

Educating Voters

By Michael J. Atwood

What a month. Only 1087 voters showed up on Tuesday February 10th to vote in a \$10,000 preliminary election. The inference from the local media is that people in N.A. are apathetic about government. Actually it's not an inference: that was a headline I read. We apparently don't care; we treat democracy with disdain and disrespect. The headlines suggest that we need to: Get out there and take part in democratic process! Now go vote at the movie theater. Do you hear me? Respect the process!

I think that Board of Elections Chairman Kevin Poirier was correct to point out that people go crazy when you try to cancel a preliminary and disrupt the democratic process put forth by a by-law in a charter ratified 32 years ago. But let's not forget that we call this democracy for a reason — it's not mandatory! If we did require every taxpayer to vote we'd call that Communism. Lack of participation speaks very loudly if you ask me. In a democracy, the majority rules and 94% of our town stayed home.

It's also been a strange year. We're in a recession. The local and national economies are both tanking. Everyone is cutting back financially. Tables are empty at local restaurants that used to be full. Ernie Boch has enough Toyotas to fill up four lots on the side of Rte. 1 and the eerily vacant lots where Pride Chevrolet used to be. The foot traffic at the Emerald Square Mall is definitely down. Stories of layoffs are passed on by word-of-mouth and foreclosure tales are sure to follow.

But despite all these things, our town sees it fit to spend \$10,000 on a preliminary just so voters have access to such an election. The cost of democracy is way too much in

this circumstance especially since we're \$2 to \$3 million short with our school budget this year.

And don't tell me that the sale of *Afghans* would pay for it. If my house has dropped \$46,000 in value that piece of art has dropped significantly too.

By my estimate, the preliminary (which actually eliminated only one candidate for selectmen) cost about \$10 per vote. Ironically, over at the Showcase, you can see a movie for \$9.75. Which would you choose? *Slumdog Millionaire* or voting in a N.A. preliminary?

I voted. It was my democratic decision and, since we dropped the cash, I decided to show up for the \$10,000 reception. However, the only entertainment I got out of the deal were conversations with the poll officials, Mr. and Mrs. Abdou, N.A.P.D. Captain Danny Coyle, RTM member, Amanda Adams, and North A.D. Paul Sullivan. These were all great conversations by the way, well worth the \$10 the town spent on me in order to vote.

On February 3rd, Superintendent Rick Smith told the school committee that there would surely be teacher cuts this year. How many? What departments? Department heads too? Administrators? Too early to tell—maybe 30 staff members, Smith said.

If I were an untenured teacher in North Attleborough or someone who was low on the seniority totem pole, I'd get my resume out there **NOW**. The school committee announcement doesn't come until spring so have a backup opportunity. Be prepared. The taxpayers of North Attleborough won't mind if you are looking around — we know you have a mortgage and bills to pay. And, with the state of the job market this year, you'd be

best served getting ahead of the game. June will be too late and you heard it from Rick Smith — cuts are definitely coming.

If you weren't aware: our teachers have been working without a contract. This is a hard pill to swallow along with the fact that administrators accepted their 4% raise this year. Add those raises up at say an average of \$3000 average per administrator (If you figure vice-principals make in the \$70,000's and principals over six-figures).

Hmmm....something doesn't seem right with that. You could practically pay for a teacher's salary with that money.

Speaking from family experience, my Dad, the former SPED Director in Norton, turned down his raise once, along with the rest of the administrators, in order to alleviate teachers getting laid off. He never saw that money again, so in turn our family sacrificed so another could benefit. He's retired now, never had a 403B, just a state teacher's pension. He's living comfortably at age 77.

As an educator, I'd have to say, it would be nice gesture for of our administrators to reject their 4% raise: follow Town Administrator Mark Fisher's lead last year. We're all suffering in this economic crisis. It would be a statement that says our teachers are worth it since they didn't have an option to accept or reject their 3.5% raise this year. If our town administrator can turn down a raise, maybe our school administrators should do the same. It would be a start in the healing process regardless especially if we are looking to lose those 30 educators and staff.

Instead, we'll play the usual games. The teacher unions will be asked to kick a higher percentage in for health insurance to alleviate the crisis for the town. The teachers

will be asked to sacrifice more. In my 13 years around education, I've seen it happen again and again. It's nothing short of using fear to motivate teacher unions.

So I hope that we can come to terms here with government and education. I hope we can learn a lesson from the silence of voters and the silence of teachers, who have no contract, are among the lowest paid, and are about to sacrifice their contribution toward health benefits and possibly their jobs.

But please don't mistake the silence for apathy; I'm hearing something quite different when I talk to voters and teachers around this town.