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FEATURED

Opponents Of Abolishing Planning Board Outweigh Supporters At Dalton Public Hearing

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Dalton resident and town clerk Jeanette Charon spoke Thursday during a public hearing on a petition warrant article to abolish the Dalton Planning Board.

Opponents of a petitioned warrant article seeking to abolish the Dalton Planning Board outweighed supporters during a public hearing on Thursday, where residents gathered at town hall to ask town planners questions and offer comments.

The planning board has been in existence since 1967.

"I don't often agree with everything you do and I voted no on zoning, but I appreciate what you do and the time you give and I think the notion of doing away with the planning board would be misguided," said resident Kenyon Tuthill. "I would hate to see a knee-jerk reaction that results

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end of the planning board."

The petition, which will go on the ballot as written for the March 14 town meeting vote, comes four years after Casella Waste Systems proposed a new commercial landfill near Forest Lake and after an April 2019 decision by town planners, who denied a lot line adjustment on the property Casella is seeking to buy, with planners concluding that requested an adjustment to create a 300-acre lot with no abutters is essentially a request for a subdivision as defined under state law.

Proponents of the petition allege that the planning board is stacked with residents who represent Forest Lake and don't represent the views of the majority of Dalton residents.

Supporters of keeping the Dalton Planning Board say the board is made up of hard-working volunteers who represent all residents in the town, and personality clashes and a "pissing contest" between some residents and some members of the planning board (namely, Adam Finkel, a Forest Lake resident and landfill opponent appointed by the Select Board as a planning board alternate in January) shouldn't culminate in dissolving a board that they say protects residents and property values.

Opening the hearing, which was also attended by residents remotely, was planning board chairman Carl Lindquist, who said the next piece after the petition was the required public hearing.

"I've been on the planning board for ten years now," said Lindquist. "None of us get paid. It's a volunteer thing. It's a lot of hours and my family would rather I didn't spend as many hours away. I don't get any great joy out of this. It's a civic responsibility. I think the same could be said for everyone else on the board."

Citing the board's history, Lindquist said voters in 1971, four years after the planning board was established, voted to authorize planners to approve or disapprove subdivisions, and in 1975 they voted to participate in the federal National Flood Insurance Program.

In 1987, voters authorized planners to develop a town master plan, which is a guide for the town that planners are currently updating.

If the planning board was dissolved, the main thing is there would be no ability to regulate any development, meaning a 100-acre lot, for instance, could be sub-divided into quarter-acre lots and a beautiful field across the road could be developed without any say from the public, he said.

"These are things that can change, and will change when there's no other regulation in town," said Lindquist.

Two years after a planning board is dissolved, residents who live in the floodplain would no longer be able to get federal flood insurance.

Petition Supporters

Among the more vocal residents supporting the petition were Jim and Sandy Dennis.

Sandy Dennis said there are many communities, including Clarksville and Pittsburg, that don't have planning boards.

Lindquist said there are two in New Hampshire without such boards, and those are the two Sandy Dennis named.

"In my opinion, the new appointees to the boards are wrong for our town," said Sandy Dennis. "The most important job of boards is to make sure new members are a good fit for all of our constituents."

At issue among some supporters of dissolving the planning board and conservation commission is the appointment of Finkel to the planning board and the appointment of Jon Swan as chairman of the Dalton Conservation Commission.

"These boards are accountable to Dalton for what they have done," said Sandy Dennis. "You have poured gasoline on the fires of division in this community. Dalton deserves better and it's time for a fresh start."

In terms of planning board makeup, the board has been static for years, and Finkel's appointment came after the petition to dissolve the board was submitted to the town, said Lindquist.

Jim Dennis said quarter-acre lots would be subject to state subdivision approval, which covers anything five acres or less.

If the planning board is abolished, the plan is to have it reestablished within a year, said Jim Dennis.

"We are not trying to blow up the town to get rid of the boards," he said. "We are trying to have a fresh start with a new board that represents the town."

Without naming names, Jim Dennis said “one or the other or both of your new board members” have used insulting words on social media to describe residents of Dalton.

“Why do they hurl these insults?” he said. “Because some of us stand up and say we don’t agree with the Forest Lake agenda, we don’t agree with a vendetta against a single landowner or a vendetta against a single project. We don’t have to say we want Casella or don’t want Casella. We stand for principle. We don’t want to see boards captured by a single interest and not working for the whole town.”

Petition supporter Pam Kathan said she sees a lot of people at the hearing from Forest Lake.

“You have to understand that we come from a different side of the track, but we still count,” she said. “We would probably not have this abolish the planning had it not been for a particular person now sitting on the board. We saw it coming, whether that was put out before or after.”

In an email on Friday, Finkel said he didn’t express interest in serving on the planning board until November, a month after Jim Dennis, in October, had already posted on social media his support for abolishing the board.

Petition Opponents

Jeanette Charon, Dalton town clerk and tax collector, moved to town in July after 28 years in Chicago and said the division she’s seen in Dalton is worse than what she’s seen in Chicago.

“Every day, I wake up and love it here,” she said. “That being said, the divide and the discourse and the ugliness that some people in Dalton have with each other is utterly disgusting … We just have to work together, because if we don’t, Dalton will never be the best that it can be … I find it really ironic that the people in this room who are really, really, really for conservation and for freedom are fighting the people that give us some of that and protect everyone, not just the people who want the landfill or don’t want the landfill.”

Charon said she’s never seen a harder-working board.

“These guys volunteer, and if you don’t like it, come to the meetings, put your hands in the air and say that you’re interested and get on the damn board so that you can make a difference yourself instead of saying I don’t have time,” she said, to applause. “If you don’t have time to be involved then don’t have time to complain about what you’re getting.”

Resident Karen Crowe said she's a little disturbed at some of the people wanting to abolish the board and commission.

"The reason is I didn't hear any specifics offered and I believe it's more driven by dislike of certain members, personality clashes, and fear, frankly, and I don't think that's a good enough reason to destroy what we have," she said. "This is a safety net for all of us."

Forest Lake residents aren't the only ones in Dalton concerned about a landfill, said Crowe.

Dalton resident Ray Gradual said he doesn't know Jim Dennis or Swan, but said it would be foolish to abolish the planning board and the conservation commission (as proposed in a second petition) for the reasons Lindquist stated.

He suggested that the board members be elected.

Gradual pointed out clear-cutting along Mirror Lake Road that he said could span two golf courses.

"This is a perfect example of why the town needs a planning board, to assist in the development and find out what's happening because it affects us," he said. "Looking from the outside in, I have no ax to grind. To me, it's a property value issue ... The bottom line is it goes back to the Casella issue and the dump and the people at Forest Lake don't want it because it's going to lower their property values."

Forest Lake resident Traci Wagner, a physician, said her concern is about the quality of the environment, water, air, and health.

"If we have no regulations, if we get rid of the planning board and conservation commission and we don't have zoning, we have no recourse, no way to protect ourselves from anyone doing anything they wish to do," she said. "I don't know what people are hoping to gain by doing this. I know in the Globe article there may be people who are getting some monetary gain."

In a Jan. 19 story in the Boston Globe, Casella resident Vic St. Cyr said he is a paid consultant for Casella, but declined to discuss the terms.

"But that is going to be very short-lived because the damage that's going to be done if we don't have any regulations will be forever," said Wagner. "There's no way to take that back. The town is destroyed."

She said there is a petition circulating in town to make the planning board members elected as opposed to their current manner of being appointed.

Other residents agreed, including Doyle Davis, a 50-year Dalton resident, who said elected members is a more democratic approach and could avert a future group of residents voting to abolish a future board they don't like.

"I think the sentiment to abolish the board is misplaced," he said.

(Under state statute, conservation commission members must be appointed).

Six-year resident Mary Lou Wellington called the current situation in Dalton "like coming into the middle of a very long-running soap opera."

"I want to thank the planning board and conservation commission for their services because it's hard to spend your time for free doing your civic duty and then get beat on," she said. "We can talk things out. We don't have to go to this wipe-it-out nuclear option. That seems crazy."

Mike Carrier, who serves on the commission, said he serves to make the town a better place for everyone and not just a few.

Dalton Select Board member Carol Sheltry, speaking as a resident and not as a Select Board member, said what she's listened to during the hearing is a personal conflict between one planning board member and other people and now the push is to punish an entire board.

"To do away with the planning board would do away with years and years of experience, knowledge and work that's already been done for over an outside — call it what you want — pissing contest," she said. "You guys have volunteered for years. It's an insult to do away with you."

Swan said he's involved in "this pissing contest," but it's not about personalities.

"This is about a group of people who want Casella landfill money," he said. "Why would they get rid of the planning board? Because of the failed lot line adjustment that Casella needs to close on the Ingerson land. To get rid of them, they don't need to go through that ... Right now, this a fight between two groups of people in Dalton — pro landfill, anti landfill ... The conservation commission weighs in on the the wetlands application. With no conservation commission, there's no weighing on the wetlands application."

Resident Gordon Jobe said, "The purpose of the planning board is to protect property values and the health and safety of our town. That's it."

Lindquist said there is no fame and glory in being a volunteer board member, but someone needs to do it and it's a challenge to fill slots.

Planning board member Gal Potashnick said she came to Dalton from Littleton and asked where there was a need and was then requested to sit on the planning board, where she said she represents all residents.

"I have done everything I can to make sure that the people of Dalton feel that they have voice," she said. "If you lose your planning board, you will lose your opportunity to be heard."

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