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ager; the right had simply never been exercised in the past.

After hearing arguments from LaVoie and Town Attorney Svonkin in mid-December, Litchfield Superior Court Judge Anne Dranginis dissolved the injunction; the town's power structure was returned to the status quo. But a deep rift remained, with town officials accusing LaVoie of exercising purely political, not community-based, motives.

"The government does err and that needs to be addressed," Winsted Mayor McCabe concedes. "The problem is, if you become so closely involved with steering and trying to set policy, how can you be a watchdog yourself? You can't be a referee and also be the guy scoring the touchdowns.

"The [community lawyer] position has become almost indistinguishable from an elected office," he adds. "It attempts to control policy."

LaVoie flatly rejects that allegation.

"The way I analyze it and decide whether to take something on is not whether I agree with it politically, but *procedurally*," she says.

In the Dove case, she says, "the charter was ignored, the procedure was violated and the people were outraged."

The officials' complaints, she argues, stem from their frustration with being held to the letter of legal procedure.

"The fastidious adherence to procedure annoys a lot of people, but it is the glue that holds our society together," she says. "When you don't follow procedure, you have an unaccountable government, cynical citizens and a disruption of democracy."

Town selectman Brian Sullivan, an unlikely ally, having been at odds with LaVoie on several issues, agrees.

"The community lawyer has created a tremendous amount of community awareness," he says. "It has made selectmen more responsible and more accountable."

Sullivan rejects the notion that LaVoie plays politics.

"I've never seen her play politics," he says. "I've been on opposite sides of issues with her but I have no problem with her. The only negatives I see are political figures on the opposite sides of issues trying to *pull her into* politics."

Know How to Fight Back

All this griping over the community lawyer's proper role is to be expected, says Claire Nader.

"Actually, if she [LaVoie] didn't come under criticism, I would have to wonder if she's doing her job," she says of LaVoie.

Svonkin, however, feels the community lawyer's "best role is educational, when it lends support, when it's not leading the charge."

He believes public support of LaVoie is not as strong as it might appear. "If you agree with her, you believe she is representing the interests of the community," he says. "If you don't agree with her, then no. But it is unpopular to be vocal about *not* being supportive of the 'community' lawyer."

Only by getting "broad-based community financial involvement" can any community lawyer program be truly representative of the community, Svonkin asserts. Barring that, he suggests that the Winsted project "adopt standards detailing what kinds of issues it believes to be in the community interest" so it can truly be an organ of the community.

McCabe is blunter. He says he simply wants "to call a spade a spade."

"Is it a community-based office or a politically partisan office?" he asks. "If [the project] looks on its role only as a watchdog, to catch the bad guys, then they are limiting themselves." McCabe wants to see the office continue to promote civic awareness and involvement, "like planting trees or the styrofoam ban," and expand into other non-partisan areas, such as providing legal assistance to needy residents. Suing the town over partisan matters, he says, is simply not constructive.

When asked if her role exacerbates society's tendency to be overly litigious, LaVoie objects.

"We're a society of laws and we pride ourselves on that. I don't understand what it means—too litigious," she says.

"I don't accept that understanding the law necessarily means constant confrontation," she adds. "But when laws are used against people who don't understand, or the process is abused—which it is so frequently by public officials—you have to know how to fight back."

LaVoie certainly knows how to do that. ■