

To the Editor:

This letter is in response to the letter you published from Kimberly Hermanson of Holland, urging residents to get involved in their communities. What she had to say was very true, that many people work hard and sacrifice to keep each town running. Towns cannot function without the Boards who oversee the health, environment, zoning, property values, etc. of each Town. When residents are actively involved and watching what is happening, bad behavior is less likely to occur, because of the light of public scrutiny. So how can you get involved? You don't have to run for office, or volunteer for a committee. You can help in the following ways:

First, educate yourself. Read your Town's annual report to see what was accomplished last year, and the issues that face your Town. Look at your Town's website. There you can learn about upcoming meetings and often read minutes of previous meetings. Read the local news, print or online, for more information about current matters in your Town.

Second, don't rely on public blogs to educate you. They usually present only one point of view, and often have incorrect or out-of-date information. Go the State Attorney General's website to learn about the Open Meeting Law, which applies to all Town Board meetings. Read about the Public Records law on the Secretary of the Commonwealth's website. The State Ethics Commission publishes rules of conduct and advisories that apply to all municipal employees and most volunteer positions as well.

Third, attend meetings of Town Boards, Committees and Commissions. Choose an area that interests you and go to that Board's meetings. Do you have children? Go to the School Committee or Recreation Committee meetings. Are you concerned about the diseases spread by mosquitos? Sit in on the Board of Health meeting. Do you care about the environment? Visit the Conservation Commission and hear what they are discussing.

What should you expect when you attend a meeting? It is required by law that an easy-to understand agenda be publically available 48 hours in advance of the meeting. You can usually print the agenda from the Town website, but a copy should be made available to anyone who asks for one at the meeting. Committee members should be courteous to one another, and to anyone who comes to speak to them. Members should be listening to whoever is speaking, not be looking at their phones. There should be no casual discussion of any business before the meeting has been called to order. Committee members should arrive on time and prepared to discuss the topics to be addressed on the agenda. If members were sent information ahead of time, they should have already read what was sent to them. It is the chairman's responsibility to see that each member has the opportunity to express their opinion courteously, while keeping the discussion on topic and moving forward in a timely way, in order to complete the agenda. At the end of the meeting there should be clarity about what was decided, what the next steps will be to accomplish it, and who is responsible for getting that done. This is achieved by making motions in proper form, and taking accurate minutes.

Elected Board Members and Public Officials do not answer to the Board of Selectmen, as many people believe, but to the voters of their Town. Here are some things to consider when evaluating the job performance of the people who are currently elected, and who work for you:

Do Members and Officials seek to do what they believe is in the best interest of the Town? Do they put aside their own self-interest and opinions when they make decisions? Are they fair and impartial as they carry out their duties? Do they treat everyone with courtesy and respect? Have they taken advantage of opportunities offered by the State of Massachusetts and professional associations to attend training in their field? Do they make sure that they comply with the requirements of the Open Meeting Law, not having discussions about Board matters with other Board Members outside of their public meetings? If Board Members take votes without any discussion in the meeting, have they already discussed the topic privately? Are Elected Officials responsive to requests from the public? Do they answer your questions freely, and can they cite the relevant laws? If you have a question, will they give you advice about where to go for information?

Most Public Officials and Board Members are fair, honest people who work hard for the betterment of their communities, often with low or no payment. They devote time and energy to educating themselves about the issues related to their positions. People who are discourteous to others, or negative in outlook, or pushing their own agenda can make the work very difficult and unappealing for the rest of the Board and other Public Officials. It is my observation after more than nine years in public service that residents who wish to attend various Board Meetings in an effort to learn about the issues in their Town and to support courteous behavior, open debate and honest government are very welcome to participate.

Leis Phinney

Town Clerk, Wales