

OPINION PIECE
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BY STEPHANIE BOYD

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A study in contrast: Considering how two Williamstown volunteer boards handle difficult civic issues – building a hotel on hallowed land and cutting a much-beloved early-childhood education program

By Stephanie Boyd

Stephanie Boyd has been a Williamstown resident since 2004. She is Founding and Former Director of the Zilkha Center for Environmental Initiatives at Williams College, has a Civil Engineering MBA, and is a Ceramic Artist, member of the Williamstown Conservation Commission, and mother of a Mount Greylock Regional High School student.

Thursday, April 28, 2016, I navigated between two town meetings: the planning board discussing a citizen's petition related to a proposed zoning overlay for the Waubeeka property, and the elementary school committee hearing public comments related to the downsizing of the 27 year old side-by-side program, a pre-k program designed to provide educational needs for special ed kids and their peers.

Seeing these two meetings unfold at the nearly the same time, (1 hour or so at the planning board, 45 minutes at school committee meeting, and then back to planning board for another hour) I was struck by their similarities and their startling differences.

Common elements of these meetings included:

1. Both were dealing with issues that strike at the heart of what makes Williamstown a special place: our beautiful rolling hills and farmland in one case and our highly valued educational system in the other.
2. Both concerned hotly debated subjects with well-spoken, informed citizens lobbying their elected committee members on both sides of the issues.
3. Both discussions were held in well-attended open public meetings.
4. Both had lawyers in attendance.
5. Both issues will ultimately be resolved through a vote at Town Meeting.

But there the similarities stopped.

Seeking public input

The planning board actively sought out opinions from Williamstown residents. At one point, planning board member, Ann McCallum, reached out to those in attendance and said: "I want to hear from some of you!" At the elementary school committee meeting, the committee listened patiently to those who spoke, perhaps attentively, I couldn't tell because they did not react or make any direct comment in response to anything they heard. In fact, after members of the school board made a few remarks, someone in the audience very respectfully requested that he be permitted to respond, and was told "No" by the school committee chair, Dan Caplinger.

As a resident blurted out a comment from the audience at the school committee meeting, a response of "You are out of order" by the school committee lawyer was received. In contrast, when audience members spoke out of turn at the planning board meeting, chair, Amy Jeschawitz, simply directed, even encouraged, the residents to come to the microphone.

Limiting free speech

Where the lawyers present at the planning board meeting spoke on behalf of their client or as citizens presenting their personal views, the lawyer's role at the school committee meeting was apparently to shut down comments by the public where he deemed them inappropriate. In fact, as resident, Joe Bergeron, delivered his remarks in an attempt to open up the conversation and address issues that many have been discussing for weeks, he was stopped in mid-sentence due to some perceived offense. Here is an excerpt of his remarks that somehow violated some speech code.

Twice, you voted on budgets that pitted Side by Side against other programs. Twice, data was presented to you that was incomplete and inaccurate in that it completely omitted the special education budget associated with the program and artificially capped the tuition revenue that you could receive. You voted under false pretenses.

The budget is not a reason to contract the program. False rumors around declining demand and enrollment, licensing or accreditation issues, financial aid issues or other administrative misgivings are also not reasons to contract the program. We can and should openly discuss and address those tonight.

I was shocked to see that the school committee feels that they need a lawyer to protect them from the comments of thoughtful, dedicated community members.

Discussing and deliberating in public

The planning board sought to find common ground: 'we all want a golf course, we all want development and we all want preserved open space'. The discussion focused on the how to get there in a way that works for everyone. In contrast, the school committee repeatedly mentioned that the administration is working with the best intentions. Great, we get that, but that isn't a goal or set of common objectives.

The planning board discussion was open and respectful even amidst the differences of opinions of those in the audience and on the board itself. Members of the planning board have varying opinions on how the zoning issue should be managed, but they stated their views, they provided background on their thinking, they were willing to make compromises and to consider other points of view.

On the other hand, the school committee chair, Caplinger, cited vague reasons for why a cost analysis developed by citizens differed from that developed by the school administration. "Different assumptions were used", he noted. But these assumptions were not presented or defended.

The newly appointed superintendent, Douglas Dias, noted he regretted former statements that he made indicating that the side-by-side program downsizing was due to financial reasons but did not then explain why the decision had been made, as I would have expected. This also made me wonder why, a few minutes earlier committee chair Caplinger only addressed the issue of the financial analysis assumptions implying that it was a financial reason causing the contraction in the side-by-side program.

In contrast to the back and forth discussion among planning board members, the school committee members essentially all made very similar comments, primarily related to their confidence in the school administration. "This affects a lot of people. To my mind, that is all the more reason to believe Dr. Dias has the best of intentions. He wouldn't do this lightly,' noted committee member Joe Johnson.

While having confidence in the school administration, is not a problem in itself, the fact that there was not a discussion of the merits, or the pros and cons of their decisions, makes me wonder why a public meeting was held at all. The lack of discussion, the lack of presentation of their analysis and lack of a clear consistent statement for the rationale for the downsizing resulted in the appearance of opaque decision-making. And it does not follow guidelines prescribed by the Massachusetts Association of School Committees, "they must meet, *discuss and deliberate* in public."

This same document then instructs committees that: “Advocating for students is one of your most important roles. *Explaining the issues to the public is an important part of advocacy.*” I am sure everyone will not wholeheartedly agree with the decision that the planning board will eventually come to regarding the zoning issue, but there is no doubt that we will all understand clearly how they got there. On the other hand, after several meetings of the school committee, we still don’t know or understand why the much beloved side-by-side program is being so negatively impacted.

Understanding the role of the town

Where the planning board, expressed their desire to develop a zoning overlay that will be successful in getting a “yes” vote at Town Meeting, the school committee did not express any concern related to their need to get a “yes” vote at the same meeting. Is it because the school budget is regularly passed without much fanfare?

What’s next?

While I have my opinions on how I would like to see both of these issues resolved, what disturbs me is not the decisions themselves but the apparent approach to the decision making, and the behavior of our elected representatives towards community members.

I know I want town committees to listen to their constituents, to engage townspeople and each other in healthy discussion and debate, and to make decisions that are at least comprehensible even if they don’t meet our personal expectations or desires.

I urge you to think about these issues during upcoming elections and Town Meeting, and to stay involved at committee meetings.