

Briefing Book: Knowing when to say 'No'

Contributed by J.D. Piro

Thursday, January 08, 2009 12:03

It's been a long time since any Town Board member voted against the town budget. In the unwritten code of Lewisboro political etiquette, budget votes always had to be unanimous, even when it was clear to all but the willfully obtuse that the board member was voting contrary to his or her best judgment. What mattered was not representing taxpayers, what mattered was that everyone get along. And to get along in Lewisboro, you go along.

So when Town Board Republicans Peter DeLucia and Al Perruzza voted "no" on the 2009 town budget, you could hear the voice of Ned Beatty in Network admonishing Peter Finch for his apostasy. ("You have meddled with the primal forces of nature, Mr. Beale, AND YOU WILL ATONE!") The role of Ned Beatty, in this case, was assayed by Town Board Democrat Dan Welsh, normally a pleasant fellow save for those occasions when his more conservative colleagues oppose his liberal positions, which, happily, seems to occur with greater frequency these days.

In this particular case, the two Republicans dissented in a 3-to-2 party-line vote from endorsing the biggest town tax increase in years. Observing what passes for political etiquette in Lewisboro, Mr. Welsh disdainfully dismissed his colleagues' opposition to the Democrats' tax increase as "political posturing" and a "political freebie." Then, just for good measure, Mr. Welsh accused Ledger reporter Matt Dalen of "abetting" the conservative cause, which is pretty funny if you know Matt. In any event, abetting the conservative cause is our job here at Briefing Book. We do it with great pride.

Mr. Welsh says he's open to further spending cuts in the new year, but claims that to "cut programs now without additional facts would not be wise." Raising taxes without additional facts, however, is a no-brainer for Mr. Welsh, whose liberal views support raising taxes now and cutting spending later. Much later. If at all. If facts are important to Mr. Welsh, he should consider the following.

The town supervisor, Democrat Ed Brancati, is the town's chief financial officer and is responsible for overseeing the town's budget process. Mr. Brancati's budget process was a debacle, acknowledged as such by all save Mr. Brancati and Mr. Welsh. Mr. Brancati proposed an 11% tax increase in his preliminary budget. After the town government published a notice saying the budget was available for public viewing, Mr. Brancati announced that it wasn't. He also asked why all the fuss. "I don't know exactly what you need to see" were his exact words to his colleagues.

Mr. Brancati so mismanaged the budget process that, for the first time in memory, the town government had to postpone a public budget hearing. The result was a budget adopted with minimal taxpayer input that placed greater financial burdens on those taxpayers in the midst of a recession. Seeing that result, Messrs. DeLucia and Perruzza voted for the taxpayers and against the budget. The mystery is not why they voted "no," but why Mr. Welsh voted "yes."

Mr. Welsh found neither the budget process nor its result — higher taxes, more spending and a lower surplus — to be so egregious as to merit his disapproval. Nor has Mr. Welsh come forward with his own list of spending cuts that would give the overburdened Lewisboro taxpayer a 0% tax increase or, better still, a tax reduction. For a town government that provides no garbage collection, no streetlights, no sewers, and no full-time police or fire department, cutting taxes should be an easy matter.

Rather than suggest ways to cut taxes, Mr. Welsh has suggested that taxpayers should show up at Town Board meetings to "cheer" for the Town Board members. Why? Because they're "doing the hard work." Mr. Welsh's call for a cheerleading squad didn't last long. Now Mr. Welsh is jeering his colleagues, not cheering them. Mr. Welsh's rhetorical barbs demonstrate that Mr. Welsh is not above his own brand of political posturing, which obviously tilts way to the left. Placing conservative principles above an ersatz solidarity, Messrs. DeLucia and Perruzza rejected the liberal orthodoxy on taxes and, with it, Lewisboro's go-along-to-get-along politics. In Lewisboro, that takes some effort.

Of course, the result is what counts, not the effort. In this case, the hard work of Mr. Welsh and the Democrats resulted in a fiscal fiasco that gave taxpayers the largest town tax increase in more than a decade. The

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Republicans decided not to take it any more. Howard Beale would be proud.