

Biddeford Update Part II: September 7, 2015

If you have a few minutes, I'd like to address at length my thoughts on why, after an almost 6-month detour, it's time to take back our City Council meetings.

As many people have witnessed in person or by viewing Biddeford's public access channel, Council meetings have been under siege by a small, very vocal, coordinated minority during the past few months. On Monday, August 10th, the Council was forced to abruptly adjourn because of inappropriate and uncivil behavior from unruly members of the audience. On Tuesday, September 1st, I was forced to again call a halt to the meeting for the same reason. Such rude, unacceptable behavior -- - marked by the quite deliberate use of foul language and obscene gestures --- is an impediment to conducting city business.

Make no mistake, the disruptions of meetings are premeditated and directly fueled by intentionally inappropriate and exaggerated rhetoric on social media. Certain individuals are so lacking in self-control that their Facebook tirades have drawn the attention of the Maine State Police. Given the violence across this country that has been exacerbated by social media postings, the

increased scrutiny by the State Police has been not only appropriate, but necessary.

I'll be blunt. This conduct is deplorable, and it is a mere handful of residents who have decided that, in this way, they will hijack every meeting --- using any excuse. By Council rules, they are certainly allowed to speak during the meeting. In fact, they are welcome to do so. In the beginning, their objective was justice for victims of sexual abuse. That's how this phenomenon began --- legitimate concern about a legitimate issue.

But in recent weeks the "movement" has become blatantly political. Through the cynical manipulation of events and confrontational rhetoric, quite consciously staged for TV cameras and social media, the objective of the group has changed. Not surprisingly, it has attracted perennial political also-rans and perpetual malcontents, including a former mayor, who earlier this year, made headlines in every news outlet for hurling a jar of Vaseline at the Governor of Maine. The mission of the group has completely morphed and the purpose now, very poorly concealed, is to destabilize and undermine the current city government in order to secure public office for themselves. In truth, they thrive on and welcome the chaos. It is all by design.

They now have their own mayoral candidate, their own Council candidates, their own school board candidates, and their own charter revision candidates, all devoted to their particular agenda. They even have their own newspaper. One of the group's loudest and most consistently profane agitators let it slip on Facebook earlier this year (in a post that was QUICKLY deleted) that the editor of the local weekly was personally aiding and possibly even directing her actions. That resulted in at least one public event on which the paper subsequently and conveniently reported. Very clearly we have a situation in which an editor harbors an easily detected political agenda, and has for a long time. Not satisfied with simply reporting the news, she wants to create it, and help shape events. Frankly, that is extraordinary.

Running for office, of course, is perfectly fine; this is a representative democracy, and anyone can run for public office. However, it is important to keep in mind that this faction's incessant production of misinformation and outrageous rumor is specifically designed to trigger a loss of respect and faith in current elected officials. That is the lens through which this group --- and the local weekly --- want you to view all developments on this issue. I urge you to be cognizant of that dynamic as you make your own, independent evaluations.

Now, if we can set rumor and misinformation aside for just a few minutes, let's look at a couple of facts.

Last week the Maine Attorney General's office announced it would not file charges against two individuals who were alleged to have committed sexual abuse against particular minors. The AG's office was concerned about the lack of corroborative information, and very conspicuous, in the very short announcement about the decision, was uncertainty about the actual age of one the alleged victims, at the time of assaults.

The AG's decision comes after the York County District Attorney's office declined to investigate. That was followed by the Cumberland County District Attorney's decision to also not investigate. Via social media, the most prominent alleged victim has repeatedly urged victims to contact the FBI in Boston, and the United States Department of Justice. He has called on Maine's governor for action, enlisted our state senator in an effort to pass a joint legislative resolution, claimed that members of the United States Congress were "getting involved," and celebrated the "fact" that the ABC News Nightline program is now "on the case."

Guess what? The City of Biddeford has heard from NONE of these folks. No contact from Governor LePage. No calls from the FBI. No letters from state legislative leaders. And certainly no inquiries from any producer at Nightline. Draw your own conclusions, but I suggest that should tell all of us a little something about the manufactured nature of the online rhetoric.

Despite the AG's decision not to press charges, the Council and I continue to be very concerned about any alleged victims of abuse. In fact, in May the Council passed emergency legislation to keep registered sex offenders away from public parks and ball fields where children gather. We did as much as we could, as allowed by the law. We also called on state senator David Dutremble to file emergency legislation on two different fronts. Despite the continued howls of protest by the unmistakably political players who continue to drive this siege, the City of Biddeford remains the ONLY government body or agency that has taken any direct action --- passing a new ordinance --- to deal with a very serious issue. Somehow, the political types driving this “crisis” manage to conveniently leave any mention of that fact out of the discussion.

Here's another inconvenient fact. To my

knowledge, no city official has ever been dismissive regarding the stories of abuse from decades ago. If anyone has that impression, then they have been misled. All the hot air about city officials “ignoring” victims is just that, completely useless hot air. Whether or not those events took place, in the seeking of justice, will be determined by the courts, not by the city council. While councilors may have their personal suspicions about what may or may not have occurred, without all pertinent details, which they do not possess, it is not prudent for them declare judgment, especially in terms of possible pending litigation against the city. My role, and the Council’s role, is GOVERNMENTAL. That is our only area of official authority. Guilt or innocence will ultimately be determined by due process and our criminal justice system.

The one and only issue with which the City has been concerned, in its governmental role, is the very specific charge that the Chief of Police knew about the incidents and covered it all up. The inconvenient FACT is that the information that the Council and I have reviewed indicates that such a charge is EMPHATICALLY FALSE. Despite the incessant conspiracy theories on social media, all credible facts clearly point out that the Chief did all that he was supposed to do, upon learning of

allegations.

We're not alone in our assessment. The AG's office has made it abundantly clear that the Biddeford Police Department and the Chief have always cooperated fully, that BPD has provided all requested information promptly and at all times, and that there is absolutely no trace of a cover up.

Quite simply, the information that the Council has reviewed to date indicates that the Chief has acted completely in harmony with the law, and all accepted protocol. Therefore, to initiate a hostile employment action against him at this time would violate his right to privacy, violate his right to due process, and violate many municipal, state and federal regulations. One of our most important duties is to protect the taxpayers of Biddeford from financial exposure. Knowing what we know at this time, it would be reckless and completely irresponsible to begin a hostile employment action against the Chief of Police.

Therefore, this past Tuesday, the Council decided unanimously not to suspend the Chief. As part of their deliberations, they reviewed a 16-page statement, written by a former Biddeford detective. The document alleged impropriety, but was completely anecdotal, and very notable for its utter

lack of primary, first-hand evidence. In addition, it was directly challenged by a signed affidavit, taken under oath, that we also examined. That affidavit bluntly stated that key aspects of the detective's statement were complete fabrications. Putting all of those pieces together, in conjunction with the Attorney General's findings and other information that was reviewed, the Council thus reached a unanimous conclusion to take no action against the Chief.

To make a false statement under oath is to put oneself at serious risk of prosecution for perjury. Therefore, receiving a sworn, first-person affidavit is FAR more powerful than innuendo and rumor, which is the stock and trade of the amateur judges, juries and executioners who love to incite chaos in the Facebook playpen. The City Council's function is to make policy. Social media "dialogue" can never --- ever --- be part of any disciplinary action or legal process. What must be fundamental to any inquiry or any accusation is factual evidence, supported by witnesses. Who among us would want to be disciplined or sanctioned because of a rumor, with only phantom accusers? No one.

I respectfully ask all citizens to periodically remind themselves that the flow of information, on social media or from any media outlet that has

compromised its reporting integrity, essentially tells one side of the story. The Council, in executive session, has heard the other side. And while the Council is, by nature, not an investigatory body, should any new information raise questions that undermine or create doubt about our understanding of what happened fifteen and more years ago, it will be the critical duty of the Council to take some sort of action. And I reiterate, because this is IMPORTANT, that the issue is not whether incidents of sexual abuse took place. The issue at hand is, if there was such abuse, did the Chief of Police try to cover anything up? To this date, we have absolutely no information in hand that supports that charge. Absolutely none.

I conclude by returning very briefly to the topic of accepted behavior during Council meetings. As your mayor, I feel very strongly that ALL the people of Biddeford should be secure in the knowledge that Council meetings are a safe and business-like forum in which every citizen can expect a respectful hearing, on whatever issue may be on your mind. This is essential. It's your right as a citizen to know this valuable tool is available to you.

I terminated last Tuesday's Council meeting when one of the agitators began attacking City staff and

Councilors, swearing over an open microphone, and making obscene gestures. Prior to that, during the course of the evening, other members of the audience had entertained themselves with loud, intrusive heckling and rude behavior. This has been standard operating procedure by this small clique for several months, and at the very least, such a hostile environment inhibits divergent testimony or opinions with which this group disagrees. This is a grave disservice to all citizens.

This will no longer be tolerated. City Council meetings are for ALL the citizens of Biddeford, and you can rest assured that the Council will insist on, and re-impose, respect and civility. This small circle of 15 or 20 agitators has had much more than a fair hearing in front of the City Council, which has invested countless hours trying very hard to sort through this difficult issue. These folks will continue to get a fair hearing in front of the Council as long as they abide by the widely-accepted societal guidelines of respect, good taste and common decency. Frankly, that is very little for the citizens of Biddeford to ask of this particular group. And it's a very easy threshold to meet.

We are resolved to return order to our meetings, and we will. Most important, the Council and I want to thank the citizens of Biddeford who, during this

unfortunate but temporary detour, have been so patient and understanding. Your continued expressions of support during the last several months, via e-mail and during personal interactions out in the community, have been very much appreciated in these very trying times. Biddeford is a wonderful community, and, together, with your assistance and concern, we will find healing and commonality.

Alan Casavant
Mayor of Biddeford