

Winsted citizens' advocate changes its colors

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bhal, who said LaVoie had crossed the line from community advocate to political activist.

"She has the power to rile people up," Habbal said. "I think she's an alley cat and that's how she fights — like an alley cat."

More than any other factor, Habbal blames LaVoie for the tension and political chaos that the firing of the town manager caused.

Without LaVoie, both sides would have sat down and discussed the issues calmly with each other, Habbal said. But with LaVoie there was intimidation, confrontation and, in the end, no chance at compromise, she claims.

But, while LaVoie was annoying some, she was inspiring others. A petition LaVoie prepared in protest of the board's action against Dove was signed by 1,600 people.

And, shortly after, when selectmen moved to fire Dove, the Community Lawyer's Office brought the right of the citizens to vote on the issue in a referendum to Litchfield Superior Court.

She lost, but the case established LaVoie as an active partic-

ipant in the affairs of the town. She has been energetic, visible and vocal ever since.

LaVoie loyally attends the Board of Selectmen meetings and frequently expresses her opinions from the back of the room. And she has been called the "eightth selectman" by those who think she is politically motivated.

LaVoie's predecessor, Ellen Thomas, was in Winsted for a year and although she was responsible for high-profile issues such as initiating an ordinance outlawing polystyrene usage in town, she managed to escape the personal criticisms that have been aimed at LaVoie.

"I took my share of criticism," Thomas said. "But I think that a lot of times people perceive you based on the topics you choose to take on."

Thomas said, for example, that she was "a lightning rod" on the issue of development in town.

However, never before has the office been so solidly in the forefront of an issue that so gripped the town as it was during the uproar that followed Dove's firing.

"I don't believe you would see all this activity in Winsted right

now if it wasn't for that office," Walter D. Miller, selectman and president of the Winchester Taxpayers Association, said.

The firing of Dove put LaVoie in a role that citizens had never seen take before; proactive rather than reactive, leading a charge and not following.

"It is really a cause for celebration," Claire Nader said. "This is what the Community Lawyer's Office was designed for: citizen empowerment."

LaVoie relishes the role she played in the protests that followed the Dove firing and says that it is that kind of involvement that the Community Lawyer's Office was designed to foster.

"The focus of the project is to provide the citizens with the skills of a lawyer, but it is also to be an advocate for the benefits of citizens," LaVoie said.

In our society, access to legal opinions are a necessary tool for the democratic process, she said.

But LaVoie's activity is questioned by some in town government who believe that her agenda is not citizen empowerment as

much as it is political empowerment for the three selectmen who supported the former town man-

ager; Brian W. Sullivan, John F. Gauger Jr., and Miller.

Mayor William H. McCabe, who has consistently been on the receiving end of LaVoie's anger since November, said he is disappointed by the new direction LaVoie has taken.

"The role of that office can be a very positive role," he said. "It can be a supplement or another shoulder for people to lean on who are working with government."

But McCabe said he is concerned by LaVoie's activity because it appears to all be negative and consistently aimed against the town government. And rather than being a force that works in conjunction with town government, the community lawyer is becoming structurally opposed to everything done at town hall, he believes.

"I see people involved with that office that have energy, ideas and I look at it as a potential resource and would like to be able to find ways to use it that way."

"We have got to find a common ground on which we can interact more positively with that office," McCabe said. "I just hope that it's not structurally set against us."