

By Milton J. Valencia and William McGuinness From Boston.com | Original Article

AMHERST - This quaint leafy town in Western Massachusetts is known for its diverse mix of college students and retirees, a former farming community characterized by suburban small talk just as much as cultural institutions. But it is never one to shy from foreign policy, either.

“We like to set our own foreign policy,” said Ruth Hooke, a retired University of Massachusetts professor, a Town Meeting member, and participant in Pioneer Valley No More Guantanamos, a local chapter of a national movement calling for the release of detainees imprisoned at Guantanamo Bay.

Hooke and others want to welcome at least two of the detainees to Amherst, population around 30,000 depending on whether classes are in session.

Under a petition Hooke submitted to the town’s Select Board - approved by a 2-1 vote Monday night - the town will call on Congress to rescind its ban on detainees resettling in the United States, and will welcome Ahmed Belbacha, originally from Algeria, and Ravil Mingazov, arrested in Pakistan, to Amherst. The measure will go before a Special Town Meeting on Nov. 2.

Cuba is a long way from Pioneer Valley, but Amherst has tackled foreign policy before, voting in the past against the war in Iraq and for the United States to engage in diplomatic talks with Iran.

Hooke noted that Amherst has a sizable refugee population. And thus it was only natural that this town, home to UMass and two private colleges, would open its borders once again, possibly making its local government the first in the country to debate the issue.

“This is a typical Amherst thing to do,” said Jonathan Tucker, the town’s planning director. “Amherst has a long history of engaging in foreign policy, and it’s not out of character for a New England town to believe it has as much a right to weigh in on foreign policy as the federal or state governments.”

Some in town do oppose.

Stephanie O’Keeffe, chairwoman of the five-member Select Board, was the lone vote against the petition, and said the outcome could have been different if two members were not absent. Under town rules, any citizen who gets 100 certified valid signatures of registered voters can propose a warrant article for the Special Town Meeting to consider, and selectmen are required to take a position on each article.

“I don’t believe that Town Meeting is the appropriate venue for dealing with domestic and foreign policy articles,” O’Keeffe said. “To me, Town Meeting is about local issues.” She acknowledged that the Town Meeting has taken stands on foreign policy in the past.

But proponents say a Special Town Meeting is the ideal platform for discussing what were called the myths and realities surrounding the detainees at Guantánamo Bay.

Nancy Talanian, founder of No More Guantanamos, said court hearings and documents have shown that many of the detainees at the military detention center have no evident ties to terrorism, as only a handful have been charged.

Under President Obama’s push to close the center, hundreds have already been released to their home countries.

But some, like Belbacha and Mingazov, while being cleared of wrongdoing, refuse to return to their countries, fearing reprisals from militants or even governments.

“Some would be happy to be home, but basically others were refugees before they were even captured,” she said. Citing court records and documents, she said some were sold as bounty to the military. Others were misidentified.

In Belbacha’s case, according to human rights groups, the Algerian-born man fled death threats

in his country to London. While awaiting asylum, he vacationed in Pakistan, only to be sold for a capture bounty to the US military. His asylum in London was never granted.

Mingazov, a former Russian soldier who converted to Islam, had moved to Afghanistan to escape persecution. After the US invasion in 2001, he fled to a refugee camp in Pakistan and was arrested in March 2002 on charges of having ties to Al Qaeda.

Talanian said other groups elsewhere in the United States that have offered to welcome the detainees, without seeking local government approval, have done so based on a common ethnicity. In Amherst, locals making up the No More Guantanamos group selected Mingazov and Belbacha after sympathizing with their cases, she said.

“Everyone across the country is scared that everyone at Guantanamo is too dangerous, but by telling their stories we hope to let people see who they really are,” she said.

And it seems Amherst residents are ready to welcome them.

“They should be free to live here or anywhere else,” said Mark Wootton, who co-owns Amherst Books and lives in nearby Worthington. “Banning people from living in certain towns or places is antithetical to a democracy.”