

OPINION

FinCom recommends 'no' vote on ambulance

Editor's note: Uchenick, a member of the Topsfield Finance Committee, gave portions of this presentation at the League of Women Voters Candidate's Night held in Topsfield on Tuesday evening.

The Board of Selectmen has chosen to put two articles on the warrant for a town-owned, operated and managed, fee-for-service ambulance service. Two override articles associated with this service would also have to pass at the ballot for this to happen. The costs for this service in the first year would be about \$110,000 for staffing — and this is for only half of the year — and \$170,000 for the purchase of two new ambulances for a total first year cost of \$280,000, after deducting reimbursements by medical insurers. The selectmen had appointed a committee to study the desirability and feasibility of a town-owned system. That committee, consisting of dedicated and competent individuals, decided to present the facts, as they understood them but made no recommendation as to whether the town should proceed. The selectmen, however, endorsed the proposal. Then, it became the job of the Finance Committee (FinCom) to evaluate the proposal and determine whether or not to recommend this project to the town.

The FinCom had numerous meetings with the selectmen and with the committee appointed by the selectmen. We, of course, received substantial input from the Topsfield Fire Chief. In addition, we have read the key pieces of medical research on emergency medicine. Because we are talking about so much money we wanted to be confident of our grounding.

The FinCom unanimously voted to recommend no action on this proposal for five reasons:

- The existing system with Lyons Ambulance works quite well for the relatively modest cost of about \$50,000 per year. The study committee appointed by the selectmen, in fact, observed exactly this.

- Medical need. We know from the research recommended to us by the committee that the key to saving lives is how quickly a defibrillator can arrive at the scene of a medical emergency. The FinCom has always supported defibrillators in Topsfield for the police and fire first responders. Topsfield's first responders are all so equipped.

SITTING IN

BY JOEL UCHENICK

mend the article and the override. But we are convinced that this is not the case. The key concern raised by the fire chief was the difficulty of recruiting call firefighters/first responders during the daytime and weekends. To address this, the FinCom has recommended increasing the fire department budget by \$80,000 in order to provide adequate staffing. Note, however, that the fire chief would continue to want this \$80,000 whether the town goes into the ambulance business or not.

- Management. I'd also like to point out that the town's ability to manage a complex undertaking such as this could be seriously questioned. In fact, the town is hiring a town manager but that won't happen for a couple of years. After that happens we can reassess the issue of management, but until then, we should not overburden the fire department with the difficulty of doubling its size, taking on the burdens of Lyons Ambulance Service, and all the other difficulties and complexities of managing this proposal. Adding to it at this time would be unwise. There is no question about the quality of the fire department's service. They simply have had a difficult time in managing estimated call numbers and thus their required budget. To more than double the budget from three to eight full-time firefighters and their responsibilities, we believe, is inviting trouble.

- Risk. There are many of us who believe that this proposal puts the town at risk and starts us down a financial road of no return. The first risk is disconnecting from a system that works to experiment with an untried system with questionable staffing. To be specific, under the new proposal the firehouse would be staffed with two firefighters at any time. When the ambulance with two firefighters is making a run to the hospital, who, then, would be left in town to handle a fire or medical emergency? Having made this major increase in the fire department staffing, equipment and budget, the first time an ambulance is making a run while another emergency arises, we will be asked for more staffing and budget to make the system work. Together these issues will likely lead

Bylaw articles up for change at Town Meeting

SITTING IN

BY THE TOPSFIELD PLANNING BOARD

A series of warrant articles relating to Topsfield's Zoning and General Bylaws will appear on this year's annual Town Meeting warrant. Some of these by-laws result from recommendations of the Master Planning Committee during the EO 418 planning process and other town boards and committees; some update portions of the bylaws that have not been reviewed for over 20 years; and some correct omissions or procedural problems in Topsfield's bylaws. They cluster around four major areas of concern: agriculture, natural and historic resource protection, housing and economic development.

Agriculture: The Department of Agriculture is encouraging communities to establish Agricultural Commissions and to adopt "Right to Farm" by-laws in order to foster and protect farming, an important sector of the economy, in the commonwealth. Agricultural Commissions have no statutory authority, but they do provide a forum for farmers and citizens concerned with agriculture to organize educational programs and promote agricultural activities. Right to Farm by-laws simply restate the Massachusetts General Law relative to commercial agriculture in order to highlight the rights of farmers to farm. At the same time, they clarify who is protected under these laws. The purpose of such by-laws is to foster positive relations between farmers and residents and among neighbors.

Natural and Historic Resource Protection: Natural resource protection is an important part of long-range planning for any community. The Stormwater and Erosion Control General By-law, developed by the Metropolitan Area Planning Committee and the Stormwater Management Committee through a grant from the Executive Office of Environmental

Affairs, establishes a single permitting process for managing storm water, a major source of erosion and water quality degradation. The by-law will streamline and make more effective the current process that requires the review of multiple boards and leaves certain endangered areas unprotected. Topsfield's water supply is limited and under significant pressure from the commonwealth and by new development. The town's infrastructure, including schools and emergency services, are strained. The Phased Growth by-law is designed to phase in new growth in an orderly and efficient fashion. The Route 1 corridor south of the Ipswich River is largely conservation land or land set aside for future water needs in the region. At the same time, this stretch of highway is one of the last undisturbed and scenic sections of Old Route 1. The Scenic Overlay Zone establishes design guidelines for the location of buildings and for screening of structures to be applied in the review of new development in this area.

Housing: Affordable housing is a critical problem in the commonwealth. Topsfield's current Elderly Housing By-law makes no provision for the inclusion of affordable housing. Further, it is in need of revision to update it for the 21st century. Revisions to the article will require the inclusion of affordable housing units in new Elderly Housing Districts or cash contributions by a developer to town in lieu of such affordable housing units so that the town can develop or promote the development of affordable housing. The Affordable Housing Trust Fund by-law establishes the mechanism for the town to

receive funds, plan affordable housing and expend funds to create affordable housing in Topsfield. A new Elderly Housing District at 120 High Street is also on the warrant.

Economic development: The final category of by-laws coming before voters at the annual Town Meeting relates to economic development. Topsfield currently relies on single family homes for 93 percent of its tax revenues. Commercial development is an important source of tax revenues. Moreover, it can provide necessary services to the citizens of the town. The Table of Uses in Article III of the Zoning Bylaw dictates what uses are permitted in the various zoning districts of the Town and the Definitions in Article I define the terms in the Table of Uses and elsewhere in the Zoning Bylaws. Revisions to these two Articles are designed to increase economic activity in selected areas. Two uses are proposed to be allowed by special permit: Nursing and Community Care Facilities and Conference and Event Facility. Both uses could be utilized on large properties that otherwise might be residentially developed, and both uses could provide important community services.

In addition, the extension of certain uses to the business park are being proposed to stimulate economic development in that area that is already devoted to commercial uses. Finally, the addition of one lot is proposed for the business village.

In short, the proposed warrant articles are designed to promote economic development, enable affordable housing production, protect natural resources, and support the agricultural community of Topsfield.

This column was submitted by Topsfield Planning Board member Martha Morrison on behalf of the Board.

Columns wanted from our readers

Have a strong thought or perspective on a certain issue? We welcome and are encouraged. I and your voice to