

Why North Haven Needs a Community Dialogue On Competitive Bidding

North Haven First Selectman Kevin Kopetz's recent column on the town's custodial contract is disappointing in a number of ways.

First, Mr. Kopetz takes the absurd position that the Town Charter's competitive bidding requirement is fulfilled by renewing a year-to-year bid contract for sixteen years. When contracts are publicly bid, they have a term, and they must be rebid when the term is up. It was Mr. Kopetz's responsibility under the Charter to bid out the custodial contract when he became First Selectman.

Second, Mr. Kopetz argues that there was no cost to the town because the custodial contract's cost increased at the rate of the Consumer Price Index over the last fifteen years. There are numerous problems here: 1. Mr. Kopetz was only responsible for the last few years. 2. Over the last few years, wages have risen more slowly than the Consumer Price Index. 3. Custodial costs depend heavily on the cost of emergencies, such as leaks and flooding. 4. Cost to taxpayers is only one of three reasons for bidding out contracts; Mr. Kopetz fails to mention the others: no-bid contracts favor friends, family, and business associates, and these contracts are the most common source of kickbacks to municipal officials. Competitive bidding is about fairness and trust in government to act professionally and impartially.

Third, arguing that not bidding out the custodial contract is okay because it did not cost the town a penny is like arguing that it's okay to go through red lights as long as you don't run into someone.

Fourth, Mr. Kopetz conveniently ignores the much bigger school custodial contract which was also last bid out in 1990 and which, until last year, the town dealt with exclusively, according to School Superintendent Sara-Jane Querfeld. Because it was not bid out, the cost of the school contract rose so much that the Board of Education decided to bid it out. Overall, therefore, not bidding out the town's custodial work did cost North Haven taxpayers money.

Fifth, the custodial contract is not an isolated instance of failing to seek competitive

bids. In fact, it might turn out to be the least harmful instance.

What is required now is what the Post's editor, Frederick Nevin, suggested in his August 25 editorial: a community dialogue on the subject of contract bidding, including such topics as competitive bidding, bid waivers, specifications, ethical issues, and the need for Charter revision to make our town's law clear, complete, and up-to-date.

The Board of Finance has not been providing the necessary oversight, possibly because the sole person responsible for the town's competitive bidding is Mr. Kopetz, a full voting member of the Board of Finance. I have written many times of conflicts of interest in this town; this may be the most damaging conflict of interest of all.

The town's legislators — all of us — need complete information about the custodial contracts as well as all other town and school contracts where expenditures to a vendor exceed \$1,000 a year, including contracts, specifications, budgets, reports, correspondence, receipts, and checks. We also need to know when each contract was last competitively bid, including full documentation of the bid process. As much information as possible should be available on the town website and in the town library, at least two weeks before the first public forum.

At the public forums (one meeting will not be enough), all relevant department heads and other personnel, as well as members of the Board of Selectmen, the Board of Education, and the Board of Finance, should attend and be required to answer all questions.

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