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Three Amherst board members to sponsor downsizing resolution

By Sandra Tan
NEWS STAFF REPORTER

The push to downsize the Amherst Town Board is gaining steam.

Council members Barry Weinstein, Guy Marlette and Shelly Schratz say they plan to jointly sponsor a resolution calling for the reduction of the Town Board from seven members to five.

If passed, Weinstein said, a proposal to downsize the board would be put forth for a public hearing in February, with the possibility of a public referendum in May.

“I think we’ll have a more efficient, more functional Town Board with five members,” Weinstein said. “It reduces cost. It shows the Town Board is leading by example in terms of reducing town government. I think leading by example is very important.”

Over the past year, two separate resolutions to shrink the board have failed to pass. But the resolution slated to be considered at the board’s Dec. 15 meeting is expected to have the strongest support of any that have been considered.

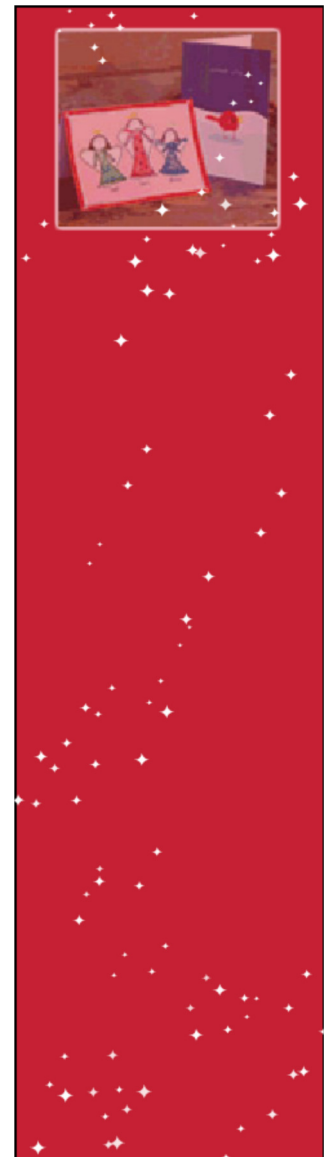
Weinstein, Schratz and Marlette are on record as favoring the resolution. Council Member Deborah Bruch Bucki has previously voiced her support for downsizing the board through attrition.

Supervisor Satish Mohan, who is currently out of the country, has expressed the belief that less board representation is bad for democracy. But he also has stated that he’d support giving town residents the freedom to decide the matter in public referendum.

Schratz said she believes board meetings will be shorter and more efficient with a smaller governing body.

“I think more things will get accomplished because you’ve got to work together,” she said.

Part of what makes the board downsizing a more realistic possibility now, compared with in months past, is a change of position by Marlette, who has steadfastly opposed previous downsizing resolutions.



Marlette attributed his previous opposition to inexperience.

“In all honesty, I was pretty new to the board,” he said. “In a town the size of Amherst, I really felt that seven people representing a town our size was probably an appropriate number.”

He has since come to the conclusion, he said, that numbers are less important than the willingness of the council members who remain to work hard and make smart decisions.

He also said that given the fact that Bucki is leaving the board at the end of the year to serve as town clerk, and Schratz does not intend to run for reelection next year, this is the best time to downsize the board through attrition.

“The timing is actually perfect,” Marlette said. “The stars have aligned in a correct fashion so no one can say this is a political maneuver or anything else.”

Council Member Mark Manna voted in mid-November to make no midterm appointment to Bucki’s seat, but he and Council Member Dan Ward have consistently opposed other downsizing measures, maintaining that a smaller board would not serve taxpayer interests in the region’s largest municipality.

Those who support the downsizing resolution say cost savings is an important factor, but less important than improved government efficiency and leadership.

Council members receive \$25,000 a year and are entitled to health benefits, though not all apply for them.

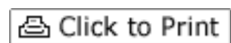
Regionalism advocate Kevin Gaughan, who has spearheaded the effort to downsize government boards, said he helped draft the resolution and is hopeful it will be more successful than the failed resolutions previously put forth in February and August.

“I think the majority of Amherst wants this,” he said, “and I hope the Amherst Town Board will give them the opportunity to have their say on Dec. 15.”

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