

# OPINION

## Payback in Town Politics

By Alex J. Grant

The recent decision by the Select Board to "explore options" for replacing our town's volunteer webmasters should be seen first as a done deal, and second, as a nasty bit of payback against the webmaster Jim Moran for having injected himself into the debate over the new high school. Select Board Chair Robert Aseltine, and co-School Building Committee (SBC) chairs, Robert Barkett and Christine Swanson, have chosen now as the time to end a successful 14 year run of volunteers doing a painstakingly professional job of creating and continuously updating the town website, [longmeadow.org](http://longmeadow.org).

Why, now? Select Board member Robert Barkett explained at a recent meeting that he found the debate over the new high school project to have been "extraordinarily ugly." The tone of this debate, he reasoned, reflected poorly upon the town because some of the back and forth on the issue had touched upon the town website, creating "so much confusion" about what was fact and what was opinion. Apparently, the realm of "fact" is reserved for the officially promulgated statements of town departments and town boards, such as presentations about the virtues of a new high school or the benefits of one design choice versus another. "Opinion," on the other hand, would seem to be statements against the new high school or criticism of elected town officials.

The central justification advanced by Barkett, Aseltine, and Swanson was that somehow the town website was infected by providing a link to the [longmeadowbuzz](http://longmeadowbuzz) blog or the [longmeadowbiz](http://longmeadowbiz) website, also run by Moran. To Barkett, this meant that town departments were endorsing the "extraordinarily ugly" exchanges of views found on the [longmeadowbuzz](http://longmeadowbuzz) blog. It would be interesting to find out whether a single person viewing the town website ever came to that conclusion.

If someone did, it would require him to go to the town website, then click on the link to the [longmeadowbuzz](http://longmeadowbuzz) blog, and then read, for example, Jerold Duquette sounding off about how the "No" faction on the school debate resembled the tea party movement, and saying, aha, the official town position is exactly what Jerold Duquette said, notwithstanding the specific disclaimers that the views expressed on [longmeadowbuzz](http://longmeadowbuzz) are those of the posters. Providing a link to a website does not mean an adoption of the views of the website, especially when the website itself contains conflicting views, as [longmeadowbuzz](http://longmeadowbuzz) does. Rather, viewers reasonably see [longmeadowbuzz](http://longmeadowbuzz) as a forum for political speech which may be of interest to Longmeadow residents. This internet forum is much like public land like the Town Green, which is a classic public forum for facts and opinions about important public issues. So when Jerold Duquette exercises his First Amendment rights on the Town Green, everyone understands that those views are his, not the town's.

Justifications like this purported "confusion," and the supposed unavailability of Moran to post items quickly, as Christine Swanson has asserted, are just window dressing on the real issue. Jim Moran posted an item on the [longmeadowbuzz](http://longmeadowbuzz) blog shortly before the new high school vote criticizing the fact that certain communications between the SBC and the state had not been disclosed by the SBC until a Freedom of Information Act request was made. The SBC co-chairs, and other supporters of the new high school, understandably do not like that criticism. They may even view it as an unfounded attack on their integrity.

But this kind of criticism is the very lifeblood of town politics, and indeed, our democracy. To view the debate over the new high school as an ugly blemish on the town is a mistake. To go a step further, and to exact payback against a single viewpoint by removing Mr. Moran as a volunteer webmaster is petty. It is telling that the supposed conflicts of interest which so animate the concerns of the Select Board now have been dormant for so many years.

This is not to say that Moran was correct in his criticisms of the new high school; I personally was a "Yes" vote. And this is not to say that Moran was perfect in moderating the [longmeadowbuzz](http://longmeadowbuzz) blog. He removed Jerold Duquette for his supposedly intemperate remarks about Mark Gold, a decision that seems to have been clouded by Moran's support for his friend and fellow webmaster, Mark Gold.

It is however unfair to suggest that the many hours spent by the volunteers on the town website have been ruined by phantom conflicts of interest and "confusion." This effort would indicate that the town is ungrateful for all that hard work, and it sends a chilling message to anyone willing to render good faith service to the town. This kind of payback, rather than the legitimate debate over the new high school, is the "extraordinarily ugly" part of town politics.

*Alex J. Grant is a lawyer living in Longmeadow. His email address is [alex.grant68@yahoo.com](mailto:alex.grant68@yahoo.com).*