

Jon Bondy's Comments about Fletcher Town Government

As Read at Town Meeting on 3/3/20

I want to tell you about some of the persistent issues in our Town government that are generally unseen outside of the Town Office. I want you to be aware of these issues because ultimately I want you to be able to make informed decisions about whom you elect to Town positions, and whether or not you might want to run for an open position yourself.

Fletcher is a small town in every aspect. We don't have "politics" so much as administration. People pitch in to keep the town running, some making significant sacrifices. We lack a real newspaper, and now we don't even have the newsletter. All we have for communication is social media, rumor, and neighbors and friends talking to each other. Most of us live here because we want to live in a small town.

However there are some things that are not spoken about, and I think it is time that they were discussed.

Some people have put in heroic efforts for the town. I think of Terry Riggs, who worked close to full-time for well over a decade and refused to be paid for his effort. He was, and is, a patriot. And I think of Matt Gillilan, who is doing an impressive job as Road Commissioner. Many of you just see the Road Commissioners at Town Meeting, sitting among the other four Select Board members, and you are most likely unaware of how time consuming their job is.

Some people have an encyclopedic understanding of the history of our town, and contribute to the town through that knowledge. I think of Carlton Ferguson and Charles Tinker. But they are getting older, and it is past time to make a plan for transition. We tried to help with this effort by hiring Lister's assistants last year. The idea was that the assistants would be trained by the current Listers, and then the older Listers could resign and swap places with the assistants. The current Listers could stay engaged with the town to whatever degree they preferred, but we would start a new generation of Listers. It has been time for a change for quite a while. But most of you may be unaware of this, and some of you may feel that supporting an old friend is as important as, or more important than, getting the job done effectively.

Or take Fred Fletcher. He has been the Delinquent Tax Collector for a long time. It is a thankless and challenging job, dealing with people who are in dire financial situations, trying to work out payment plans that work both for the taxpayers and for the Town. Parts of the job could be folded into software that is currently running at the Town Offices, but some of us feel that we owe it to Fred to keep him in his position until he is ready to call it quits.

The trade-off between loyalty to friends in a small town vs. maximum efficiency is not always easy, especially with people you know and care about.

I mentioned Charles and Carlton and Fred, and their age. You might be looking at me and wondering "Jon: do you think they are any different than you?" And my answer is, of course, "no". I have had my eye on transitioning out for years, but the Town Clerk and the Select Board and I realize that there is no one, right now, to replace me. I hope we can figure that out in the next 3 years, if you re-elect me.

Not having a public forum for communicating about our public officials also makes it harder for voters to make informed decisions during elections. For example, last year, Jesse Wiens was up for re-election to the Select Board. Jesse and I recognized that he had missed more than 1/3 of the SB meetings in the past year, and we felt compelled to inform the voters about this. We felt that if the voters wanted him on the Board after being fully informed, that was fine, but not informing them seemed wrong. We consulted with Barry Doolan and planned for Jesse to speak after he was nominated, to explain what had happened. Instead, Jesse was nominated, no one else was nominated, and Jesse was promptly re-elected without being given the chance to speak. We tried, but failed, to inform you about what was going on. In my opinion, every nominee should be given a chance to speak, even if unopposed, and comments from the floor should be solicited for every nominee.

The Auditors offer another example. Auditors have two responsibilities: 1) to check, or audit, the books, so that we can rest assured that our finances are accurately portrayed in the Town Report, and 2) to prepare the Town Report. While there are, and have been, individual Auditors who have performed all of these duties, as a whole the Auditors have failed to do either of those jobs adequately, for as long as I can remember. The failure to audit the books in a thorough and timely manner is an ongoing concern of the Town Clerk, and should be of concern to you. Andrea Zamuda audited the books for FY2019 6 months after the FY was complete; this is better than nothing, but it is not the same as auditing every month; we need monthly audits, and Andrea intends to do so going forward.

Our Town Report gets prepared in January each year. This year, Nancy Cardinal did the bulk of the work preparing the report, as she has done in previous years. That said, Karrie and Aimee logged more hours than all of the Auditors combined. This has been going on for years: Elaine had the same problem. The Town Office staff worked the equivalent of a week on the Town Report because most of the Auditors were absent. Some, but not all, of the work can be done well ahead of time, but we have failed to accomplish this.

I do not believe the Auditors or anyone of our Town officials is lazy. Since I am retired, I have time to put into helping the town run smoothly, but everyone else on the Select Board has full time jobs and family responsibilities. Three out of the five members of the Select Board work for themselves. They are not lazy people, just busy people.

We need to find a way to get more residents involved and engaged with town government. Some nearby towns have twice as many committees and boards as we do, and they are fully staffed. For decades, we have struggled to find qualified people to work on the Planning Commission and Development Review Board. The situation with the Auditors is similar. People either are uninterested in helping out, or are unable to help out. And we need to find a way to get the news out in some manner other than a once-a-decade document like this.