

Mayoral Race

By Michael J. Atwood

North Attleborough is talking about electing a mayor these days. If that interests you, then mark your calendar: on Monday, September 22nd, there will be a special town meeting to discuss government reform.

Last Monday, thirty (30) citizens of our beloved town with a population of 27,907, showed unity and declared that they want to explore the option of a mayorocracy. Like you, I was absent from that selectmen's meeting. I read about it in the paper, opting instead to stay at home and watch the Sox 3-0 win over Tampa Bay.

With all that said, allow me to use the next 1000 words to completely eliminate myself from ever being elected mayor...if it is indeed approved by North Attleborough voters and the Massachusetts legislature. State government has already rejected the idea three previous times but I hear the fourth is the charm. Good thing this isn't baseball.

I don't mean to be sarcastic but the whole idea of North Attleborough finally growing up as a town after 121 fruitful years, does seem quite humorous to me. I guess the majority of people at that meeting feel like we aren't getting things done, that certain aspects of our current government take too long. But, if 30 people think a mayor and town council can help us improve on this process, then I guess we better at least consider it.

All this talk of a mayor sends me back to high school. Back then, my good friend, Mayo, frequently referred to me as The Mayor. At Feehan, it seemed that I knew everyone, talked to everyone, made everyone or most everyone I met, my friend. It's just

in the Atwood genetics: we shake hands and talk a lot. Mayo thought it was hilarious the way I could walk into a strange crowd and connect with people. The problem was, just because I had a friendly, engaging personality, didn't mean I knew the first thing about politics. I just knew people and with a joke or a smile could get them to respond to me.

I got myself elected to the student council and was a surprise victor in the senior class presidential election. However, my tenure as president was arguably one of the least productive terms of any Feehan president. I was busy running rather than planning the powder puff football game and other important senior activities. My biggest accomplishment was getting a class t-shirt but I think my fellow officers actually took care of that. I should've resigned and I think my advisor, Mr. Peter Klin, probably wished I had. I don't blame him. I should have been impeached because I'd used my friendly personality to win a popularity contest.

Politicians in general scare me. I guess it's the whole cult of personality thing; they can be a bit narcissistic in my views. God knows I was when I ran for president but what teenager isn't? An election can become more about the candidate than the issues, as we've seen lately. Whether or not this mayor thing goes through, North Attleborough desperately needs to address some major issues right now. This is going to require focus and leadership; there is no room for sunshine patriots or poetry contests to solve this mayoral issue. North Attleborough, like America, is on the verge of a major metamorphosis.

In this metamorphic vision, I see new neighborhoods rising up after developers receive quick zoning approvals on 1-acre lots. I see golf courses appearing upon former landfills; hockey rinks constructed on the grounds of old amusement parks; I see new and

renovated schools; I see a larger education budget and N.A. teachers getting higher salaries so we can keep our fine educators here; I see a growing Special Needs program; I see the town electric company being sold and rates going up; I see gas lines being installed to meet rising fuel costs; I see Russian art being displayed in a secure location for all to cherish; I see the acquired LeStage property finally being turned into an open space area or park; I see an eight mile bike path extending across our town on the old railroad tracks from South Attleboro to Plainville. In the midst of this metamorphosis, I see a mayor sitting on the post, shaking hands with people at the state level but not getting these things done due to a personal political agenda. We already have five fine elected selectmen on the job, keeping watch of each other and a highly recruited, homegrown town administrator. Is the problem with the people or the process?

I don't even know what to base the criteria for a mayor on. I guess we'd have to look to our closest neighbor, the city of Attleboro for examples. Kai Shang was pretty good from what I recall. I do know he was a member of the first state basketball championship for Attleboro High, owned a laundry business, and was quite a character with a thick accent and hearty laugh. By all accounts, he was a good man, a productive mayor, and a fine spokesman for the city. Judy Robbins was also a smart, educated woman who also led the city successfully for a few terms. Robbins has even come to N.A. to help us with a few things after serving Attleboro. I hope all the former mayors excuse my lack of political knowledge. I'm from North Attleborough; we're not used to all this mayor talk.

And now Attleboro has Kevin Dumas, a popular mayor who just won re-election. I've been reviewing his background on his website. It's his financial background with

Fleet National and State Street Bank and ability to manage \$10 billion in retirement funds that interested me most as a qualification. But if we elected a comparable mayor, how would that improve upon a town administrator? Is a mayor a money manager or a spokesman? If so, let's hire a financial advisor and stick with selectmen, they know how to speak. And what's the difference between a town manager and selectman and a mayor and a town council running a town? Is it the Massachusetts law the problem? Does this mean Mark Fisher can't integrate his character as well as handle millions of dollars a year? I hope not. It's all a bit confusing.

Selectman Chairman John Rhyno, who once rejected the idea of a mayor, now supports it. He even paid for a private ad in this newspaper, a feedback ballot that gave us three choices. He points to Mayor Dumas knowing people on Deval Patrick's staff, being known by state officials, and letters getting written faster because it takes time for our selectmen to meet. Don't we live in computer age where we can email each other? And why can't a town representative make the very same connections that Dumas has? Couldn't we even move toward electronic means of convening in emergency situations? I think in his own way, John Rhyno is our mayor, just without the formal title. He could be hanging with Deval too, asking for state bonds.

A mayor won't solve these issues but improving the efficiency of the process will. We need to give six people more power, not just one.

North Attleborough is a town, not a city. Our needs are different, and with that said, I believe, that we may all be overacting about this need for a change. We just need more than 30 citizens implementing what our beloved town's future will be. That's about 27,877 people short. And I'll admit, I was one of them.