

Community Lawyer's Office



CHARLENE LaVOIE

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By JEDD GOULD
Register-Citizen Staff

WINSTED Three years ago this community was given something no other town in the country has — a Community Lawyer's Office.

In recent months, however, some people are beginning to wonder if that is a distinction to be treasured after all.

Established and funded by Winsted natives Ralph Nader and his sister Claire, the office is designed to give citizens the legal tools necessary to involve themselves with their local government.

The office in Winsted is an experiment

that will someday be reproduced in other communities, nationally known consumer advocate Ralph Nader said recently.

But a new perspective on the experimental office started coming into focus for some people on Nov. 18, minutes after the town manager was fired by the Board of Selectmen. It was then that Community Lawyer Charlene LaVoie stood up and demanded that selectmen tell the truth about the firing.

With rumors of political deals and personal vendettas running rampant, the board had fired former Town Manager Wayne W. Dove by a 4-3 vote, offering the

changes direction

public little explanation.

LaVoie, like hundreds of other town residents, was not satisfied with the public account of the board's reasoning.

That night, when the mayor tried to move the meeting forward, LaVoie stayed on her feet and shouted him down. He told her she was out of order. She ignored his command and told him that the citizens wanted to know the truth.

It was not until most of the 150 people in The Gilbert School auditorium erupted with angry shouts that LaVoie sat down.

In that moment she put herself solidly at the center of a political storm that raged in

this town for months. She drafted petitions, filed a lawsuit and spoke the language of legalese for citizens who didn't know how. And she was one of the driving forces behind the creation of the Citizens' Coalition for Open Government, a group formed to protest Dove's firing.

People charged her with being politically motivated and taking sides. Just as many others said they didn't know what they would have done without her.

One of the many who didn't approve of her actions was Selectman Nancy P. Ha-

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