,000, a budget of \$305 million (almost 5 times that of Amherst), and a TM government that is a model of efficacy.
- The ACTV record of recent town meetings reveals the high quality of town meeting debate and the remarkable effort, care, and intelligence town meeting members bring to the discussion of complex issues. Take a look.

*Myth #8: Power is too diffuse and it is unclear who is in charge and who negotiates with entities such as the State and UMass.*

**Fact: The organizational structure and responsibilities for the town are well defined.**

- The Select Board can and does delegate negotiation power to the Town Manager.
- More consequential outcomes need approval by the elected Select Board and Town Meeting, as is appropriate in a democracy. The recently expanded Town-Gown and University-Town-Advisory-Committee (UTAC) efforts are examples of how this works under the current system.

*Myth #9: Town Meeting is too time consuming for members.*

**Fact: Town Meeting is well attended and requires a moderate yearly time commitment.**

- Town meeting meets from 7:00-10:00 PM, averaging 13 nights per year spread out over 3 sessions.
- Dependent care is provided for those who need it.
- 68%-73% attendance ensures regular sessions and provides far more diversity and expertise than any sample of 13 residents in a Council.

*Myth #10: Town Meeting is out of step with Town Hall, blocking implementation of shared goals.*

**Fact: Town Meeting votes are well-aligned with the majority of town recommendations.**

- Well over 90% of Town Meeting votes follow recommendations of the Select Board or other Town Boards.
- Occasional disagreement between Town Meeting and the Select Board is a **sign of a healthy government** airing legitimate differences in the interpretation of a master plan and providing checks and balances among elected bodies. Checks and balances are central to the [Principles of Local Government put forward by the League of Women Voters.](#)



For more information visit: [VoteNoOnCharter.org](http://VoteNoOnCharter.org) and [NotThisCharterAmherstMA.org](http://NotThisCharterAmherstMA.org)