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'It's gotten nasty'

GROUP AIMS TO RESTORE 'CIVILITY' TO TOWN'S POLITICAL DISCOURSE

BY GUS STEEVES
NEWS STAFF WRITER

SOUTHBRIDGE — To Monique Manna and Dick Whitney, town politics desperately needs some civility.

"Anybody who takes a stand, that's fine, but it's gotten nasty," Whitney said. "We don't have to agree, but we should not be enemies."

The two, and what they hope are at least a couple

dozen more people, aim to start a local effort to get "beyond the landfill" and put some energy into a variety of other critical issues in town. Although both said they support the industrial park road and other changes in town, they noted it's possible to disagree based on facts without making the issues personal. Both are familiar faces in town circles, having

spoken at Town Council and other meetings. Manna was most recently a key player in an effort to demand more information and oversight of a proposed methadone clinic, while Whitney has been unofficial town historian for years.

"We're looking towards the future of Southbridge,"

Group aims for return to civility

CIVILITY

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Manna said, noting she was inspired to act because of “the negativity about the town manager’s statement and how it was taken out of context, and the landfill issue. There’s more to Southbridge than the landfill.”

Specifically, she was referring to Sound Offs and other commentary regarding an Evening News paraphrase of a comment by Manager Chris Clark about cancer and domestic violence roughly two weeks ago. Some in the community attacked him for it, accusing him of endangering people’s health, while others interpreted it as a simple observation of fact comparing the risks over the short- and long-term.

A key issue for the group is to find ways to promote the town’s positive qualities and make it inviting to business and visitors. Some of those have been showcased with

recent town forums and presentations — for example, the generally positive reception given to UMass student proposals on economic and tourist development last year and one on greenways last month. Such events have found that residents of varying political stripes tend to see the town’s diversity, history, environment/water supply, hospital and art community as strengths Southbridge should tap going forward.

Manna noted the new group “is absolutely not a political party.”

“We want to show [people] we’re a really good community and a business could thrive here,” she said. “We’re a big community, but we’re also a small community and we all have to work together.”

Whitney agreed, noted he’s “frustrated” at the quality of town politics and the fact that some people seem to oppose things but don’t propose alternatives. Among other things, he noted the last year or so has seen “a really fervent group” opposing the land-

fill; he said he had no problem with their fervor “but I don’t respect some of the things they do.”

“I have the perception that those vocal few think they’re a majority, but I don’t think they are,” Whitney added. “It’s easy to tear something down, but not so easy to be constructive. ... We want to bring business and people together who have a stake in the community; they don’t all have to agree, but have to be willing move forward.”

Manna said they have no idea how many people are likely to show up to the group’s inaugural gathering April 16, but are hoping 15 or 20 do so. Since it’s being held at a private home, she declined to publish the address, but people can visit her site, www.getinvolvedinyourtown.com, and call one of the phone numbers listed there for details.

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