On the Friday afternoon after last Thursday’s board meeting, I received an inquiry from a local newspaper reporter.  The inquiry was about the Highlands Cashiers Players being permitted to use Founders Park to celebrate their 30th Anniversary.  The specific question was why the town board didn't follow the recreation policy of requiring them to submit the request 30 days before the event, and even sixty days before they would serve alcohol.  It was pointed out to me that rumors in town confirmed that it was inconsistent and selective in its enforcement of adopted town policies.  Ironically, the revised park use policies were approved at this May meeting.

My initial response to the reporter was that this was an informal event where no tickets would be sold, the park would not be closed, and no money would be exchanged.  The alcohol in question would be brought to the event and may be shared with others.  Based on my information, it was simply a gathering of people that included those who had performed or supported the many successful seasons of the  Highlands Cashiers Players.  Unfortunately, no organization member was at the board meeting to answer questions.  They were all at the PAC putting on the play, Social Security.  I later discovered the event was a picnic in the park.

So, after that first response to the reporter, I immediately contacted the town manager and the recreation department director to get more information.  After all, our recreation director, Lester Norris, reviews and presents all requests for park use.  He reviews the requests to ensure that town policies will be followed.

Lester told me what had happened.  The Highlands Cashiers Players did request to use the park and seek permission to serve alcohol back in March, well before policy deadlines.  Lester reviewed the request at that time.  Unfortunately, at some point when the town manager and I were developing the April agenda, the request was left off.  Ironically, at that meeting, the board approved the Mountain Top Rotary’s request to sell alcohol at the upcoming June art show that they sponsor.  It would have been easy to review both requests at the same time, although the scope and magnitude of each request were not the same.

Since the Highlands Cashiers Players' request was inadvertently left off the April agenda meeting, it was placed on the May agenda.  The problem was not the fault of the requesting organization,  but rather the town, and it would have been unfair to delay the event.  But its appearance on the May agenda without an explanation created the perception that the town was cutting corners and bending the policies for certain groups.  We were not.  I appreciate the reporter sharing the issue with me, especially since no one else had.

Over the past 12 years, I have tried to have the local government as open and transparent as possible.  My writing about this situation illustrates my commitment to transparency and consistency.  I suspect someone in the community who thought the town was inconsistent passed that information to the reporter.  On the other hand, I have always maintained an open-door policy and strive to be responsive to the needs of citizens.  I would have been happy to respond directly.

If you have questions about the Highlands Cashiers Players' use of the park, please contact me at AskMayorPat.com.  Congratulations to the Highlands Cashiers Players on their production of Social Security.  I saw it this past weekend, and it was great.  They will have performances on Thursday and run through this coming weekend.