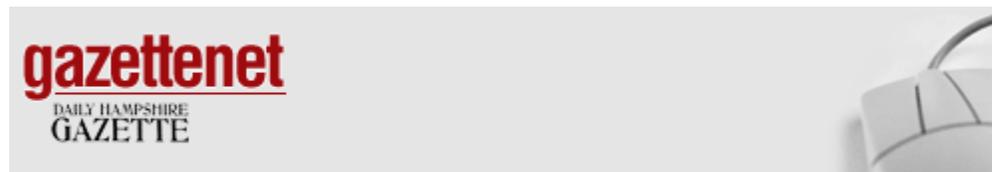


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An election custom could become history

BY SCOTT MERZBACH EMAIL THIS WRITER  MORE STORIES BY THIS WRITER**[View all comments \(1\)](#)****[Originally published on: Tuesday, July 20, 2004]**

LEVERETT - Leverett's tradition of nominating and voting for candidates for town office from the floor of annual Town Meeting could be coming to an end.

The Board of Selectmen is considering asking residents about changing the custom of holding elections as part of annual Town Meeting. Leverett, a town of 1,600 residents, is the only town in Massachusetts not to require either nomination papers or caucuses and not to have its election separate from Town Meeting.

Bonsignore said she anticipates holding hearings on the subject and perhaps scheduling a vote on changing the bylaw this fall. But change is not imminent.

"The Select Board itself hasn't made a definitive vote on it," Bonsignore said. "We're serious about discussing it and bringing it forward, unless we get compelling reasons we shouldn't."

The rationale for making such a change is that it would prevent surprise or stealth candidates, making those seeking office more accountable to voters, and would eliminate the behind-the-scenes strategizing that takes place immediately before Town Meeting, Bonsignore said.

In the past few years, selectmen have countered this by holding candidates nights so that all residents who wish to be elected can introduce themselves to the community.

In the last several elections, contests for Board of Health have dominated Town Meeting. This year, fliers were sent out endorsing a candidate just days before the election. Bonsignore said there was no way of knowing who sent the literature or how much was spent on campaigning.

Currently, the moderator presents to residents a list of available positions, then opens the floor for nominations. If there is no contest, the nominations are closed and a ballot is cast. If the election is contested, the names are placed on a ballot where residents use secret ballots to decide the election.

Bonsignore said the drawback to changing this procedure is that it's more expensive to hold separate elections.

"If we're jeopardizing the democratic process the way we're doing it now, then cost shouldn't be a factor," Bonsignore said.

A more formal process also might make it more difficult for some residents to seek office.

"The con is: Would we be apt to get less people to run?" Bonsignore said.

In 1990, a similar proposal was brought forward by residents by petition, led by the late Esther Madden of Jackson Hill Road, in which candidates would have had to collect 25 signatures six weeks before the vote and selectmen would have set a date and polling place for the separate election.

But by voice vote at that year's Town Meeting, voters rejected the change, which again will need a two-thirds majority to approve.

Town Moderator Gary Gruber said he sees no need for a change.

"If somebody wants to campaign, they can," he said.

Gruber said he ran successfully for selectman twice "and my only campaign costs were two 8 1/2-by-11-inch sheets of paper."

"If you spend two consecutive Saturdays at the transfer station, you can meet everyone in town," he said.

Speed trap decried

An Amherst resident irked by a speeding ticket has created a Web site attempting to drop what he calls an illegal speed trap on Route 63. The town's acting police chief says he won't stop patrols there, but says the Web site might get motorists to slow down.

Philip Garrow started the www.leverettspeedtrap.com Web site to raise awareness about a place Leverett police patrol on Route 63 near the intersection with Bull Hill Road after receiving a ticket for speeding.

Acting Police Chief Kelson Ting said the Web site can only help his department's patrolling efforts.

"If he's got a Web site, that's good for us. We want people to slow down," Ting said.

The Web site was put up after Garrow met with selectmen last month and spent more than an hour explaining why he thinks a 45 mph zone on Route 63 is illegal and why he thinks it is inappropriate for Leverett to be profiting from speeding tickets.

Ting calls these claims "ridiculous."

"I totally disagree with that," Ting said. "It's what I hate doing the most is issuing tickets."

Ting said most complaints his department receives are about speeding. He tries to have one officer always available to send to areas for which police receive the most speeding complaints.

Selectmen Chairwoman Fenna Lee Bonsignore said it is not accurate that the town has put patrols on the street to raise money.

"We're doing it because speeding cars is an issue," Bonsignore said. "Our

biggest complaint in town is the speed of cars."

Ting said he can't remove a speed patrol location because of one person objects to it.

"I've got to do what's best for the whole community," Ting said.

Ting recently received a \$5,500 community policing grant to purchase a speed traffic board. This will be used as a warning, alerting drivers to their speeds.

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