



EDITORIALS

Guest editorial: 'I don't get involved in politics'

by Staff Report July 12, 2019



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Editor's Note: This is the second in a series of guest editorials running between now and July 4, our nation's Independence Day. These essays were solicited by the Franklin County League of Women Voters for The Recorder from several especially knowledgeable and experienced members of our community, about issues as important to America today as when our country was born with our forefather's Declaration of Independence.

"Politics" has multiple definitions but the one most people think of is this one from Merriam Webster: "political activities characterized by artful and often dishonest practices." It is this negative idea of politics that causes family, friends, and maybe even you, to say, "I don't get involved in politics."

However, when we talk about politics, we're talking about more than politicians and laws. We're talking about your relationship to opportunities and resources, about the quality of life you live in your own town.

We're talking about the local budget that pays for plowing the local roads and byways. If you attend your local town meeting, you'll receive a copy of that budget and vote on it every year. And if your town needs to buy a new plow, they'll have to get your vote on that too.

That budget also pays for running your schools and libraries, for services to local seniors, and funds activities that make your town a great place to live.

Budgets aren't fun, but we all need them. Paying attention to how your town and state spends money tells you what issues they consider important. You're not expected to be an expert when they present the budget at town meeting; you can ask questions and make officials defend their choices.



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Think about those officials, the Select Board members or city councilors we the voters elect to assemble that budget. Do they represent your values? Are they paying attention to the issues that you care about? You can call them, or attend a Select Board or Town Council meeting and ask them about it.

At this spring's Annual Town Meeting in Buckland, one of the hot topics was a new marijuana bylaw for the town. A long line of residents queued up to advocate for or against the bylaw, and while the debate took more than an hour, the residents spoke with passion and a real sense of their right to speak. The discussion went so long that at one point a Select Board member made a motion that the time for questions be closed and a vote taken. He was voted down, even though it was late, on a school night, and many people were still in line to ask questions or state their positions. Such was the voters' conviction that all voices should have the opportunity to be heard. This is politics at its best.

Politics isn't just about choosing candidates. This past fall's election ballot included questions about mandating nurse/patient ratios, and whether a law protecting transgender rights should be overturned. When you attend your local town meeting, you're voting on issues as varied as banning single use plastics or resolutions brought via resident petitions.

But politics is about more than voting. It's about being engaged with the world around you.

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There are conversations happening all over Greenfield about whether a new library is needed or not, and if so, how to pay for it and where it should be. The towns of Ashfield, Buckland, and Shelburne share a Senior Center that has been running out of space for years. They've assembled committees and held public forums to get public feedback on various plans and possibilities. (Also in Greenfield, there's talk of whether the Jon Zon Community Center is a community center or a senior center.) In June, the 2019 season of the Charlemont Forums begins, with this summer's topics including poverty, climate change, and the African American experience.

These are all important conversations, and these conversations are politics too.

When you talk to your town librarian about signing up your child for the summer reading program, a program likely funded through a hodgepodge of grant money and town money, you're involved in politics. When you register your child for the summer camp organized by your town's Recreation Committee, you're involved in politics. When you attend the performances of any number of the community bands in our region, you're involved in politics.

Now that you know it, why not be involved in a more intentional way? You may not have time for meetings or events, but maybe you could have coffee with your neighbors to talk about the kids' summer movie night the local libraries are sponsoring with the Northfield Drive-In. Maybe you could think about ways to support these programs you love. Many good things our towns do go away for lack of that support. Sometimes, being involved in politics is as simple as going to the movies.

Marie Gauthier, author of this piece, is the president of the League of Women Voters of Franklin County. She lives in Buckland with her family.

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