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SMALL NEWS IS BIG NEWS

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## Transparency Urged After Secret Write-In Ballot Raises Concerns

By Abby Luby

Government transparency and election mishandling became a hot-button item at last week's annual joint meeting of the Pleasantville Village Board and the Pleasantville School District.

As contentious as some of the exchanges were, by the end of the three-and-a-half hour meeting, both boards assured the public of their continued and dedicated work together.

Arguments centered on a write-in candidate for a village board seat, Angela Vella, who ran last in September in what was assumed to be an uncontested election. Vella is a Pleasantville School Board member. Accusations became volatile as parents viewed the write-in campaign as covert and mean-spirited on the part of the school board and one that seemed to target one-term village board incumbent Nicole Asquith, whose children are in the Pleasantville school district.

"I knew about the election, I drove past the fire house, I saw two women manning the table," said Pleasantville resident Cathy Sabol, parent of children in the district. "I thought about going in and voting but I didn't want to infect or expose anyone. I thought I didn't need to vote [because it was uncontested]. I will never not vote again in my life."

Vella has said she objected to the village's lack of transparency and their failure to announce two board seats were up for election in a timely manner, which prompted her write-in campaign. "It was within my right to run and it was not a coordinated effort by the school board," she said at the meeting, stressing that her write-in campaign wasn't a school board issue and the joint meeting

was not the appropriate forum to discuss it.

Other parents found the secrecy of the write-in ballot upsetting and wanted to know which board members specifically were involved.

"We'd like to know from all of the members of the board of education if you knew about the secret write-in campaign and if you helped by encouraging people to vote for Angela," said Pamela Papish. "I'd like to hear from you one by one."

Vella told her "we are not required to do that and nobody should be put on the spot like that. It's nobody's business, just like it's no one's business who wrote in my name or who voted for me."

Although it's legal for one person to sit on two local boards, Vickie Neilson questioned the ethics of having one person running for and serving on both school and village boards.

"The different roles of the board of education and the village trustees can have a healthy tension," said Neilson. "I don't see how one person can wear both hats at once." Neilson asked if there was a way to amend the village code to insure somebody doesn't sit on both boards.

According to Village Mayor Peter Scherer, incompatible municipal offices are spelled out in the New York State Education Law, which says that 'no trustee or member of a board of education can hold the office of district clerk, collector, treasurer or librarian.' Scherer said the state law isn't clear about other offices, but the law could be interpreted that individual municipalities have home rule. "I doubt we would pursue it," he said about changing the village code. He

did say he personally objected to a trustee being on two boards. "I think it's a bad idea," he said.

Traditionally, village boards encourage potential candidates interested in running for a seat and refer them to the Westchester County Board of Elections, which oversees village elections and provides petitions and guidelines. According to Scherer, the village is not legally responsible for advertising or promoting the election. School boards, however, generally elect board members at the same time the community is asked to vote on the yearly budget and practices an extensive outreach to the community using newsletters, announcements, forums and meetings about the proposed budget and the candidates.

The timing of the village board announcement of the two open seats was one of Vella's main issues. According to Pleasantville Village Board Meeting Minutes, a resolution was passed on October 28, 2019, about the March 2020 village election. The Examiner reported on Feb. 3 that one-term incumbent Nicole Asquith and Chamber of Commerce Vice President Paul Alvarez were running for the two board seats; trustee Steve Lord was not seeking re-election. The Village formally announced the upcoming election on Feb. 10, two days before candidate petitions were due to the BOE with the required 100 signatures. Any resident wanting to run at that point would be hard pressed to get their petitions filled out. At that point, the election was slated to be in Marc 2020.

This was an unprecedented election year with the village

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### ALTERNATIVE FACTS

A caravan of Trump supporters drove through the area Sunday, eventually gathering outside the Clinton family home in Chappaqua, chanting "Lock her up." Trump supporters are also promoting a debunked conspiracy theory at protests that President-elect Joe Biden's triumph in the election was due to massive fraud perpetrated across multiple state-run elections, coordinated by both Republican and Democratic governors to help down ballot Republicans but hurt only the president.

## P'ville Explores Regulating House Size After Large Residence Goes Up

By Abby Luby

When construction began on a single-family house on Ashland Avenue in Pleasantville some months ago, neighbors began to notice the footprint was larger than most other houses in the area.

Some residents on the block contacted both the village board and the zoning board asking about the proposed 4,946-square-foot structure. Lynn and Edward Russell, who live immediately south of the planned new house, wrote a letter to the zoning board expressing concern that the board would allow variances for maximum height and coverage parameters, rendering the house too big and seemingly out of place in the neighborhood.

Ashland Avenue resident Peter Rogovin recalled a Zoom call-in to a zoning board meeting earlier this year with several of his neighbors. "The overwhelming sentiment on



ANNA YOUNG PHOTO

The nearly 5,000-square-foot house on Ashland Avenue in Pleasantville, which has received the ire of some residents on the street.

the call was that the house was too big for the property, even on a street that has very large houses," he said.

The village zoning code does not include a FAR (floor area ratio) regulation, which stipulates an allowable ratio of total square feet of a house divided by the square footage of the property. Consideration is also given to the grade and slope of the property within the regulation.

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election postponed three times over a period of six months by Governor Cuomo due to the coronavirus pandemic. Most village residents, like Sabol, assumed the two board seats were uncontested and felt they didn't have to vote. By September, many were hesitant to vote in public because of the virus. The result: 114 write-in votes were cast for Vella, 169 votes for Asquith and 282 votes for Alvarez.

Vella said when she received election day notification from the BOE in September it was three days before the election. "I had

three days to run and it was within my right," she recounted at the joint meeting. "This was not a coordinated effort by the school board. Some were aware [of my campaign] and others were not. It was never discussed by the board."

Parents posing further questions about Vella's motives were met with a refusal to answer, which angered some parents. When reminded that their five-minute public comment was up, it only added to the veil of secrecy.

"When is the time or place to discuss

what happened? Can we schedule another meeting regarding this specific topic?" asked Pleasantville resident Sara Hukkanen. "What I've heard here tonight is offensive."

Another parent of two children in the district, Deepthi Prakash, was concerned if the issue was having an impact on the relationship between the two boards. "We are barking at each other in high-pitched voices and that doesn't help us move forward and demonstrating to our children that we can work together. There are lots of things that are legal but are morally and ethically

wrong." Prakash asked Vella for written assurance that if she plans to run [for village board] that she make a public announcement.

Prior to the meeting a letter was sent by concerned parents to the village and school board requesting a discussion about the write-in campaign. School board member Shane McGaffey said he reached out to several parents who signed the letter to explain Vella's actions. "Many understood her reasons but disagreed with the method." McGaffey, who regularly covers village board meetings for PCTV, said he felt strongly that the candidate petitions were never announced. "I know the village is not legally required to [announce] but I feel they are morally obligated."

The village has taken new steps towards becoming more transparent. Village work sessions that precede the regular meetings, will now be recorded, a decision announced at the village board meeting last week. Work sessions usually have free discussion resulting in more comprehensive content. The village is ramping up their social media platforms and is considering live Facebook sessions on issues where residents can ask questions of village officials.

Village board trustee Paul Alvarez has been named liaison to the school board. "It's disheartening to have something like this happen," he said of the contentious meeting. "But we all have the best interest for our children and for their future. In the end, our biggest goal is to work together for education and for our kids."

## P'ville Explores Regulating House Size After Large Residence Goes Up

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To address residents' concerns about regulating house size, last week the village board voted on a resolution to have a professional study done to determine if the village zoning code should incorporate a new FAR regulation. The study, which will cost the village \$15,000, will be done by New York City based BFJ Planning, the same company that worked with the village to update the master plan a couple of years ago and has worked with other Westchester municipalities on similar zoning regulations.

Village Trustee David Vinjamuri said the study was a good idea. "A community in Connecticut was seeing big white elephant houses cropping up all over the place for years and years and suddenly they realized their zoning rules were not tight enough," he said.

Agreeing with Vinjamuri, Trustee Nicole Asquith said, "If it's a real concern to residents in Pleasantville it's worth looking into. Over time, it seems that Pleasantville is becoming a more desirable place to live and we may see bigger houses being built."

Village Trustee Joseph Stargiotti didn't vote to approve the study and asked to postpone the vote until next month because he wanted more time to consider BFJ's proposal. "The house that is being built [on Ashland Avenue] is very, very large," he said. "Although I agree that such a large house shouldn't be built, there are not going to be a lot of houses built that size here in the village. I don't know what the benefit of a FAR will be."

Pleasantville Mayor Peter Scherer agreed that many lots in the village were too small for large houses, but felt the study should still be

done. "We ought to go ahead with the study because we owe it to the folks that expressed concern about it. Rejecting this proposal feels to me like not fulfilling that responsibility," he said. "It could very well lead by a decision that we shouldn't do anything."

BFJ plans to examine footprints of single-family homes in Pleasantville. The company will draft a FAR zoning regulation for single-family zones to be presented to the village and reviewed for possible revisions. Once the draft regulation is completed, a public hearing will be scheduled and an Environmental Assessment Form will be submitted as part of the state Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA), in which the village will be the lead agency. The entire process will include about half a dozen meetings with the village board and a public hearing.

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