

Winsted's Brand of Politics Places Its Town Manager in the Hot Seat

Continued from Page One

the record that I left because the Mayor then [Mr. Pettit] kept trying to micromanage the job. He kept going to Hartford," to deal with the state himself, rather than going through the manager's office. "He used to say that he thought he would make a good manager."

In Winsted's politics, Mr. Battistoni confesses, "there are too many little personal vendettas on the Board of Selectmen, too many egos. Nobody is getting on able to work under those conditions for very long."

Mr. Dove held the post from 1990 to '91, and remains puzzled about why he was fired following the November 1991 election of Mayor McCabe. Four months earlier, Mr. Dove recounts, he received a "gold star" evaluation and a raise. Selectmen Walter D. Miller and Brian W. Sullivan, both Democrats, citing his dismissal was the result of some off-the-record political deal between the Mayor and other selectmen.

"They say Mr. Dove 'got shafted'" and even suggest that he be rehired as soon as possible. It is not a prospect that the former manager welcomes.

"If I took one year to get over that case, I would think I'd be dead before I took the position again," Mr. Dove says, adding, "In my opinion the town manager form of government won't work in Winsted." The board confrontation drags you into the politics, and whenever it's convenient they just go around you. They even drag in the department heads as well."

The charter, Mr. Dove argues, is designed to prevent the selectmen from dealing directly in administrative issues, and prevents the manager from political back. Instead, the Town Manager has become a convenient "fall-guy."

"Once the Town Manager is in office, the job of the board is to get on with the public policy of the town, and let the manager administer," he continues. "The Town Manager should be selected from the politics. Everybody on that board should be sitting behind you."

Mr. Vayner, who also served as Town Manager for Waterbury, managed Winsted for six months in the weeks of Mr. Dove's stormy dismissal, discovering just how politicized the position had become.

"I remember going to council meetings and [Mr. Sullivan] had a 'Remember Dove' bumper sticker on his briefcase. One of the things he said was

"Winsted is like a soap opera, if you tune in five years later it's still in the same place."

—Nancy P. Habbal
Democratic Selectman

that if he ever was in a majority on the board, he would bring Wayne Dove back. The odds are that in November, should that faction win a majority, the current Town Manager will be fired."

Mr. Vayner, who now teaches a politics and government course at Felke Post University in Waterbury, says he tried to be "as precise and unbiased and as business-like as possible" while in Winsted, and that this attitude may in fact have contributed to his failure to be appointed to the fall-term position. "Students have shown that the greater

the degree of political instability, the less likely the town manager form of government is going to work," he recounts. "In Winsted they have an in-his-party split on the board between the Democrats. Everybody wants to see whose side you are on, and if you're not on anybody's side then they want someone else in the job who will be on their side."

"They definitely have a problem in Winsted," Mr. Vayner adds. "The Town Manager becomes the fall-guy for the politicians. Could I have been affected by that? The answer is 'absolutely.' Mr. Maynard was hired in May of 1992. The apparently uncorruptable nature of the town was one of the things that made it so attractive to the current Town Manager, who says he had been observing events in Winsted for seven years, while managing towns in Maine, Arizona and Vermont."

"I always felt the problem here was not having a professional manager," Mr. Maynard maintains. "This town has fantastic potential, and it has a tremendous number of really good people. A professional town manager's job is to help a town to realize its potential."

The first major test of Mr. Maynard's initiative will come on Jan. 23, at a town meeting to debate a bonding proposal for capital improvements. The projects include a \$7.5 million water filtration plant, \$6 million for road improvements, \$3.5 million for road extension around Highland Lake and \$370,000 for tax reduction.

The Town Manager has drawn criticism from some selectmen who say the road projects are unnecessary, and label the rest of the plan too costly and ambitious for Winsted. Mr. Maynard has argued all along, however, that state

and Federal loans and grants will cover most of the costs.

"It's difficult to explain to people how these things work," he concedes. "First you pass your referendum, then you do your bonding and organizing, when you are ready to go to construction, then the state and the Federal Government put up their money."

Even if Mr. Maynard successfully secures the funding that he predicts, and manages to stick to the administrative side of the town's business, it is unlikely that his position will be a sheltered one, particularly as some selectmen would prefer a strong mayoral form of government.

One of those is Mr. Miller, who is rather outspoken on the issue, and among other things says, "I'll tell you one thing. If [Democratic Selectman John F.J. Ganger, Sullivan, and myself] get re-elected in November, and pick up another vote, the guy is gone."

Mr. Sullivan confides that "town managers have his sympathy in Winsted."

"In my opinion we should have a strong mayor kind of government," he adds, saying "that would take the political burden off the Town Manager. With a strong mayor, you let him take the weight of the decisions. Right now it's unfair to the Town Manager, he doesn't know how long he's going to be here."

Mr. Maynard can take some comfort from the fact that Mayor McCabe thinks the town manager form of government is the best one for Winsted, adding that it is up to the manager to "stay out of politics to the maximum extent possible."

"I believe in the town manager form in general," says Democratic Selectman Nancy P. Habbal, "however it appears that in Winsted there are people who want to play politics with the position, and that makes it very difficult."

But Winsted is Winsted, Ms. Habbal continues. "It will move forward at its own pace. As somebody said to me the other day, 'Winsted is like a soap opera. If you tune in five years later it's still in the same place.'"