

Groton Council Takes a Wrong Turn

We protest the Groton Town Council's decision to remove Chairman Jeffrey Pritchard from his position on the Planning and Zoning Commission (P&Z) -- depriving the community of his invaluable knowledge and decades of experience. We also object to the method used to remove him. With a clearly preplanned action, the three-member Personnel and Appointments Committee (PAC) refused to forward Pritchard's name for a decision by the full Council. The committee deep-sixed the reappointment simply by not voting on it.

What little record exists reveals a deeply flawed and highly suspect process conducted not to shed light on the decision-making, but to carry out this important change in the dark and shield it from public scrutiny.

The Nov 19th Personnel and Appointments Committee meeting lasted for 21 minutes, of which the first 16 *minutes* were devoted to approving a new *alternate member* of P&Z. By contrast, the much weightier act of removing the long-serving *Chairman of the Commission* was transacted in 24 *seconds* without a moment of discussion or a single word beyond the perfunctory "motion to reappoint; no seconds." With that, the Chairman's 20+ years of exemplary volunteer service was brought to an abrupt end. Then, despite repeated requests by two town councilors and numerous statements of public support for Pritchard at the Dec 3rd council meeting, Mayor Franco and most of the councilors shut down the discussion.

A decision of this significance should not have been made by a committee of three, without a vote by the full council. There is clearly a back story to these actions for which the Mayor and others did not want to be held accountable.

Under Pritchard's leadership, P&Z has been a voice of moderation and reason, on the one hand supporting considerable development in Groton (recently taking the lead in identifying a potential opportunity for housing development), but also saving the town from the disastrous consequences of ill-conceived oversized projects that had gained momentum despite overwhelming and well-founded public opposition. Foremost among these were the proposed 930-unit development at the Oral School property and the threatened construction of

hyper data centers, which would undermine our quality of life (through excessive noise and significant air pollution). The P&Z under Pritchard held its ground, precluding development of the Oral School property on a scale that violated existing zoning regulations, and imposing reasonable size and use limits on data centers.

More recently after months of work P&Z under Pritchard passed a short-term rental regulation that allows for STRs but limits their ability to take over whole neighborhoods. All existing STRs were grandfathered in that regulation. Neither side on the issue was entirely happy with the compromise outcome, but the public participated actively in the process. Some council members and town staff appear to think P&Z overstepped its bounds, but the number of STR's was expanding unchecked and, until the Council acts in the form of an ordinance, P&Z has applied some regulatory brakes.

In the words of Michael Kane, a P&Z commissioner who testified on Dec 3rd, "Chairman Pritchard is fair and impartial." He "brings a sense of balance, ... allows every commissioner full time for discussion, ... and is dedicated to giving the public full opportunity to be heard... [while being] supportive of every applicant." *"He finds consensus, and P&Z votes unanimously 99 per cent of the time."* Such is the track record of the Chairman being ousted by the Town Council.

We believe the Town Council's failing to reappoint Jeff Pritchard is a major disservice to Groton and an affront to the principles of democratic and transparent government. Mayor Franco and friends may succeed in blocking his reappointment, but they are losing in the Court of Public Opinion.

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