Things Are Too Quiet In Winsted

By Charlene LaVoie, Community Lawyer

All Is Quiet In Winsted I: Where are Winsted's Leaders?

Winsted has something in common with New Britain. In New Britain, Superintendent Paul V. Sequeira secretly tape recorded conversations of school administrators to determine whether they were "loyal." Two other school administrators knew of Mr. Sequeira's activities and did nothing stop it.

In Winsted, a selectman who is also a state police of officer used the recording equipment of the Winsted Police Department to secretly tape record a conversation between two citizens. He used the tape recording to threaten certain candidates on the basis that the conversation demonstrated a "betrayal" of the Democratic party (wait until you hear the tape). At least six others knew about and/or participated in this plan, including two former and two current selectmen. None of these people did anything to stop or denounce it.

This is where the similarity ends. In New Britain, an outpouring of moral indignation, as well as legal charges made it clear to Mr. Sequeira that his actions were unacceptable. The Board of Education voted 9-1 to censure Mr. Sequeira and the two board members for their actions, which the Board characterized as inexcusable and unethical. Sequeira issued a public apology to those whom privacy he invaded. The community sent the message, loud and clear.

On the other hand, in Winsted the wrongdoers carry on, comfortable in the assertion that their actions are justified by the "betrayal" of the Democratic Party. There has been no outpouring of moral indignation, no statement from community leaders that such behavior will not be tolerated. All is quiet.

In both New Britain and Winsted the moral and ethical fabric of the community is tested by these events. New Britain citizens and leaders met the challenge and publicly denounced such activity. In Winsted, the silence condones neighbors spying on neighbors, implicitly permits the invasion of everyone's privacy and teaches our children that the political arena is a free for all in which anything goes and the ends justify the means.

All Is Quiet In Winsted II: Is This Anyway to Treat Volunteers?

At the past several Board of Selectmen meetings there has been discussion about the appointment/reappointment of regular and alternate members of the Zoning Board of Appeals. The participants were two selectmen, both Democrats, who were selected by the Board to find volunteers for commissions and the current and former ZBA members, both Republican and Democrat.

The current chairperson of the commission was passed over for reappointment with a flurry of excuses about how she should have indicated her intention to be reappointed even though there is no such requirement and the tradition has always been to ask a commission member of their interest.

Next a Democratic selectman suggested that the current alternates were not nominated to be regular members of the commission because, as alternates, they improperly participated in meetings. This is not only a disingenuous statement, it is incorrect. These alternates never participated in an improper way. Alternate members may participate in housekeeping matters during meetings and when seated as regular members they have the authority to participate as regular members. An alternate may not vote or make motions on land use applications to the commission unless seated as regular members.

The other Democratic selectman tried to justify the non-appointment by saying that he only wants the most qualified members of the community on the important land use boards and implied that the alternates and members seeking reappointment were not as qualified as those with degrees in engineering who were appointed to the commission.

Only one citizen had the presence and good sense to comment that there should be a mix of citizens on the boards and commissions and that if we required citizens to hold advanced degrees to serve on the boards and commissions, many of the people now serving would not be eligible. There was also comment that commission members should be encouraged to continue on the commissions and volunteers should be embraced, not dismissed.

The entire discussion was an irresponsible display by elected officials and a tortured attempt to get around an attack on the members and alternates seeking reappointment. It was also a signal to citizens that they better not volunteer unless they are on the right side of certain selectmen.

The other selectmen did not participate in this important discussion about the need for citizen volunteers to sit on the boards and commissions in town. Nor did anyone comment that citizens should be treated with respect and dignity and commended for their volunteer and civic efforts and not belittled, overlooked and harassed.