

More Letters

Can Voters Trust the Souhegan Advisory Finance Committee?

To the editor:

The Souhegan Advisory Finance Committee (SAFC) has been described as dysfunctional this budget year. I agree. This is due to two very different perspectives regarding the purpose of the Finance Committee. Until recently the SAFC charge was a nebulous statement that provided little clarity. This budget year started with a new charge that produced the conflicts that exist today. It is important for the voters of Amherst and Mont Vernon to understand the two perspectives if they use the SAFC's recorded vote on the ballot and the voter's guide in their decision to vote for or against the Souhegan District budget warrant article.

The two points of view in the SAFC disagree on the role/purpose and the charge given by the moderator (which is supported by the Souhegan School Board (SSB) leadership). This is caused by fundamental disagreement over who the SAFC members represent. The moderator, who is elected, appoints the SAFC. One point of view believes that the SSB and the moderator are the elected officials; and, the appointed SAFC is an advisory body to help the board to get their budget passed by way of inspecting and advising the Board on the proposed budget. The other point of view believes that the SAFC is an independent body and advises the public/voters on the appropriateness of the School Board and Souhegan Administration proposed budget in the spirit of the system of checks and balances.

An outcome of the former point of view is that the elected Board sets the educational philosophy, strategy, policy and model of education. I fully agree. But, they also consequently believe that this sets the budget that SAFC must support. This is where I disagree. On the ballot, Warrant Article 1 is to elect a member of the school board and Warrant Article 2 is the approval of the proposed budget. I believe that this was intentional on the part of the NH Legislature. Warrant Article 1 says the voter is electing the school board based on their vision for the school; Warrant Article 2 says the voter authorizes only said amount of money to implement the educational program and no more. These two warrant articles are clearly separated and there is no language, implied or unimplied, that ties them together.

At the beginning of this budget review season and at the request of the Committee, the moderator issued a new charge to the SAFC. At first, it appeared innocuous. However, the moderator's interpretations have restricted the data and methods that the SAFC can use to evaluate the budget. It only allows the use of the current budget (and its projected actuals) and the proposed budget on a line item by line item basis to be used as a determinant by the SAFC to make their individual votes. This excludes any comparative data from other school districts available at the NH Department of Education website, previous year's track record, and top down/bottom up analysis of budget. It also disallows the Committee members from voting based strictly on the bottom-line budget number. This dictate forces the presumption that the current budget line items are correct. Setting such a narrow charge is an overreach of the moderator's discretion and the School Board's leadership.

Not We/They, But Us.

To the editor:

At the January 14th Village Strategic Planning Committee meeting, some wondered whether a "we/they" attitude among people living in the Village and those living outside the Village really exists. One need only read Peter Hansen's letter to the Citizen editor entitled "What About 'The Rest of Amherst'" to dispel any doubt.

Mr. Hansen decries that the Village strategic planning process benefits Village residents to the detriment of the majority of residents that live beyond the Village. It seems to me that this view is myopic for several reasons.

First off, Mr. Hansen seems to have overlooked that the Board of Selectmen and the eight town departments that comprise town government undertook what is considered one of the most innovative strategic planning processes in the state two years ago to ensure that limited resources and tax dollars are expended as sensibly as possible in serving all residents of Amherst wherever they live. These plans have been refreshed again this year and now serve as the basis for annual municipal planning and budgeting.

There has not been nor is there now a comprehensive strategic plan for the town as a whole. There should be. People may cite the existence of the 2010 Master Plan, but it is not really a plan; rather a list of several fine aspirational goals that lack any framework for achieving them and no context for understanding how/when we'd know if we have. Also, the multi-year Master Planning process, which consumed a lot of taxpayer money and was fraught with power-struggles and divisiveness, has left many reticent to revisit and refine those goals into a true land-use plan.

The schools have been working on their own strategic plan over the past year and have framed some key themes and goals, which they are starting to share with citizens. Specific initiatives, related costs, timing, and delegation of responsibilities will be devised based on public input over the coming months.

Consider, too, the host of commissions, committees, and boards serving all residents of Amherst whose activities also deserve a strategic-planning context. The Board of Selectmen felt that these organizations along with residents from all parts of the town ought to be invited to engage in thinking about and shaping the future direction of the town. Which is why the BOS selected a more bounded topic – the Village – with which to initially engage people in thinking strategically together.

As you will recall, the vote count of both the Board and the Committee are provided on the ballot for each warrant article. One SAFC member calls this a "super vote". The Town of Amherst and Amherst School District's (ASD) ballots have similar bodies called Ways and Means Committees which provide a non-elected reviewing body to examine the budgets of the Town and ASD. This "super vote" is intended to guide the voter with an alternative perspective of the appropriateness of the budget. There is an implicit assumption that this alternative perspective is independent of the Board and free to examine any and all data. Under the current charge, this is not the case. Members of the Town Ways and Means and the Amherst School District have confirmed that they are not constrained in any way.

Limiting the review to the line items only and disallowing consideration of the bottom-line \$ figure is in sharp contrast to the decision that the voter must make - voting for or against a single budget number which will appear in Warrant Article #2. The only thing that matters is the bottom-line budget number; no line items appear on the ballot. Once the budget is approved, the School Board has the power to move money at will within the many line items of the approved bottom-line number; and, the line items are meaningless after the vote is cast. Why limit the Souhegan Advisory Finance Committee to only inspecting the line items when the voter only votes on the bottom-line; and, line items are rendered meaningless once the votes are cast. The bottom-line number is roughly 1/3 of your tax bill; and, it must be part of the decision process for both SAFC and all voters.

Trust in the Souhegan Advisory Finance Committee process has been deeply eroded. These limitations on the Committee are a form of censorship that is intended to win voters to the Board and school administration's budget. Contrast this with how the Town Ways and Means and our Selectmen work together or how the Amherst School Board and their Ways and Means committee work. They are allowed, encouraged, and enabled to pursue data where ever it can be obtained with the purpose of producing the most efficient use of tax dollars possible. This is not a matter of getting an annual budget passed or not, but rather the voter's right to the best information possible without censorship to make their decision.

To the Voters of Amherst and Mont Vernon, look at the Souhegan Advisory Finance Committee's 5-2 vote in favor of the School Board's budget on the ballot and in the Voter's Guide with high degree of skepticism. The SAFC might well be cast as the Souhegan School Board Budget Marketing Committee.

So, why is the data and process being restricted to evaluate the FY2016 Souhegan budget? More on that...

David Chen
Souhegan Advisory Finance Committee
Co-Chairman
Former Town Ways and Means
Committee member

The reasoning is thus: the Village is a town-wide resource that truly differentiates Amherst from other communities with whom, quite honestly, we vie for residents, businesses, and investments. For many of us, it's what attracted us to move here in the first place. And, while the Village is a neighborhood for those who live there, it is unquestionably a valuable asset and locus of community activities for all residents. Thus, engaging other town organizations and citizens in thinking strategically about how to retain its value will help to maintain a vital town asset and expand collective strategic thinking.

Mr. Hansen's assertion that residents are going incur multi-millions of dollars of taxation as a result of this process is quite off the mark. Indeed, working groups looking to address a number of identified issues haven't yet framed possible initiatives, let alone costs associated with them. Indeed, it is very likely that a number of key efforts, such as managing traffic and safety; enhancing access for children, youth, adults, and seniors; and enriching the number and kind of community activities for all Amherst residents need not cost much at all to implement.

Mr. Hansen also cites investments in maintaining Amherst Town Hall as an example of economic inequity to those residents not living in its immediate vicinity. Would he forgo this argument if Town Hall were located at Cricket Corner or Walnut Hill? Does he believe we should let it crumble simply because it is located in the Village?

The process of engaging citizens in discussion of the Village has indeed pinpointed fissures among subsets of the populace. Village residents would like to see less traffic, while Village business-owners feel that traffic flow is vital to the ongoing success of their businesses. Residents within the Historic District, of which the Village is a part, are quite willing to invest in keeping their homes "historic" and well maintained, but would like to improve the working relationship with the Historic District Commission to do so. And, yes, there is some we/they thinking regarding Village- versus non-Village residents. But there are ways to mitigate these matters. The goal for all citizens and public servants alike should be to bind those fissures through intentional dialogue, engagement, and collaboration rather than fracturing them any further.

Mike Akillian
Amherst



Amherst Emergency Medical Services - "Did You Know.?"

Another in a series of articles about Amherst by the Ways and Means Committee

The Amherst Department of Emergency Medical Service provides basic and advanced life support emergency medical services for Amherst and Mont Vernon.

The EMS station is located in the lower level of the police department building and is comprised of living quarters for the on duty EMTs, a training room, and vehicle storage facilities. The vehicle fleet consists of two ambulances and a one dedicated paramedic vehicle.

The department currently has about two dozen part time medical personnel who are trained at three different levels of emergency care:

• EMT's (Emergency Medical Technicians):

EMT's receive 150 hours of training consisting of lectures, hands on training and field internships. They are trained in basic first aid and to assess patients to determine the appropriate medical course of action. They can take vital signs, care for wounds, deliver babies, and perform CPR.

• Intermediate/Advanced EMT:

EMT intermediate/Advanced receive over 200 hours of training. This is the level is between EMT and Paramedics and is currently in transition. In addition to providing all of the same medical care as a basic EMT, advanced EMTs can start IV's and administer some medications.

• Paramedic:

Training for Paramedics can take up to two years to complete and involves between 1200 and 1800 hours of classroom and clinical study. In addition to providing basic and advanced levels of life support, a Paramedic can diagnose certain medical conditions, (such as a heart attack), conduct and interpret EKGs, intubate, and administer up to 60 different medications.

EMS is staffed 24x7 with up to 3 employees, an ideal shift would consist of an EMT, an advanced EMT, and a Paramedic.

The Amherst EMS provides two levels of medical care and service:

• **Basic Life Support (BLS):** Any EMT can provide BLS, which not only pertains to assessing Airways, Breathing and Circulation (ABCs), but can also include several other functions such as testing for blood sugar levels or taking vital signs.

• **Advanced Life Support (ALS):** ALS can only be provided by an intermediate/advanced EMT or a paramedic because it requires a higher level of care or treatment, such as an IV.

All current employees are paid per diem and are not eligible for benefits from the town. Most of the staff work full time elsewhere as either EMT's for hospitals or as EMT certified firefighters for local area towns but they are responsible for maintaining and updating their Amherst EMS training. The staff is notified of any changes involving policy or equipment through email.

When an emergency call comes through, the duty crew is dispatched. If there are three personnel on duty, they will deploy to the emergency site in two vehicles, the paramedic vehicle and the ambulance.

Upon arrival at the scene the situation is evaluated and appropriate care is administered. If transport to a hospital is required, at least two staff members will ride in the ambulance, one drives and the other one tends to the patient. Unless the third member is needed to provide additional care during the transport, he or she will return to the EMS station and notify dispatch that he/she is ready for a subsequent call.

If there is an additional emergency call, Dispatch will page the remaining Amherst volunteers to determine if there is a second person available to respond. If there is no one immediately available, Dispatch will issue a mutual aid request to fill the need. (Amherst EMS has a reciprocal agreement with all of the surrounding towns for such mutual aid).

Only calls that actually involve transporting a patient to a care facility (about 70% of the time) get billed to insurance companies and therefore generate revenue for the town. Last year the Town was reimbursed for over a third of the operating budget for our EMS department.

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