

GEORGETOWN TODAY

BOXFORD

Golfers, brides, money, and fire 'alarms'

Lawrence "Lonnie" Brennan
VALLEY PATRIOT GEORGETOWN COLUMNIST

The big questions: who knew what, when, and what actions did they take to prepare for this day?

If you've watched the Boston television stations, or read the daily papers, you know the Georgetown (golf) Club closed abruptly in September, leaving brides high and dry, and apparently "screwed" out of their reception deposits. (They'll have to wait in line behind an estimated \$10 million owed to more than 200 creditors before they can see a dime of their wedding funds returned to them.)

What's almost funny is how the press reacted. You see, after years and years of court battles and court orders, and a couple of judges describing in their documents the temperament and actions of the Club's president, Peter Wojtkun, it took a gaggle of brides to do what the courts could not do: put a spotlight on some unpleasant activities. Upsetting a few brides sent TV news helicopters to the air, news personalities onto the streets, and daily reporters scrambling for quotes.

Previously, Mr. Wojtkun was ordered by the courts to return hundreds of thousands of dollars he had taken from some golf members and abutters. His cases and appeals and legal schedules were so busy last year with various cases from present and former golf club members who he had either sued, or had sued him, that one judge noted that "the Georgetown Club" appears to be another name for "the full employment of all legal counsel in Essex County." But until recently, it was all about golfers and abutters, and pretty boring drivel to plow through. But, toss in a few brides and their deposits and cancelled parties and: instant "press" appeal.

So, here is what you probably haven't read yet: following the September closing of the Club, the Valley Patriot obtained a copy of a court document apparently containing hand notations from Mr. Wojtkun, certifying to the United States Bankruptcy Court via petition # 09-18710, that the Club's intent to seek bankruptcy protection was drawn up on May 6, 2009. One must wonder how many brides gave deposits after that May 6th date. And why no one thought to consider putting such deposits in a separate escrow account to protect the brides, should the Club decide to execute the bankruptcy filing?

Fire Contract "Alarming"

"Alarming" is the term Erie Fire Association No. 4 President Dan Brodie used to convey his thoughts to the Georgetown Board of Selectmen regarding the contract proposal he had recently received from Georgetown Fire Chief Al Beardsley and Selectman Steve Smith.

Chief Beardsley reported to the Board that there were some "misunderstandings" with the proposal, and Mr. Smith was quick to point out that there were some mistakes made and "I'm going to work to make it right."

Mr. Smith was emphatic and his words were well received by a tense crowd

audience, concerned with the future of the fire department and the protection of the North Street areas serviced most directly by Erie.

Erie has traditionally received an annual stipend of \$3,000 from the Town which Erie uses to offset a portion of approximately \$4,600 of insurance costs. Erie provides the Town with two fire trucks, supporting equipment, and the North Street Fire Station in exchange for the yearly stipend. No payment was received from the Town last year, and so far, no payment has been received this year.

Members of the fire department and Erie's association attended the selectman's meeting to hear first-hand the status of the contract. After some exchanges, Selectman Chair Phil Trapani joined his fellow board members in committing to clear up any issues: "Let's get this thing done," he told the Chief and the board.

The Erie 4 Fire Association (which includes firefighters as well as an incredibly large number of "Friends of Erie" supporters) raises money through dinners, events, hall rental, etc. to purchase trucks, equipment, and maintain the building and grounds of the North Street station. (By way of disclosure, I finally joined the Association in March of this year, and I encourage everyone in Town to do the same.)

First in Class, Now Off the Department

In an earlier column I had noted that Georgetown's Chris Dubois had graduated first in his class at the Massachusetts Fire Academy. That achievement, in June of this year, was no surprise to those of us who know of his credentials and years of extensive experience with the on-call Georgetown Fire Department.

(Mr. Dubois had recently taken a full-time firefighter position on the Westborough Fire Department. By way of reference, several of Georgetown's on-call firefighters are full-time members of other fire departments or emergency medical response units.)

With regret, during his Academy training time, Mr. Dubois had to reduce his on-call work in Georgetown this past year. As a result of this temporary reduction in local volunteer hours, he was, for a lack of better words, not received well by some of the members at Central station.

So, after 14 years of dedication and service to Georgetown, the former fire department officer, our neighbor, is no longer responding to local calls. His gear is now in the hands of others.

It's our loss. Let's hope it's only temporary and things can change in the future. We have many outstanding members of the Georgetown Fire Department at both the Central and Erie (North Street) locations. But Chris will be missed.



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A moral choice for Boxford

John McCormack
VALLEY PATRIOT BOXFORD COLUMNIST

The "Joint Meeting Haynes Land Advisory Committee & Housing Partnership Committee" happened at Boxford's Town Hall on Wednesday evening, September 30, 2009. This was supposed to be an informational presentation for the public and also a dry run for the committees' presentations of this combined housing, recreation and conservation project at the upcoming Special Town Meeting. Well it certainly was dry, recycling the same plans as last year minus a few athletic amenities. As for the public, all of the attendees but three appeared to be interested town officials or employees; the three civilians were two abutters and me.

I asked Peter Delaney, who is a member of most of the committees pushing this project, how this meeting was publicized. He said it was "on the website" which is true, but it was listed as just another upcoming public meeting. He deferred responsibility for that to the Town Administrator's office. I asked why the ubiquitous "sandwich boards" which announce town meetings, flu clinics, and elections weren't deployed in the villages. He deferred this responsibility to the DPW. I guess no one got the memo.

Town Meeting purchased the 75.5 acre Haynes land off Middleton Road near Main Street two years ago for \$3.3 million. The rich purchase price was supposedly supported by the property's "highest and best" use for 24 house lots of a potential 34 lot subdivision. But soon after the deal closed, concern arose about the presence of Blanding's Turtle, an endangered species. Quelle surprise! After thousands of dollars of consultant and state application fees, we know that 46.5 acres (62%) of the property is considered Priority Habitat by the state. Quelle horreur! The town seemed blindsided by this. The Salem News reported "Selectman Stephen Davis said the town had no way to know the Blanding's turtles lived in the area."

An inconvenient truth, however, is that an inquiry about the presence of endangered species on this property was made in 2004. An appraisal referring specifically to Blanding's was done in 2006 and came into the town's possession at an unknown time. Whether this information was discounted or overlooked during the purchase negotiations remains a mystery.

Thus began a comedy of errors surrounding this land bought in a fever. Recreational fields were the presumed motivation for most voters to support the purchase. Three things stood out in the stack of engineering drawings on view at the meeting showing two large multi-purpose fields and one baseball field.

First, the baseball field will have its own "gray monster" in left field; a rumored

21,000 cubic yards of ledge must be blasted to level the area. Second, the elevation of the multi-purpose fields must be raised up to four feet to keep them dry in spring. Significant stormwater management facilities are required. Third, every recreational field and parking lot encroached significantly, sometimes almost totally, on wetlands buffer areas. In addition, Boxford conservation regulations prohibit any project which will have an adverse effect on rare species habitat.

It isn't clear that any of the recreational fields can be built under the conservation regulations. Yet, a Haynes committee member reports a "working spirit" to "create an amicable solution" with the Conservation Commission. This has been going on for over a year. The Selectmen support this project and the Selectmen appoint the Conservation Commission. The "appearance" of a conflict of interest is unavoidable.

The most usable part of the land is 13.4 acres at the Middleton Road entrance and is slated for 20 units of "community housing." The housers tried and failed to grab this land last year. They talk about "designating" the land but this means changing the purpose of the land and granting an "affordable housing restriction" which gives the holder the legal right to enforce the restriction, effectively giving control of the land to the housers. They are trying again this year and additionally want the power to dispose of the land. The intention is to donate the land, which the town claims is worth \$578,000, to the housing developer.

The value was calculated using the average acre cost of the land, which is clearly erroneous. The town's appraisal used an average lot value, but states clearly that "several of the lots ... would be oversized (i.e., above average in value), but others would be impacted by limited uplands and proximity to wetlands (i.e., below average value)." The housing area essentially occupies two oversized ANR lots, which don't require roadway construction or extensive permitting. These were appraised in a related report at \$595,000 each, or about \$1.2 million, and could be considerably more.

The cost of this project could include the integrity of Boxford's government if shoddy procurement, compromised regulation, and dubious accounting are rewarded. Boxford's Town Meeting voters need to make a moral decision about this project and defeat the "do whatever it takes" mentality employed so far by rejecting Articles 11 and 12.



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