

Citizens Advisory Committee Meeting
October 24, 2009
7:30am

Meeting Attendees:

Larry Ballin (Chair), Tina Helm (Selectman), Mark Kaplan (Selectman), Barbara Brown, Peter Bianchi, Noel Weinstein, Robert Lavoie, DJ Lavoie, Bob MacMichael, Hardy Hasenfuss, Rick Anderson, Cindy Snay, Dave Payne, Jack Harrod, Stephanie Wheeler, Howard Hoke, Gary Markoff, Karen Hoglund, Anne Loeffler, David Harrison

Chair Ballin called the **MEETING TO ORDER** at 7:35 AM and noted that the agenda would be loose for the meeting. He mentioned that the tax rate had gone down this year. He wished it could be even lower, but felt that lower is better. Mark Kaplan commented that in his estimation the reason they were able to get a lower tax rate was because of the Department Heads delaying projects for another year. He felt the Department Heads and Jessie Levine should be applauded for their work in this area. Chair Ballin agreed with Mr. Kaplan and said that some of the funding that had been put off would need to be replaced at some point.

Chair Ballin said that the Crockett's Corner project was also to be reviewed. The State DOT will discontinue the project this winter but will stripe it before they stop to help with safe travels. They will begin with the concrete and pavement when the plants open again in the spring. It is their hope that they will be done by June. He opined that it hadn't been a very safe project and has been painfully slow and difficult to watch. Chair Ballin stressed that this is a State project, not a Town project. Mr. Payne asked what they had left to do in the spring. Chair Ballin said that the West side needed medians added, until just to or past the Presbyterian Church entrance. They also need to finish up the work in the anterior of the new slip lanes that are there. He noted that they will also make sure that the curbing is in place and apply a final coat of pavement. Stephanie Wheeler asked if they would put the light back for the winter months while they suspend the project. Chair Ballin said that they were not planning to have a light there any more, even after the project was finished. He noted that if this became a problem, they would have to lobby to have it put back in. There was some fear that if it were to become a problem, it would mean that there could be a fatality.

Chair Ballin reported that on Wednesday, October 28 there would be two GACIT meetings, which are meetings where the Governor's Council talks with the population about roads, bridges, etc. The Board of Selectmen plans to show up at both meetings to talk about the roadways. All were encouraged to attend, as the more people to represent New London, the better. The meetings were at 1 PM in Newbury and 4 PM in Andover. Chair Ballin said that he would bring up the subject of the light that was removed from Crockett's Corner at this meeting, but most importantly, he is planning to talk about the repair of Main Street. It has been taken off of the 10-year plan and they plan to lobby hard to get the project back on line. Chair Ballin said that both Councilors Burton and Shea would be at the meetings.

Noel Weinstein commented about Route 103-A and Stoney Brook Road. He reported that there had been a similar problem in that area as in the Crockett's Corner area, and they were able to improve the situation by using signage. He thought perhaps the same thing could be done at the Crockett's Corner location instead of a light. Ms. Helm felt that there should be some interim protection by way of a light or a sign during the winter months.

Peter Bianchi said that he thought it was a great idea that the Town was going to go to the meetings and he hoped that the councilors wouldn't suggest for them to have Main Street paved. He said that this idea was not a long-term solution. The road needed to be rebuilt, not repaved.

Bob MacMichael said that the biggest problem on Main Street was drainage. He said that Donnie Kristal, who is a handicapped friend of his who lived off of Main Street, had to have his house built next to the ground to have his wheelchair accessible to the house. The water comes in and has been several inches high in his bedroom before. Mr. MacMichael felt that this was a real problem with Main Street that needed attention.

Mr. Kaplan said that in the Main Street area of New London, they are on a ridge. If the rain water falls on one side of the ridge, it hits Red Brook and goes east. If it falls on the other side of the ridge, it goes west. He explained this to be a normal, natural ridge so building a straight road sometimes results in water going on one side or the other. He opined that someone has to do some engineering and studying to find the best way to create the road. It is not a simple matter, however the State has the experience and should be able to do this.

Moving on, Chair Ballin announced that the Elkins Grant application process was moving forward. Bob MacMichael, Maureen Prohl and Ms. Levine went to Lebanon, NH to present their case for Elkins. They are hoping to get some grant money to work on the roads and sidewalks, as well as some enhancements to some of the buildings in Elkins. Chair Ballin said that he heard that the presentation was very well-received. He thanked Mr. MacMichael for going to the meeting.

Chair Ballin reminded the committee that this coming Saturday was Halloween and that the Recreation Department has a large event going on in conjunction with Springledge Farm and Colby-Sawyer College. A "haunted woods" event would be created in the trails behind Springledge and the old middle school. He suggested spreading the word and for people to bring their kids/grand kids to the event. Stephanie Wheeler said that there would also be a "Monster Dash" (race) for the kids in the morning and a dance on Halloween night.

Mr. Kaplan said that he, Chair Ballin, Ms. Levine and Ms. Helm went to Concord and listened to the Governor about the donor town issue. He said that New London was at risk for becoming a donor town again. The message he heard was that each town's representatives, of which could total between 80-85 would need to vote as a block. He understood that if you don't have the votes, you don't get what you want. Mr. Kaplan wanted to find out if the people in the Portsmouth Coalition wanted to go forward in any manner to get everyone together to try to meet their goals of not becoming donor towns, or if they actually wanted to send out their usual letter with reasons for doing what had been voted in. He asked the Board of Selectmen if it would be okay if he went to gather information on this matter. Mr. Kaplan reported that the amount New London could be responsible for as a donor town would go over \$900,000 the first year and over \$2 million within three years. He felt if they were going to tag New London for a million dollars, the Town would have to raise the tax rate by a whole dollar. However, in Manchester where there are large buildings and companies, they would only have to raise their rates .10 -.30 cents. Mr. Kaplan wasn't sure anyone else was looking at this angle and he still needed to find out if it was true. Ms. Helm added that these large towns, like Manchester and Nashua are recipient towns. Mr. Kaplan said that on the other side of this issue, these are the towns that demand more and have more kids in the schools, and more needs for their people. The key thing with these larger towns is that they have the votes. If the major cities get together and decide what they want, they can out-vote the smaller towns.

Chair Ballin reported that to show their support, \$5,500 would be given to the Portsmouth Coalition from unspent money in the legal fund. He believed that the Governor noticed that the Town of New London was a force in the battle. Chair Ballin said that the mantra they want to try and develop was that it was "Manchester and Nashua against the rest of the towns in New Hampshire." He said there may be only 20 donor towns lined up right now, but there will be more and more added each year. They will lobby hard

to get the collar on the legislation right now reinforced for a couple years which will give time to work on this project.

Noel Weinstein said that it sounds like the formula for which towns give and which receive is not based on the grand list. Mr. Kaplan said that distribution of the money goes as according to criteria. Mr. Bianchi said that in the past, they were donor towns and Amherst and Bedford were recipient towns. He opined that those towns were not as needy as others, such as Claremont. He said that he has seen that type of inequity in the past. Chair Ballin said that the larger towns are bedroom towns with a lot of kids.

Mr. Kaplan read a list of the top donor towns and commented that they are all small towns who are donating the most amount of money. Chair Ballin said that the issue is whether it is constitutional or not. Mr. Markoff asked if Judd Gregg had been involved in this issue. Chair Ballin said that he isn't involved at all. Mr. Kaplan said that it was up to the Towns to do the research and investigate, and organize something to help make a difference with the votes. He said that he has spoken with the two legislators about this to no avail.

Howard Hoke tried to clarify the issue. He said the way the funding goes in education is that the State levies a tax and the school district puts some dollars into the fund. The State, by way of legislature, looks at the distribution of the funds. All of the towns pay a certain amount into the State coffer. The formula is based on need, and voted on by legislation. The amount paid to the State is equitable. What ends up happening, is that the towns don't get back what they put in. For example, Warner gets back from the State more than what they pay in. So the amount of tax they pay to the school district comes out lower than what it should be. New London gets almost nothing back and has to pay more in to the school district.

Mr. Kaplan said that Mr. Hoke made a good point. He added that every student gets exactly the same kind of education. When you talk about an adequate education, whether Kearsarge was above, below, or right on to national standards, it is exactly the same. Therefore, why should the money be any different? It should be exactly the same. If they pay in, they should get it back. He wondered why towns like Warner and Bradford get more money back than they put in. Money should be distributed to reflect an adequate education.

Mr. Hoke said that the decision-making is made up of a body of legislatures and the small towns are in the minority. He said that even if you get to the point of proving that using donor towns was unconstitutional to raise funds, so what? Then what would be done?

Mr. Kaplan said that if there were 234 municipalities in the State, and if you look at where people stand, all the donor towns are on one side of the issue, and the larger towns are on the other. Compare that with the representatives from those areas. If there are 10 metropolitan areas, 224 small town representatives can band together to have a greater impact on the vote. He said that takes a lot of political guts and most people are not willing to take on that fight. He is not sure if the coalition is willing to do this. Mr. Kaplan stated that if you are not willing to fight the big towns, they will win every time.

Mr. Markoff said there are other ways to fight this in the media. He opined that what Mr. Kaplan had just articulated should be constructed into an email campaign. It could be "Tweeted" or "Face Booked" he thought. Mr. Kaplan agreed that this sort of publicity would be welcomed. They first have to find out if the coalition wants to do this before they can start the fight. Someone has to come with a program. He wants to find out if they are interested. Ms. Helm said the primary recommendation that the Governor made at the meeting was that the Portsmouth Coalition has to have a unified program and then do things such as go to the media with one message. He was hoping that the meeting would produce that common

goal. Unfortunately, they didn't get to that point, consensus-wise, at that meeting, so another one has been planned.

Mr. Weinstein said by the Governor encouraging the towns to gather together to sway the vote and it passes, and he vetoes it, it could still be over-ridden. He opined that they just needed the amount of votes that would block an override.

Mr. Kaplan said there are committees with Republicans, Democrats and representatives throughout the State, as well as caucuses. He said that if several groups who are for a project and are sitting at the same table, good things will happen. He felt that communication was key and that it was important to "gather the troops" and have little groups and committees come together to discuss the topics at hand. Suddenly, everyone gets to know who the other representatives are and where they stand so they can band together and support each other. Ms. Helm said that the general message here was to stay tuned because this issue is surfacing again.

Howard Hoke said that he had one suggestion. He commented that it was very easy for him to say that this method of raising funds across the state isn't fair. He would like to urge those arguing this way of raising funds to NOT use the word "fair," but to illustrate it in terms of equity. The focus on equity may lead people to give up a benefit and favor that choice because it is the right thing to do. People may be willing to pay more because it is the right thing to do. He said that data can be gathered to determine what is equal and appropriate. He suggested that as they go through the debate, whenever they hear something being said as "fair" cut the conversation short right there and bring it back to the matter of equity. The opponents can still be against it, but you can state that this is how it should be. Once they recognize something that is equitable and manageable, they are, maybe even in secretive numbers, more apt to stand up and agree.

Mr. Markoff agreed with Mr. Hoke. He asked if Dave Kidder could be brought in at some point to find out where he stands. He was supposed to be at a recent meeting and he felt that they were owed some time. Mr. Harrod thought both representatives should come back in. Chair Ballin said that he would look at the legislative calendar to see when a good time would be to schedule their appearance at a meeting.

Ms. Helm said it is not just our Town that is in danger of becoming a donor town, it is other towns too. She concluded that a cohesive approach should be used.

Mr. Weinstein asked if the grand list went up since last year. Chair Ballin said that it went up \$5 million. Mr. Weinstein opined that because of this increase, there was not a pure savings, even though the tax rate went down. Chair Ballin said that he felt the taxpayer was still profiting a bit this time around.

Chair Ballin said they should keep an eye on Andy Peterson's effort for a Homestead tax. He cautioned that the second-home population would get hit hard with this tax. This tax gives a \$150,000 exemption for homeowners and people who pay property tax on second homes, businesses, or places other than their primary homes. Those people with more than one dwelling would need to pick up the slack. He clarified that the Homestead tax gave an exemption on the primary residence.

Tina Helm said that she has been attending a Selectmen's Institute for the last six months and had her last session the past Saturday. She brought some copies of a booklet that she found valuable to share. It was a booklet on how to go to the legislature to make your thoughts known about bills and how you could be a more participative citizen. She has been encouraging those at the CAC meetings to go to Concord to voice their opinions. Ms. Helm reported that the booklet gives all of the information on how to go to express your opinion. It even tells you where to park! She said that it was a very nice guide and encouraged people to take one if they wanted.

Bob Lavoie said that Mr. Kaplan's initiative was good and he would appreciate a report on his progress. Mr. Kaplan said that he would be willing to do this so long as he can have someone follow through with the idea. DJ Lavoie said if they need visual or number support, this group would be a good one to tap into. Chair Ballin said there are sign-in sheets at every hearing to document whether people are for or against the bills. They do take into consideration the feelings of the citizens. Ms. Helm said that related to this topic, any are invited to join them at the GACIT meetings next Wednesday.

Ms. Lavoie asked if they could get a schedule of other meetings happening around the State so they could possibly attend them. Mr. Kaplan said he could get this information from Ms. Levine.

Mr. Weinstein said that this winter when the school budget was being voted on, the budget committee members and Board of Selectmen members attended the meetings and he found that the more members who attended, the better. He said that the labor (teachers) showed up in droves and voted for the higher budget. Unless people are willing to show up at these meetings, this plan is not going to work. Mr. Kaplan remarked that people don't like going to these kinds of meetings. Ms. Snay said that many people do get involved and just notifying people that the meetings are going on would help with attendance. She felt that most people wouldn't mind getting an email to give notice of special meetings like these.

Hardy Hasenfuss suggested sending an email out about the GACIT hearings for those who were not present at this meeting. Mr. Markoff suggested making the email call attention to the need for the people to open it.

Mr. Bianchi said that in the last week or so he saw on the news about a New Hampshire insurance group that had discrepancies on how they were spending money. He didn't know who they were but it was a group in Concord. He said that the news was chiding them for not handling the State's money, and what towns put in for insurance, appropriately. Mr. Kaplan said what he knew was in terms of the pension and that the state dropped off their contribution and had to be picked up by the towns for the police, firemen, and teachers. The promises they had made for future payments are greater than the amount of money that they really have. With the state of the stock market, they are so under water that they will never be able to come back. That is how far back they are. Mr. Kaplan said that their state, in its wisdom, was paying 35% for the pensions but are now only going to pay 30%. Mr. Bianchi said this was not what he was talking about. It was how the group fit into the local or State government. Every municipality in the state was involved in this.

Chair Ballin explained that it was an ongoing dispute of the firefighter's union and local government center (LGC). The root of the problem was the fact that the LGC is continually lobbying on behalf of the municipalities to manage their portfolios. The firefighters are hoping to get as much as they can in the pension world and the insurance world and they are continuing to lobby on the other side of the table. They have filed suit seeking info on how the LGC is run. There have been some management problems in the last year and they have some new people on board. He noted that Ms. Levine was on the board of the LGC and could speak to it much better. Chair Ballin said that it is a political battle that the union firefighters have managed to get in front of the media on. He said that Thursday's Concord Monitor had a good article about it.

Mr. Markoff asked if there was any plan to discontinue these programs and make them defined contribution. If the portfolio goes down, the taxpayer ends up having to pay for it. There is no responsibility to do it properly. Mr. Kaplan said that there were 12-16 people on the pension fund committee and it is those people who decide whether the benefits should be enacted. Programs like social security don't start paying until 62, but these other programs can and will pay benefits at any age. Mr.

Markoff asked what the professional qualifications are of those on the committee. Mr. Kaplan said they hire outside of the group to manage the portfolio.

Mr. Payne opined that the unions weren't going to decide on defined contribution.

Mr. Markoff felt that people weren't aware of the source of the tax bill and they will get mad at the Town when they should be mad at things like this. He said he is not naïve but was not aware that this was what had been going on. He wasn't sure of the process and felt transparency was key. He opined that people need to know all of this information. Mr. Markoff then asked Mr. Weinstein how they get through this problem, as Mr. Weinstein had some background in this area. Mr. Weinstein said that they get through it just through pressure. They suggested talking to Ricia McMahon from Sutton, who used to be a representative. Mr. Markoff proposed having Town meeting take on some of these issues on education and not so much on how to spend small amounts of money. He said they need to make people more aware of what the source of these bills are and get a show of hands of who would respond and become a presence to fight these issues.

Mr. Bianchi said they have gotten away from the school district meeting being on just one day. By the same token, if people in the school district don't want to spend one day per year to help control the philosophy and budget of the school, and if those in the Town meeting are few, the apathy in the general population is there. They went away from one day school district meeting to go to the deliberative session, which 200 people attend. He said that it was going to take an effort by the population to give up a day to attend these kinds of meetings. The general public doesn't see all of this. They need to get involved and it is difficult to get this changed. Mr. Markoff said that times have changed about how people feel about their financial positions in the world. All levels of their lives are upended. He felt that they may be more apt to get involved if they know they can. When higher taxes are coming from sources with no representation, they need to encourage participation to make people aware and let them know they can help.

Mr. Bianchi said that very few people show up at the meetings in the Town. He referenced the School Board meetings in particular. He agreed with Mr. Markoff on the idea of getting more people involved, but felt it was a hard nut to crack. Mr. Markoff said that he agreed with Mr. Bianchi as well, but felt it was pertinent to get to this information at Town Meeting.

Ms. Loeffler said that regarding the problem with the school budget, there are so many mandated items, it increases the apathy. People feel that they should concentrate on what they can do at the State level. If there was more info from the Town, Ms. Levine could email everyone and explain the issues to them and people would be more apt show up for the meetings. Ms. Snay suggested putting articles in the papers to bring attention to the meetings. Mr. Lavoie said if Ms. Levine could notify people of upcoming meetings and explain the agenda, why they should go, and how it would affect them, they are more likely to generate some interest. He believed that most people do not even know what is going on in the town.

Mr. Kaplan said people most generally want to know how things will affect their pocketbook. He said that Ms. Levine was good at being able to relate items towards the monetary subject.

Mr. Payne said that he agreed with Gary Markoff about the battle to get people to attend meetings, but he believed they need to prioritize their efforts and get people aware of the big issues.

Ms. Helm said that since being on the Board of Selectmen, she has felt that it has consumed her life. She said that she appreciated Ms. Levine and all her work and that they must decide on what they should ask her to do. Ms. Helm went on to say that they all need to think about giving up other things in our lives to participate in the local government and getting in the know of what was going on in our communities.

She said that they can ask Ms. Levine to do more to inform the citizens, and it was perfectly justified, but to keep in mind that she was very busy as it is.

Ms. Brown said that talking about information, when she was on the school board people who she thought were fairly well-informed were sometimes ignorant of the complexity and make-up of the school district.

Mr. Hasenfuss asked who was unionized of the employees. Chair Ballin said there are no Town employees that are unionized. Mr. Kaplan said the teachers are unionized, but he didn't consider them to be Town employees.

Mr. Markoff asked when the tax bills went out. Ms. Helm said that they had already been sent. Mr. Markoff felt that maybe when they were to go out, they could ask if the Town had their email address on record. Chair Ballin said that the Quicklink insert that went out with the bills suggested giving their email address to them to add to the Town's mail list. Mr. Markoff suggested asking the people at Town Meeting for their email addresses. Chair Ballin said that he would email the times and dates of the GACIT hearings and would try and do a better job of letting people know what was going on in the town. He noted that they have 650 subscribers to the mail list currently and thought that was a pretty good number.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:00am

Respectfully submitted,

Kristy Heath, Recording Secretary
Town of New London