

A Need for Ethics Discussion and Education

From what I witnessed at the June 8 Board of Selectmen Meeting, North Haven's government seriously needs an education program concerning conflicts of interest and other ethical issues.

The issue of ethics was raised when Republican Selectman William Mitchell noted that Brian Cummings, whom Democratic Selectwoman Janet McCarty had nominated for an appointment to the town's Board of Ethics, might have conflicts of interest due to his role as a supporter of and adviser to Ms. McCarty.

I agreed with Mr. Mitchell's statement and said that there would also be possible conflicts of interest between the two roles now held by Joseph Ierardi: that of North Haven Community Services and Recreation Director and chair of the North Haven Republican Town Committee.

Mr. Ierardi felt that I had falsely disparaged his character. I responded that having potential conflicts of interest between one's roles has nothing to do with one's character, but that it is important to recognize potential conflicts and deal with them responsibly.

Mr. Ierardi continued to insist that I was disparaging his character, Director of Public Works Richard Branigan defended his colleague's character, and none of the Selectmen said anything to enlighten their department heads or town residents about conflicts of interest.

The first two steps in becoming an ethical town official are (1) to recognize situations in which conflicts might occur and (2) to accept the fact that they may happen to you, no matter how praiseworthy a person you are.

The potential conflicts between Mr. Ierardi's two roles are clear: a town employee's obligation is to be impartial, inclusive, and respectful of all town residents, while a party town committee chair's obligation is to be partial, exclusive, and sometimes disrespectful of opponents.

This is why it is highly unusual for a department head, or any town employee, to chair a party town committee. I could not find a single instance of this, and the Connecticut Republican Party representative I spoke with did not know of a single instance. This is also why the great majority of towns in the United States have nonpartisan governments, where a nonpartisan chief executive officer appoints nonpartisan department heads.

If every time the subject of conflicts of interest comes up, as it often does in town governments, it is treated personally, emotionally, and in a partisan manner,

instead of professionally and rationally, neither officials nor citizens will learn how to recognize conflicts, especially in themselves.

When one is in a situation where one has a conflict, one is obliged not to participate, not to discuss or vote or otherwise act. This does not mean that one is not capable of being impartial, it means that one has obligations or interests that make one seem partial and that put undue pressure on the person caught between two conflicting roles.

Dealing responsibly with conflicts of interest preserves the confidence of citizens that their elected and appointed officials are acting impartially and in the public interest.

It appeared that no one at the Board of Selectmen meeting understood these basic facts about conflicts of interest. Why do I know better? Because municipal ethics is my job.

I would be happy to work with the town government, at no charge, to help it set up ethics training for all its officials and employees. I would also be willing to lead a townwide discussion of our town government's ethical culture, so that citizens can learn about municipal government ethics and provide their own input as to how the town could better handle ethical issues and improve its ethics program.

But nothing can be done until our town's leaders acknowledge the need for a serious look at our town's ethics program.

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