

PERSPECTIVE



PAUL CHOINIERE
p.choiniere@theday.com

NFA, stop blocking information

After his board of trustees concluded he bore no responsibility for a part-time coach allegedly getting away with having sexual relations with a student, only to repeat the criminal behavior with a second student, Norwich Free Academy Head of School David Klein wasted no time in starting to affix blame.

Because, hey, why should the top guy be held responsible when those down the ladder can be tossed into the volcano?

In the course of two days three officials were placed on administrative leave, though the high school was not discussing what discipline may await them.

NFA would not comment on “individual personnel matters,” said NFA spokesman Geoff Serra. That meant the academy was not identifying the officials, though Day Staff Writer Claire Bessette was able to uncover the names and disclosed them.

Under the law, the identities and what has and will happen in these cases is a matter of public record; it will just be a matter of dragging the information out of NFA. The academy is not alone in claiming a “personnel matter” exemption from disclosing information under the Freedom of Information Act.

Yet there is no such exemption. “Personnel and similar files” are only exempt from disclosure if “such disclosure would legally constitute an invasion of personal privacy,” according to the open government law.

In other words, only exempt from release is information that would intrude on a person’s private activities. At issue here are the job actions of NFA officials in their capacity as educators and administrators for what serves as the public high school for Norwich and surrounding communities.

And those actions may have contributed to the ability of former coach Anthony Facchini to allegedly enter into sexual relations with the two female students, for which he now faces two counts of second-degree sexual assault. There is compelling public interest in how officials at NFA handled the matter and how the institution will deal with those individuals.

There is, however, an outrageous loophole that the legislature should close. If a union contract blocks personnel files, it takes precedent over the FOI law! But that does not appear to be at play with this matter.

True, NFA is not your typical school. Its trustees are internally appointed, not elected. It is a private institution serving a public function. Norwich and the other towns that utilize it as their high school pay the tuition of the students they send there.

But it is subject to the FOI Act. I should know. As the Norwich reporter for The Day in 1990 I filed the complaint with the FOI Commission that led to the ruling that NFA’s records are open to the public. The academy initially appealed to the courts, but dropped its challenge knowing it had a losing hand.

So, Mr. Klein, when reporters or members of the public ask for information subject to the FOI law, personnel or otherwise, hand it over.

Chandler

I wanted to take a moment to acknowledge the overwhelming reaction in emails, calls, letters and conversations I received concerning my Jan. 14 column that dealt with the death of our family dog. People were very kind and shared their own stories of losing beloved pets. Several donations were made in Chandler’s name to groups that rescue animals.

Some questioned the appropriateness of my giving such attention to an animal, given the degree of human suffering and death in this world. I did not, and do not, compare the passing of a pet with that of a human family member. However, these creatures do find a special place in our hearts. In the past two weeks that was made clear to me.

Paul Choiniere is the editorial page editor.

A fair and just society

Faith groups should work together for good of the region

By TOM CLARK

We live in a time when divisions at the national political level move farther into uncharted territory every day. But we needn’t let the national dysfunction define us in southeastern Connecticut. Perhaps it can even spur us to work harder on building a fair and just society right here. Maybe we live at a time that demands, especially of faith groups, that we work more and more in community to alleviate poverty and suffering.

Certainly there are plenty of problems to work on — and opportunities to create more effective structures for lifting up the needy and the marginalized.

We are a region of immense wealth, among the wealthiest in the nation. Yet we have allowed a pattern of racial segregation, persistent poverty and educational disparity to persist for decades.

Only 9 percent — yes 9 percent — of New London students in eighth grade achieved above goal on the Smarter Balanced test in 2016-17, according to the Connecticut Data Collaborative. The same figure for East Lyme was 63 percent, and for Stonington it was 51 percent. For language arts the numbers were equally disturbing.

Troubling as they are, the figures on educational disparity illustrate just one of many ways the region allows a marginalized population to persist. There isn’t even a functioning community center in New London, a resource taken for granted in most surrounding towns.

There is some history on how we got to this place of astounding regional disparity in opportunity and poverty. Unlike all other states except one, Connecticut has no functional regional government — county or parish — to deal with regional problems. The state abolished county government in 1960, and, at the time, it seemed a progressive move toward eliminating a layer of bureaucracy. But

it came with unintended consequences. The pockets of poverty persisted and festered within regions of unprecedented wealth. Fairfield County was, and is, among the wealthiest places in the country, yet its largest city, Bridgeport, moved farther and farther into poverty and educational dysfunction.

And the pattern repeats throughout the state. Wealthy regions host decaying urban centers with little or no regional structures to help ease the burdens on the marginalized people living in cities with higher property taxes, horrible schools and

decaying housing. To make matters worse, the urban centers have a diminished tax base because they house the vital institutions such as hospitals, courts, state offices and colleges that pay no property taxes. The state’s Payments in Lieu of Taxes program is woefully underfunded. Although providing vital regional services, the urban centers are economically abandoned.

With a minimum of regional government structure, some organizations have stepped in. A council of governments does regional planning and coordination. Local and regional foundations serve as

tremendous assets, especially the United Way and the Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut.

Faith groups and churches work tirelessly — as separate institutions and as collaborators on vital efforts such as the homeless shelters. Individuals, nonprofits and other NGOs play an important role in stemming some of the worst pain and hunger, such as with the establishment of the New London Community Meal Center — which serves the entire region with free meals.

The current national divide requires us to do better. Certainly churches

and other faith groups seem an obvious way to forge increased regional cohesion and help for the most marginalized. The faith groups already do great work as individual temples, synagogues, mosques and churches. And there are ecumenical associations that could serve as kernels for a regional interfaith action group. By coming together as a regional association, bridging the divides of faith, we can provide a practical way to transform the patchwork network of aid for the marginalized and demonstrate the unity of goodness shared by all faiths.

A regional association of faith groups putting together the hands of good people from throughout the region will provide immense help as we move into a new and uncertain future. We can’t control the whims of fortune that blow our way from afar. But by coming together we can raise up our own people to the best of our ability.

Churches, temples, mosques and synagogues coming together in a regional coalition or action group for common purposes may seem overly idealistic. But this is a practical and doable step toward a more cohesive community — and it can be guided by studying existing models from other regions.

The Interfaith Council of Southwestern Connecticut began in 1938 when churches sought a unity of purpose and energy. The group subsequently expanded to include other faiths. At a time when it’s becoming popular for people to write off faith itself as largely irrelevant, why not prove them wrong? Why not here?

Tom Clark is president of the New London Community Orchestra, a founding board member of the New London Homeless Hospitality Center and a member of St. James Episcopal Church in New London. Contact him at newlondonorchestra@gmail.com.



Don’t accept bad choice as only choice

By BRENDAN M. CUNNINGHAM

Over the past three months, officials in East Lyme have been conjuring an illusion of free choice over a property proposal. Thomas Hobson, a 17th century stable owner in Cambridge, England, was a famous purveyor of such tactics. Hobson’s clients only had the “choice” of taking the horse located closest to the barn door or nothing. His customer’s choice was really his choice.

The “Hobson’s choice” in East Lyme is proffered by a “task force” in hot pursuit of a referendum. Residents are asked to vote yes for \$5 million in borrowing to buy a property vacated by Honeywell. A no vote will force the police to stay in a decrepit leaking station atop a brownfield of hazardous waste. The illusion is that anyone voting no will be responsible for the police department’s ongoing deplorable working conditions.

Nothing could be further from the truth. That responsibility lies squarely with the officials who oversee the upkeep of town property, the same officials who have fallen short in that regard and now bemoan the consequences of their own mismanagement. Related is the question of how quickly a new building would fall into similar disrepair.

Don’t fall for the illusion that anyone voting no will be responsible for the East Lyme police department’s ongoing deplorable working conditions. Demand a better choice.

The illusionists of town hall offer their performance on a hazardous stage. The town’s credit rating was downgraded last summer subsequent to borrowing approximately \$37 million to renovate schools. There is evidence that this downgrade has already harmed taxpayers by increasing their loan repayments. School classrooms are located in echoing gymnasiums or buildings with exposed wiring and plywood windows in the midst of winter. Renovations are incomplete. The town agreed to borrow more than \$4 million this month for “well improvements.” Meanwhile we’ve been warned: additional borrowing could trigger another credit downgrade and more burdensome loan repayment. The impact on taxpayers of our downward credit spiral has not been officially quantified, yet we are asked to bless more debt.

Additional concerns abound. Our police force is dedicated and effective. Their presence deters crime. This means that removing the police from downtown Niantic

has the real potential to increase crime rates there. Should the police relocate to a similarly central part of town, such as Flanders Road, then we’d likely see a decline in crime rates in a new spot. But officials propose to relocate police in the woods on the border of town. There will be no offsetting decline in crime in the Four Mile River forest.

Approximately half of the proposal is for open-ended “renovations” to the Honeywell property. Our illusionists would like a \$2.3 million line of credit with a vaguely defined “public safety” earmark. Taxpayers glance across recent headlines and learn that our first selectman reported a public safety official to our police chief for possible criminal prosecution due to payroll “discrepancies” (see “Niantic fire chief resigns” The Day, Dec 22, 2018). If public safety officials have mismanaged something as routine as time cards why should they be trusted with a multimillion-dollar loan?

There are even more reasons to “leave it” when officials finalize

their offer. Demonstrably false statements have been made about the elevation of the property. Officials use public safety expenditures and properties in other towns to “show” that their plan is “affordable” yet there is no attempt to establish that the comparison towns are remotely similar to East Lyme. Officials want to co-locate various public safety functions at significant cost without showing any benefit. Regionalization is the future (see “Firmin, Nickerson Debate”, The Day, Oct. 30, 2017) yet officials are boldly planning to deregionalize from Waterford’s facilities.

It is increasingly clear that town officials are operating under the illusion that these issues are irrelevant. Taxpayers do have a choice. There are a wide variety of less expensive and centrally located options to improve police workspaces. Taxpayers can comfortably see through the illusion and vote no. And in coming elections they can vote to place fewer illusionists in positions of authority.

The author is an associate professor of economics at Eastern Connecticut State University and East Lyme resident. The views expressed in this commentary are the author’s alone.