

TOWN COUNCIL PUBLIC SPEAKING MEETING

JANUARY 19, 1999

6:30 P.M.

A meeting of the Wallingford Town Council held specifically for the purpose of offering the public an opportunity to speak on topics of concern to them was held on Tuesday, January 19, 1999 in the Robert Earley Auditorium of the Wallingford Town Hall and called to Order by Chairman Robert F. Parisi at 6:31 P.M. Councilors Farrell, Papale, Parisi, Renda, Rys and Zandri answered present to the Roll called by Town Council Secretary Kathryn F. Zandri. Councilors Centner and Zappala could not attend due to previous commitments; Councilor Knight was ill. Mayor William W. Dickinson, Jr. was also in attendance.

The Pledge of Allegiance was given to the Flag.

James Heilman signed up to speak at this meeting, however he failed to show.

Reginald Knight, 21 Audette Drive also signed up for the meeting and was the only speaker to address the Council with his remarks.

Reginald Knight thanked Mr. Farrell for assisting him with his request that additional hearing dates be scheduled by the Board of Assessment Appeals for the purpose of hearing motor vehicle tax assessment appeals. Mr. Farrell had learned that the Town of Madison held several such hearings on weekdays and weekends and had directed correspondence to Robert DeMarco, Chairman of the Board of Assessment Appeals asking that they consider doing the same.

Regarding the Martin Luther King Holiday, Reginald Knight stated that the Mayor was quoted in the New Haven Register as saying that he did not want to have this day off from work and the statement made by the Mayor was, "If you don't stand on principle, what do you stand for?" He asked the Mayor, "why did you change your mind and let it go through?"

Mayor Dickinson replied, I felt, due to the discussion that was occurring the day would have no meaning at all. It was degenerating into self-interest polarization and confrontation and the day should not mean that. To avoid it becoming just a day of those values, it should be a day of higher quality and one in which we do remember the principles of Dr. King.

Reginald Knight stated, I will go along with that 100%; please make a note that I went along with the Mayor on that. Straight off, there is your first example of what you get from Martin Luther King's Day.....a sale in ladies underwear; that is how much it means to some people. I know there is an

ethnic situation here and passions rise high; I was raised in a town that is completely split even now and I am nearly seventy years old now. When I was a tiny boy going to school, if you were of the other religion, you got beaten. At the age of five I was beaten unconscious and I was unconscious for two or three hours because I was a Protestant and had to go through a Catholic zone and stones were used; held in the hand and smashed into my face because I was the wrong group. There seems to be an awful lot of energy that goes into this. Laws and committing days to people, will not change people; I don't think it does. Do people really care? How many people would go to their church and synagogue and give silence up to Martin Luther King? Myself, I admire the man's courage because I have seen the business where you stay in your own end of town or you really get hurt. That man (Dr. King) went into the deep south and walked right into dogs and guns and vicious people. I admire him for his courage but there are many, many people in this world who have the same courage and did it with the same non-violence. (Mohandas) Mahatma Gandhi was probably the greatest man of this century because he laid against the greatest empire at the time and just sat in the street and asked that people do the same thing; that was raw courage against the military. I think you showed courage yourself, Mr. Mayor. I would like to offer some suggestions; one, to observe the day for the man's sake. We are practically an all-white town, we have to admit that. If we were honest, how many people do you think really went around that day, if there hadn't been such a hullabaloo going on, would even have thought of Martin Luther King or what he stood for? I would suggest that maybe to get out of the situation, it would be that the Town workers work that day if they feel that they really should observe Martin Luther King Day and donate their wages of that day to some appropriate cause for underprivileged children that would be in the neighborhoods where it would best done; that would be a wonderful thing because Martin Luther King thought of children and work. My second thought is, we have an election coming up in November, why can we not put it on the election sheet? Let the citizens of this town decide whether Martin Luther King Day should be a day off or not. Why should the Mayor take the heat for the whole thing? They could put it as a question on the ballot. I really don't think you can legislate human decency or people being kind to one another. You can pass laws where people can use the same toilets or travel on the same bus but it is not necessarily going to make people like each other or want them as neighbors and who is to say who is the good person and who is the bad guy? We all know bad white people and we all know good black people and nice Hispanic people and all the rest; who is to say the good and the bad? It is just a suggestion; to put it in as a write-in question or a referendum. It might help solve the situation a little bit.

With regards to the sidewalks in town; Reginald Knight stated, we pass laws that people clean their sidewalks and yet the same people over and over and over again, do not clean them, including the person who owns city dump central division up on Main Street; it is still a mess now. This morning or yesterday was even worse; all the way from the fire department north on Main Street the sidewalk had not been, no attempt was made to clean it whatsoever. Footsteps had turned into ice and there would be no effort yet, policemen drive by. What is the point of making laws if nothing is done about

about it? It seems ridiculous. Mr. Parisi, since you once held the position of Sidewalk Inspector, what are the duties of the housekeeper?

Mr. Parisi answered, as far as I know the homeowner is responsible for the sidewalk; the care and maintenance of it. Do you mean after a snowstorm?

Reginald Knight stated, I mean altogether. Even when the walks are cracked and are heaving up and down.....

Mr. Parisi replied, if I am not mistaken, homeowners are responsible for that.

Ms. Papale stated, they have so many hours after a storm.....

Mayor Dickinson stated, with regards to the snow removal, they have a certain amount of time after a storm to remove the snow. The physical repairs to sidewalks at one time was the responsibility of the homeowner unless it was a tree owned by the Town that created the problem. That has been changed. All repairs to sidewalks are done by local government.

Reginald Knight stated, I wish the Town would press forth on the issue of making people clear their sidewalks. I see people walking on the roads because they are afraid to walk on the sidewalk which seems terrible, especially for the aged. I am nearly seventy and I get around quite a bit on foot and I am more afraid of the sidewalks than I am of the traffic.

Reginald Knight next asked, who is responsible for removing the large pile of hard-packed snow that is deposited at the end of sidewalks as a result of the snowplowing by Town trucks? Who would be responsible for removal of that to allow for clear passage of the sidewalk?

Mayor Dickinson asked, is the snow in the sidewalk or the road?

Reginald Knight answered, it is a combination of both; it is in the gutter and on the sidewalk.

Mayor Dickinson answered, what ever is in the road is the responsibility of Public Works and what ever is on the sidewalk is the responsibility of the homeowner.

Reginald Knight commented, we just don't see it at the road intersections, we see it in driveways where people have enough money to employ a plow to go into the back of the property, like a real estate business or something like that who has offices on Main Street; they go in the back and push the snow out and you get a little mountain right on the sidewalk property. No one seems to do anything about that either. I have even seen it downtown; at the intersection of Center and Main Streets where people have to climb over a little miniature frozen mountain to get across the road to

the Post Office. There should be some sort of step taken to make that better. It seems to be the same people over and over again. One of the worst spots this morning as I went up Main Street was in front of Janis Small's office.

Mr. Parisi pointed out, it is the (duty of the ) landlord. He stated, even on Center Street, the merchants sometimes are the ones that put the pathway out to the road so that if you park.....you are right, it is less and less; you're right.

Reginald Knight stated, the funny thing about it is, the more affluent they are.....it is like a Cadillac car; the traffic signals don't seem to work on a Cadillac but they work on a Ford or a Chevy to indicate that they are going to make a turn left. It is rather amazing.

On another matter Reginald Knight quoted the ordinance which reads, "No official or employee shall grant any special consideration, treatment or advantage to any person beyond that which is available to every other person similarly situated." He went on to say that the Mayor stated in his 1984 mayoralty acceptance speech, "I call upon every citizen to take interest in the community, attend meetings and express concern. If you are treated discourteously and discouraged from participation in town government, I want to know about it. There will be a schedule of hours when I will be in the office available to you....." etc., etc. Reginald Knight stated, here we have a notice that says everyone will get equal treatment. Here is the mayor's wish that everyone come forward; we know that not everyone will and that is the sad part of life today. People say today that you cannot fight city hall or they (city hall) are not going to take any notice or they (city hall) don't listen or if it isn't party-wise then they (city hall) don't care. I feel very strongly about this business. The reason we are all here is supposedly to save time. Here we are on a Tuesday when we could be doing something else. There must be lots of things you could be doing to help the world along a little or even to sit home with your family and enjoy them. If the time was slackened up at the regular meetings or if our little friend there....he was cut off because the public speaking time was up. This thing has bounced back and forth and the rules have been bent, double bent, twisted and warped and I don't think that's right. If you slackened off at the regular meeting and let people speak....here we are trying to encourage people to come and talk. People stop me on the street or in my travels and ask me, "why don't you tell them (Council) this, or why don't you tell them..." and I say, "why don't you tell them?" They respond, "I am afraid; I can't talk in public." Well I can't either, I am not good at it. They say they are afraid or it is not going to do any good. I would like to ask again that these people be allowed to speak, say their piece. It does not do any harm. What harm does it do? The Public Question and Comment time at the regular meeting should be expanded to let people speak, let them make their point, let them get to it and quite often you will find that if there is no confrontation or argument about it, they will be able to make their point and sit down and let someone else speak. It is when we get into confrontational and argumentative situations that the thing gets out of hand and the overall time runs. It is not fair to someone who is speaker #8; he is not going to get to speak and that is not right. It puts too much on the Chairman to pick and choose who is going to speak. I don't think that is

right; he should not have that problem. The right to speak and say what is on your mind is very important to the American culture.

With regards to the trees, Reginald Knight stated, how are we going to equate the money we are saving on tree cutting services with danger to the public? The tree by Moses Y. Beach School has a notice on it that says, "hazardous". Little children pass by and go to school in the area and the notice was on the tree for well over a month; a hazardous tree. Again, it was done by a company from Middlefield or Middletown. I find it extremely hard to imagine that we cannot get one of our local companies.....I spoke to one company who was taking down a tree and they said that no one had approached them at all about this. There must be some way that some in-town company could be put on a retainer or something of that nature to get these trees down before someone gets hurt. I don't see why the town workers can't do it. Up until the time I retired I was cross-trained on other people's jobs. I don't see why Public Works cannot take down a tree.

With regards to taxes; Reginald Knight stated, I still find it very hard to understand how Mr. McManus' situation was overlooked. Not only the area of his land but motor vehicles; two or three. Nobody knew where they were; he claimed he sold them, etc. When I built my garage on my house I had to put in for a permit and I also had to get a variance so that I could build nearer to my neighbor's line.

At this time Mr. Zandri interrupted Reginald Knight to state that he would have to leave the meeting because he has an item on the Public Utilities Commission's agenda this evening and the meeting is taking place simultaneously with this one. He apologized for having to leave during Mr. Knight's presentation.

Reginald Knight stated, I had to submit plans to show what I was doing with my garage and they had to be approved. Immediately I was taxed on having a garage.

Mr. Parisi stated, not everyone does it the way you did; you followed the rules.

Reginald Knight asked, you (Mr. Parisi) have a second garage too, haven't you?

Mr. Parisi answered, yes.

Reginald Knight asked, is that in the description of your house?

Mr. Parisi answered, I think it is, yeah; I hope it is; it should be; there was a permit.

Reginald Knight stated, on my house they showed the layout of the house and they called it an attached garage. It is strange because an attached garage according to the rules is not necessarily one

that is attached to your house. If the front of the garage pokes out further than the back of your house then that is an attached garage even though it can be fifteen feet away from the house.

Reginald Knight stated, on the description of my house, on the bottom left hand corner they added in that I put up a garage. You must have had the same thing, am I right?

Mr. Parisi answered, I would imagine that I did; I honestly don't know. I had a permit taken out by the fella that did the work.

Reginald Knight stated, if this is sloppy book work, I don't understand it because these things are supposed to be noted. They come from the people who give the permits and then it goes to the tax people who are supposed to make the necessary changes. Is that right?

Mayor Dickinson replied, you are puzzling over something that has resulted in two employees losing employment with the Town and arrests being made. I doubt that our sitting here and wondering about it is ever going to give us answers to why the records weren't there. They weren't there; there has been a lot of discussion about it and as I stated there is some serious disciplinary and other actions taken as a result of it all. We are not going to solve it here tonight and understand what happened and who did it or why things are the way they are.

Reginald Knight stated, I would like to know that steps have been taken to stop it from ever happening again; a person cannot change their situation without it being on the tax situation.

Mayor Dickinson answered, the information was on the tax rolls. There is no implication that Atty. McManus did anything. The question is regarding the work product of the people who are employed by the Town.

Reginald Knight stated, Mayor Lindsay of New York had a project that was supposed to help the poor; a \$30 million project granted by the federal government. Of that \$30 million, \$17 million could not be accounted for in any one way and that man, the Mayor of New York, stood there and said, "I don't think there is anything wrong, I just think it was sloppy bookkeeping." If you believe that, I have a bridge I want to sell you.

Mr. Farrell stated, there were some obvious mistakes in the Assessor's Office. I am an attorney and I have to deal with questions of value on a daily basis because for probate estates it becomes a big question, "what is the value of the real estate that is in probate estate?". The assessment process, no matter if you had the most honest people there, is not absolutely fool-proof. You pointed out some examples of people that never got building permits. There is no mechanism necessarily that is going to pick up and tax people on things where they did not go out and legally obtain a building permit. It actually takes someone going out into the field and the likelihood is that that is only going to happen

where you are doing the ten year re-evaluation because unless someone else brought it to the town's attention, we don't look in every back yard. Not to defend what happened but, even if you had the most honest of people there, it is never going to be an absolutely perfect system. I bet there are a lot of examples out there and if you wanted to search high and low you could find but they are not things that would come to the Assessor's attention. My perception is, despite all the things that went wrong there, by and large, they were doing a reasonably good job; I will go out on that limb. My perception, having dealt with that office is that, most things were on the up and up and that they were trying very hard to follow through on everything that came through. You go and pull a building permit, you go transfer land; I saw all of those things being picked up by the Assessor's Office and being acted upon. My own experience is, there was not sloppy bookkeeping. By and large I think they were doing their job. It is not in defense of anyone but to give you a feel for the process.

Reginald Knight stated, I suppose it is like everything else; the honest taxpayer goes and gets his variance and building permit and does everything the proper way and he is going to get taxed while other people are going to go ahead and do things.....

Mr. Farrell stated, welcome to the real life. I encounter that every day in my job. I can give people the perfect advice and say "hey, if you don't do what I am telling you, you may get caught and there is going to be serious repercussions" and they say, "what about all those other people who routinely do the wrong thing and don't get caught?". What am I supposed to tell you, "go ahead and do it?"

Reginald Knight asked, are there any new plans on the Wooding/Caplan property?

Mayor Dickinson answered, discussions are still continuing amongst the private property owners. There is nothing more to report.

Reginald Knight stated, lastly, Mr. Al Pareti died down in Sneedville, Tennessee. He was a senior custodian in the school system. There is a wake for him tonight at the Wallingford Funeral Home if any of you think, as a public official, that you may want to attend the service. Thank you very much for listening to me.

Motion was made by Ms. Papale to Adjourn the Meeting, seconded by Mr. Farrell.

VOTE: Centner, Knight, Zandri and Zappala were absent; all others, aye; motion duly carried.

There being no further business the meeting adjourned at 7:12 P.M.

Meeting recorded and transcribed by:

*Kathryn F. Zandri*  
Kathryn F. Zandri  
Town Council Secretary

Approved:

*Robert F. Parisi*  
Robert F. Parisi, Chairman

*2-9-99*  
Date

*Rosemary A. Rascati*  
Rosemary A. Rascati, Town Clerk

*2-9-99*  
Date