

West Boylston Solid Waste Advisory Team
DRAFT Minutes
October 7, 2008
Town Hall Offices, 127 Hartwell Street

Present:

Judy Doherty, Chair
Elise Wellington
Janet Vignaly
Julianne DeRivera
John Westerling
Mary Ambrose, Adjunct member

Not present:

Craig Gonyea

The meeting began at 7:05 p.m with a discussion about the upcoming October 20th Town Meeting. Members were told that they had to be careful to keep the discussion within the scope of the proposed warrant article, and that additional information, such as mandatory recycling, would not be allowed because it was outside the scope. Members discussed the different functions of its Report to Town Meeting, given at the beginning of the Town Meeting, and its Warrant Article (#19), which comes up later in the evening. During the Report, members may talk about all the work they did, while discussion must stick more closely to the topic at hand when the warrant article comes up. Ms. Doherty told the team that she would be unable to stay for the whole Town Meeting due to a schedule conflict, but that she would be willing to either speak at the Report or at the Warrant Article time. Members agreed that her presence would be especially important at the time of the Report.

Ms. Doherty gave a suggested outline for the SWAT report. Ms. Doherty would talk about the money being “thrown in the trash” because people are not recycling all they can. If education alone could change people’s habits, that would be fantastic—if 1000 tons could be diverted from the waste stream by education alone, the town would save \$76,000. Ms. Doherty later asked Mr. Westerling for the latest recycling rate and he reported it was 20%, down from the peak of 23%. It had been hovering around 21-22%. Ms. Doherty said this was evidence that all the education work the team had done was not effective alone. Ms. Doherty continued her suggestion for the report: the committee, having reviewed options, found that actions are not just changed by good intentions, that a “nudge” has done well in other towns to effect change. Pay As You Throw (PAYT) has a good track record, and that is what SWAT will recommend tonight.

Mr. Westerling said that he thought it was pretty clear that the Selectmen wanted SWAT to pass over the PAYT article on the warrant. Members discussed the process of doing that, and Mr. Westerling suggested asking the question of who has the authority to ask that an article be passed over, especially since the article in question was a 10-taxpayer petition.

The committee then discussed their October 1st meeting with the Board of Selectmen. Ms. DeRivera summarized four obstacles to the SWAT proposal she heard at the meeting. Mr. Val Pruneau said he didn’t support PAYT because of how it would affect large families he knew. Mr. Allen felt the town had not reached a critical threshold where PAYT would be necessary. Mr. McCormack thought that the move to PAYT would be too difficult for people to understand. And Mr. Rucho thought the SWAT proposal was “small potatoes” with the \$2 million deficit (quote from Ms. DeRivera). Selectman McCormack said he voted “no” to PAYT because SWAT put it on the warrant without asking, and his feelings were hurt that the SWAT did not come to the Selectmen before doing so. He

also said that he didn't want to see a vote because if the people voted "yes" they would assume the program would be implemented, and would be confused if the Selectmen made another decision, such as taking trash out of the budget altogether.

Ms. Vignaly updated those who were not present at the Selectmen's meeting. She had responded to Mr. McCormack by informing him of the timing problem the SWAT had encountered in the process—after meeting with the Selectmen on July 16, SWAT had told the Selectmen of SWAT's Public Forum to be held on September 9 to gauge public opinion on PAYT. However, warrant articles were due on that same day, so the SWAT would not have a way to hear public reaction before placing an article on the warrant, so they submitted the PAYT article to make sure they had reserved a place for it on the warrant. Then, the day after they submitted it, Ms. Wellington learned that the Selectmen could decide not to put SWAT's article on the warrant. Since she felt the SWAT would still want to keep its options open, she put together a quick 10-taxpayer petition to ensure the article was included. All this was done so SWAT could keep its options open following the Public Forum and with the knowledge that the article could be withdrawn by SWAT all the way up to the time of Town Meeting. Ms. Vignaly suggested going forward with the article at Town Meeting, but emphasizing the non-binding aspect of the article.

Ms. DeRivera asked about regionalization of trash. Ms. Wellington responded that it would only be possible if the towns negotiated together at Wheelabrator, since towns have different tipping fees. Mr. Westerling reiterated his assertion that the Board of Selectmen didn't want to see a vote on this issue at Town Meeting, and the SWAT had to be careful. He brought up Mr. McCormack's question, "What's the hurry?" Ms. Vignaly said she thought the hurry was the \$2 million deficit the town faces and she heard at the joint meeting with the Selectmen, Finance Committee, and School Committee that the earlier things are decided that will provide savings, the better. Mr. Westerling said the \$2 million deficit would be difficult to reconcile, that even if the town closed the DPW and the library, it wouldn't even reduce the town budget by \$1 million. He said the DPW had a budget of \$550,000 and the library budget was around \$350,000.

Ms. Doherty suggested telling the SWAT story to completion, and leaving the article on the warrant so people could have a voice in the topic. Mr. Westerling reminded the SWAT of Mr. Phillips' suggestion that SWAT put an item on the ballot in the April 2009 town election.

Ms. Wellington suggested keeping the article on the warrant, to acknowledge that the Board of Selectmen do not support it, but that this would be a forum for the public to give the Selectmen a gauge on public opinion. Putting the question on the Townwide ballot, on the other hand, would not provide people with that forum for discussion. Ms. Vignaly added that a ballot does not measure an informed vote, and that many people she had talked to did not support PAYT at first, but then were very supportive after learning more about it. Mr. Westerling said that the SWAT only had to convince 5 people to support PAYT, as the Selectmen make the decision. Ms. Wellington acknowledged this to be true, but said that in other towns where the Selectmen made the decision without public support at a Town Meeting, there was not as much cooperation among residents when implementation began.

Ms. Ambrose suggested that individual residents call the Selectmen to express their support of PAYT. She said it would have been good to have passed out small pieces of paper at the forum encouraging people to do so. She asked if, during the Town Meeting report, SWAT could say that some Selectmen wished to have feedback, that SWAT withdraws the article but would like to see a show of hands of how many people would support the general direction of PAYT at this time. Ms. Doherty said this might be a peacemaking gesture while also getting a read on the town. Ms. Doherty said the SWAT

Report at Town Meeting should focus on money saving, and how the percent recycling currently was about the same as when SWAT started its education campaign. Most recently there's been an exchange, Ms. Doherty described, as if to Town Meeting, between the SWAT and Board of Selectmen. The Selectmen told SWAT they wanted to know more about public opinion, and SWAT conducted a Public Forum, at which the majority seemed enthusiastic. The SWAT had put together an article to hold a place on the warrant. Then, on October 1, there was the unsettling situation where the Board of Selectmen seemed not approving of what the SWAT had done.

Ms. Wellington informed the team that there could not be a discussion at Town Meeting if the article were withdrawn, and that it would not be desirable to ask for a straw poll without giving the people the facts. Ms. Doherty asked Ms. Wellington to read the warrant article and she did. Members again discussed the possibility of sticking with the article as written. Mr. Westerling repeated his sentiment that SWAT members were crossing from advisory into advocacy. Ms. Vignaly said that she had spoken with members of town government in other towns and nobody else had seen the SWAT actions as crossing the line. Ms. Doherty spoke to her understanding of the word "advice," which is a candid opinion based on experience, and is given if someone asks for it. She noted that Town Meeting is a group that SWAT hasn't yet advised. Mr. Westerling said SWAT members were seen as forcing the vote, that if members were part of a grassroots effort, that would be okay, but as an advisory team, it was not good. Ms. Vignaly said she did not even feel they were being respected as an advisory team, and she recounted the background of the SWAT's research. At the very first meeting, Ms. Vignaly said, and Ms. Doherty confirmed from her notes, Mr. Gaumond welcomed SWAT members, told them of his formation of a similar team in his former town, East Longmeadow, and told the members how successful the team had been at reducing trash and saving the town money after implementation of PAYT. The West Boylston SWAT, said Mr. Gaumond, had a "carte blanche" as they proceeded to seek solid waste solutions in their own town. Ms. Vignaly then reported to the team about her attendance at the September 25th Joint Meeting (Board of Selectmen, Finance Committee, School Committee) where the issues of a mandatory recycling bylaw and PAYT came up. She and Ms. Wellington, who was also in attendance, were not called on to report potential savings on either program. Ms. Vignaly did raise her hand to give mandatory recycling estimates, but when PAYT came up, Mr. Allen said dismissively that there were too many variables to estimate the impact. Ms. Vignaly reported that, at that Joint Meeting, Finance Committee member Pat Crowley brought up the SWAT's fiscal analysis which members had given him before the meeting, but that these numbers seemed to be given no credence. It was frustrating to be treated this way, said Ms. Vignaly, after researching the topic for a year.

Ms. Wellington told the team that maybe it had leaned too much on the advocacy side, but the early SWAT minutes stated the mission of the team, and "we've done it," she said. She said that members have spent a huge amount of hours, Mr. Gaumond hasn't attended many SWAT meetings, Ms. Vignaly had emailed the Selectmen asking them for their questions and hadn't received any from them, and that SWAT hasn't received much input from the Selectmen. She continued that in July, the SWAT presentation to the Selectmen was put on at 10:00 pm instead of 9:00 and then most of the video was inaudible, which was not at all helpful to SWAT. She asked, if the Selectmen are against PAYT, why weren't SWAT members told this before they spent all their time researching it under the DEP grant that the DPW applied for to research PAYT? Ms. Wellington said the team had wasted a huge amount of time, and that if the Board wanted people to volunteer in town, they should treat volunteers differently or people will not want to spend the time. She said that the "poor communication" was not the fault of the SWAT, considering the team had been before the Board three times, each time at the request of the SWAT.

Ms. Doherty said she was shocked at the idea expressed at the Selectmen's meeting, that a Town Meeting vote would not be good because if Town Meeting members voted in favor of PAYT but the Selectmen did not want to implement it, they would be "confused." Ms. Doherty said she had believed the town government to be more of a democracy.

Ms. Vignaly recounted that Mr. Phillips said he felt morally obligated to do an override if PAYT were approved but he never gave an explanation. She expressed her frustration that the Selectmen were not putting specific issues on the table. She said that she had spoken to numerous residents who said that they had not supported the idea of PAYT previously, but after learning the facts, they really hoped it passed. Ms. Vignaly said that she felt that after all the public involvement, the SWAT owed it to the people to follow through with the article to let their voices be heard.

Members discussed the idea of seeking Finance Committee support. The Finance Committee did not need to make a formal vote, but could voice their support at Town Meeting. Ms. Vignaly said that Finance Committee member Pat Crowley seemed to be in favor of PAYT, and that Finance Committee chair Ray Bricault had sent an email to the comment page on the website which contained a logistical question—offering two sizes of free bags—rather than any show of nonsupport. Ms. DeRivera reported that many people she had spoken to assumed that PAYT was going to be adopted, especially considering the financial situation in the town. Ms. Wellington said that it was not uncommon for Finance Committees and Select Boards to be on opposite sides of issues, since what is fiscally favorable is often not the same as what is politically favorable.

Ms. DeRivera reported that she had called Ms. Kim Hopewell, Town Clerk, to obtain the number of large families in town, in order to know the percentage of households that would be affected by the "large family" argument. She said that it was not possible to obtain that information because of the privacy of children involved. Members thanked her for the good idea and the effort.

Ms. Wellington reported that she called the Longmeadow DPW, who said they had received a lot of flack before adopting PAYT, but after it went through, large families were the best recyclers. That town also has an appeals process whereby families who have taken in foster children, or who have handicapped adults wearing diapers, can appeal due to their legitimate hardship in buying their bags. Only 5 families have used the appeals process, reported Ms. Wellington. Ms. DeRivera pointed out that large families would also have the option of opting out of the PAYT and hiring private haulers, which Mr. Westerling pointed out would cost them \$400-500 per year. Ms. Ambrose reminded members of the Public Forum participant who pointed out that "it all comes out in the wash" since other peoples' taxes pay for children in schools.

Ms. Wellington pointed out that Ms. Irene Congdon had PAYT displays available. Ms. DeRivera offered to contact Ms. Congdon to obtain one for Town Meeting.

Ms. Vignaly made a motion that the SWAT endorse the 10-taxpayer petition that was on the warrant (Article 19), which called for a non-binding vote urging the Board of Selectmen to adopt SWAT's modified PAYT recommendation. Ms. DeRivera seconded the motion. All in favor.

Ms. Doherty clarified that the intention of the team was not meant to be an affront to the Board of Selectmen, but as a straw poll, an indication of where the townspeople are at this point in history. Though the SWAT considered putting PAYT on the April town-wide ballot, they considered this to be too far away, and wanted to get a more immediate feel from the people. Ms. Vignaly added that the sooner the program were implemented, the sooner the savings, and that the urgency of a decision was

expressed at the Joint Meeting. Ms. Wellington added that the Selectmen had to take into consideration that if the Town Meeting vote on PAYT took place in May, it would take a half year to implement, pushing the program and savings back. The DPW Director she spoke with in Longmeadow told her that a nearby town had problems because they voted in May and tried to implement the program too quickly. She reminded the team that Mr. Gaumond had said previously that October would be a good time to vote, so the town would have the PAYT projected savings information when they were planning the town budget in January.

Mr. Rucho appeared at the end of the meeting, and members asked him to clarify why he abstained from the vote to support or not to support the PAYT warrant article. He said he abstained because he didn't believe the Selectmen should take a stand on petitioned articles before the Town Meeting, that the Selectmen should vote at Town Meeting like everyone else. He recounted that at one meeting the Selectmen agreed to take a stand on petitioned articles, and at another meeting they don't take a stand.

Regarding the PAYT program, Mr. Rucho said he has a family of five and puts out one bag per week. He said the problem that many people see is that currently, the town's collector takes anything, so after PAYT they will have to pay to dispose of things like lumber, etc.

Final tasks: members would email the Town Meeting handout around and continue to make revisions. Ms. DeRivera would send her op-ed piece to the Banner. Ms. Doherty would type up remarks for the Town Meeting Report. Ms. Vignaly would prepare a Power Point presentation for the warrant article and ask Ms. Hopewell about the deadline for submitting that. Ms. Vignaly and Ms. Wellington would present the information to the Senior Center on Thursday, October 9 at 12:45, and at Hillside Village on October 15 at 7:00.

The meeting adjourned at 9 PM.

Submitted by,

Janet Vignaly, Secretary