

TOP STORIES

Positions Cut, Union Seeks Other Options[Print Page](#)

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WOODBURY — First Selectman Jerry Stomski addressed his recent decision to cut the position of recreation specialist from the Parks and Recreation Department at the Thursday, August 12, Board of Selectmen meeting.

In response to the statements he made at the meeting, Matt O'Connor, communications director CSEA/SEIU Local 2001, called a press conference on Friday, August 13.

Former recreation specialist Leslie Gamsjager, who said she has 21 years of experience in event planning and received a degree in marketing and advertising from the University of South Carolina, and Richard J. Lamothe, supervising foreman in the Public Works Department for 15 years, are both members of the union.

Mr. Stomski eliminated both positions earlier this month after the Board of Finance approved a pay plan that was \$80,000 less than the pay plan originally approved by the Board of Selectmen.

Mr. O'Connor said the ultimate goal is to restore both positions.

"Fundamentally, this is about the services Rich and Leslie provide," he said. "The eliminations were done without exploring options."

During privilege of the floor at the August 12 board meeting, Michelle Ecsedy questioned whether the decision to eliminate the recreation specialist position is fiscally responsible due to the revenue the department brings into town.

She also questioned whether Mr. Stomski has the authority to fire someone.

"These were the eliminations of job positions," said Mr. Stomski. "I'm definitely within my legal authority to eliminate positions based on economic hardship."

Resident Tom Arras agreed that cutting staff is always hard, but said the public sector in town was largely untouched until this year.

He said while the decision to cut positions is difficult, it is necessary in business, even though it is hard to understand when it hits close to home.

Mr. Stomski said the original town budget included funding for all salaries and programs, but then the finance board approved a pay plan with an \$80,000 shortfall.

"It was not our action, but our responsibility as far as 'who goes,' he said.

At the press conference, Mr. O'Connor said he wants to remind everyone in town that the 2010-11 municipal budget that passed did not require the cutting of positions.

"There are some questions on why this was done," he said.

Mr. O'Connor said the intent is for union representatives to attend the next Board of Selectmen meeting.

At the August 12 selectmen's meeting, Mr. Stomski said he had to make decisions based on the finance board's elimination of \$80,000 from the pay plan.

"I think it's a great loss that we had to let anyone go," said Mr. Stomski. "This was something that was forced on us by reducing the pay plan. No matter who we let go, someone is going to face hardship."

Selectman George Hale agreed that losing positions is a shame and said the elimination of the recreation specialist position is a poor financial decision.

"This is a department that generates revenue from fees that people want to pay and not from taxes," he said.

Mr. Hale said he needs to understand why that source of revenue will now be stifled.

"It was never our intention to cut programs," said Mr. Stomski. "We plan on keeping most. We may eliminate some."

He said the Business and Economic Development Committee has plans.

"The Business and Economic Development Committee plans on bringing more special events into town than we've ever had before," said Mr. Stomski. "But they're volunteers. With people like yourself stepping up to the plate, we'll be just fine."

Mr. Stomski said he has a message to the townspeople who are concerned about losing programs.

"Stand up to the plate, volunteer your time and make it right," he said.

Mr. Stomski said the Parks and Recreation Department will still generate money. He feels the town will be able to generate more money due to efforts made by the Business and Economic Development Committee.

Mr. Hale said he is looking forward to the volunteer efforts by that committee, but cautioned against absolute statements.

"I don't think it's a guns or butter argument: 'well, if we don't have Park and Rec, we have the Business and Economic Development Committee,'" he said. "I don't think they should be in the same discussion."

Mr. Hale is the former chairman of the Economic Development Committee, a predecessor to the Business and Economic Development Committee.

Selectmen approved a motion to amend the pay plan, to reflect the \$80,000 reduction by the Board of Finance. The new figure is \$3,001,000.

During discussion of that motion, Mr. Hale said he wanted to address the pay plan and the comments from Mr. Stomski and residents, during privilege of the floor.

"When the first selectman says 'we acted,' he may be representing his office, but he is not representing the entire board," said Mr. Hale.

"In my absence, the two selectmen voted to give the entire authority to the first selectman, so he does have ownership of that."

Mr. Hale was referring to Mr. Stomski and Selectman Barbara Perkinson's approval to give the authority to hire and dismiss personnel to Mr. Stomski.

That vote took place at the June 24 Board of Selectmen meeting, which Mr. Hale did not attend.

"Even though I did not have the authority, we did not have a discussion as a board," said Mr. Hale. "As the charter initially suggests, to deal with employees, the board should deal with it. The intent of the charter was more collaboration with the Board of Selectmen."

Mr. Stomski asked Mr. Hale, several times, who he would lay off.

Mr. Hale said he would have followed the charter as it is written and would have had discussions with the Board of Selectmen before rendering a decision.

"We should not reduce the ability of a revenue-generating department to produce revenue, particularly when it's fee-driven and not tax-based," said Mr. Hale.

Mr. Stomski asked Mr. Hale if he was going to answer his question on who he would lay off.

Mr. Hale said the question was ludicrous.

Mr. Stomski asked Mr. Hale to look at non-revenue generating departments and pick someone to lay off.

Mr. Hale asked what happened to early retirement packages that were offered and Mr. Stomski said there were none.

Mrs. Perkinson suggested the selectmen pursue early retirement packages for the coming year.

In further explaining his decision to cut the recreation specialist decision, Mr. Stomski said he looked at what areas he felt he could compromise on and where the position stemmed from originally.

He said he looked at various areas, such as health and safety and the fire department.

"I think health and safety is an area we looked at that we weren't going to compromise on," said Mr. Stomski. "So we started looking at the quality of life."

Mr. Lamothe said at the press conference that he is in charge of a complete snowplowing route that includes plowing around the municipal buildings.

He said if he is not working, the response time for plowing will be slower and wondered if that will equate to a compromise in health and safety due to increased car accidents in the winter.

Mr. Lamothe said he filled in whenever Public Works Director Dave Monckton was out and does not know who will pick up that role now.

In cutting the supervising foreman and recreation specialist positions, Mr. Stomski said he looked at where the jobs originated.

In the past, the park and recreation director took care of director duties, specialist responsibilities and park maintenance, he said.

The public works director, likewise, handled the foreman duties, said Mr. Stomski.

Mr. Lamothe said that was 25 years ago.

"We've picked up 20 miles of road since then," he said. "Things are totally different than they were 25 years ago."

From this point on, Mr. O'Connor said union members will discuss cost-savings ideas to present to the town.

"Yes, a budget was passed where this shouldn't be necessary, but our members want to be part of the solution," he said.

At the same time, he said the union will look through the contracts and see what recourse the union may have to restore the supervising foreman and recreation specialist positions.

Mr. O'Connor said the union has already filed grievances, because eliminating positions when work still has to get done is a contract violation.

With both positions, a procedure is followed. Typically, the first step is to speak to one's manager. Because the situation involved layoffs, Mr. O'Connor said the union went straight to the first selectman to seek a

mutual resolution.

The first selectman did not want to restore the positions, said Mr. O'Connor.

The next step is to bring the matter before the state Board of Mediation and Arbitration, he said. After that, Mr. O'Connor said the next avenue is arbitration, if necessary.

He said the question that needs to be asked then, is whether that is an efficient way to spend taxpayer money.

At the press conference, Ms. Gamsjager said there is a trickle-down effect from the Park and Recreation Department's programs.

The farmer's market provides economic stimulus and the townwide tag sale draws people from other states who then need to find a local restaurant to eat in, she said.

"I always bring in thousands upon thousands upon thousands of dollars of sponsorship, which I'm grateful for," said Ms. Gamsjager. "We put on a lot of free events, at no cost to the taxpayer."

Mr. O'Connor said that by eliminating the positions, the economy of the town will be altered and that one of the worst business decisions to make in troubling economic times is to cut staff.

"It's not just their livelihood," said Mr. O'Connor. "It's their contribution to the community."

The next Board of Selectmen meeting will take place at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, August 26, at the Shove Conference Room, 281 Main St. South.

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