

LETTER:

Plymouth's ongoing and growing scandals - a crisis in leadership

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Joe Coughlin, Plymouth

The articles in the OCM over the past few months are ample evidence of a growing scandal in Plymouth that point to a crisis in leadership.

They began with:

1. Very disturbing stories on how former director of the Public Health Department was treated by town officials. Dr. Nate Willis- Horvitz was a real professional with vision on what the town needed to create a full service Public Health Dept. here, which we have never had, something many of the current town officials lack, but he rubbed the officials the wrong way so after being discriminated against (which the state agreed with after he finally realized he had no other alternative other than to appeal to the state after trying to resolve his concerns with town officials). He is an Afro-American by the way, the only one that was in the town government in any kind of management position. Maybe they don't like that? The town officials, including the town manager, chair of the Select Board and others, denied his concerns and allegations, and then tried to cover it up by denying them. He is gone now and it is the town's great loss.
2. Fire Chief Bradley's ongoing concerns about the severe maintenance conditions at our fire stations around town. He has pointed out that these concerns have been raised to his bosses (town manager and DPW director) in the past, but they have been ignored. Now they have risen to such a level that two of our fire stations have had to be closed due to safety and health concerns to our firemen. This should have never happened. Where has the leadership in this town been for many years? We are placing the health of our firemen in jeopardy because of inept leadership! This is wrong.
3. Recent reports by the director of Facilities Management, Wayne Walkdon, about the deplorable condition of not only our Fire Department buildings but other public buildings around town for health and safety reasons, have been criticized by town officials. Why? Facts are facts. Where have town officials been over the years that these problems have been growing? That is his job to identify the building management needs of the town for its public buildings, and hopefully get those needs included in the town's budget over several years to be addressed. This is just good management. The town needs a long term plan to identify all such needs and include them into a long term maintenance plan to address them as the need for repair and replacement occurs, on a planned basis, and with provisions for emergencies. What happened to the town's plan, if we ever had one, and if we do, why hasn't it been implemented, and periodically updated? Because of the response Mr. Walkdon has received from town officials (town manager, president of the SB, director of DPW, and individual SB members), Mr. Walkdon has gotten no support for his concerns and felt his only recourse was to resign, which he sadly did.
4. In a related OCM recent story the discovery of certain pipes in some public buildings covered in leaking asbestos was discovered. The apparent response by the DPW was to cover and seal them. Wrong response! The asbestos should have been cleaned out and the offending pipes and/or coverings replaced. Yes, many old pipes in many old buildings may have asbestos covering pipes and in other

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insulation, which was the way of doing such construction in the past but they need permanent fixes to protect the public health of those employees who may be exposed to that risk. We need to do the right thing for our employees, not just what is the cheapest and most expedient, and yes, that can be expensive, but it is the right and safe thing to do. This is not a new issue, the U.S. Congress and federal government addressed the asbestos issue years ago, as well as other such health construction / maintenance issues as lead paint many years ago for the protection of the people. We need to do the same!

5. Recently Brigitta Kuehn, chair, Plymouth Board of Health, came out publicly and supported the claims of Dr. Nate, Chief Bradley and Mr. Walkdon. Good for her and good for the town! She can go to the state for support, if needed.

6. Recently in another OCM article on these issues, the SB chairman Ken Tavares said that the complaints needed to stop and solutions be worked on, or words to that effect. OK, fair enough! However, he has been on the SB (former Board of Selectmen – BOS) for about 30 years as the chair, or a member. That is more than enough time to identify challenges, if one is paying attention, and come up with solutions. It is also interesting to note that SB members are also the sewer commissioners. Ken is the only current SB member who was a member of the old BOS back when the original sewage system was designed, installed and maintained to such an incompetent level that it failed a couple of years ago and has cost the taxpayers of Plymouth tens of millions of dollars, which will be felt in everyone's' property taxes for years.

7. Recently the SB voted to keep the property tax rate the same for all property, residential, commercial and industrial. Instead of changing it to a split rate with higher rates for commercial and industrial and lower for residential, as it is for thousands of other communities across the country. It is interesting to note that the newest member of the SB, Patrick Flaherty voted with the majority to keep the rates as is. Why? Well, it seems as if he may have had a conflict of interest in trying to protect the current tax levels for his own business. That is not what our elected officials are supposed to do. They are supposed to be making decisions that care in the best interest of the people of the community, not just their own. Unfortunately, that is not what they always do!

The current problems/challenges in our community have not occurred overnight. Many of them have festered for years, but not adequately identified, planned for with fixes and solutions implemented. That is what good leadership at all levels is all about.

Kudos for Dr. Nate, Chief Bradley, Wayne Wheldon and Brigitta for having the courage to raise these serious issues in the public forum since their efforts to resolve them in private were apparently met with criticism, derision, denial and attack, without regard to the price they may have to or had to pay for their selflessness, and desire to do public good, which they clearly have done.

With good leadership these things would never happen. Our town manager is well paid for her responsibilities, more than \$200k/year, more now and/or by the end of her current contract than the mayor of Boston and any member of the U.S. Congress, House and Senate. For that kind of compensation we should get top talent and leadership.



Plymouth is about to celebrate 400 years of history. There are many things that the town can be proud of, but there are serious voids that need to be filled as we move on into the future of our growing community.

One thing that these current crises have pointed out to those who may be paying attention, it is that Plymouth has long ago outgrown its form of governance. A representative form of town government that meets twice a year, which we currently have, is no longer appropriate and as current evidence shows, just doesn't work anymore for a community of this size, and growing, for the best interests of its people. Do the people of Plymouth know that Plymouth is the only community in Massachusetts of this size, other than Brookline, that has not changed its form of governance from a town government to that of a city government? Framingham was the latest one to do so. And they all have prospered in doing so in many ways. It is about time we do the same for the benefit for all of our citizens.

As such, Plymouth needs a new form of governance, whether that is a city government with a mayor and city council, or some other form of government. This should be decided by the people of Plymouth, not just the "good old boys" system we currently have.

Can all of these issues be resolved? Yes they can! But that will take honesty and openness and the cooperation of all parties to do so, elected, appointed and the interested public. Let's all put down the swords and defensiveness and work together to bring about a better Plymouth for the next 100 years, which we can do, but only if we want to and agree to. Maybe the recent action by the newest member of the SB calling for a public meeting between the SB, town manager and department heads will be a good start at the leadership we lack. However, only time will tell.

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