In Sleepy Hollow, The $64,000 Question - River Journal Online

Written by Robert Bonvento
Friday, 23 April 2010

In the previous issue of this publication we wrote a “From River Journal” column entitled Headless in the Hollow?

The editorial reported on a pattern of personnel and zoning decisions made by Mayor Ken Wray and his Board of Trustees. It can be read at RiverJournalOnline.com here.

In that piece we focused on what some have referred to recently as a "bizarre decision-making process" by the Mayor and Board centered around Village Treasurer Diane Jacobson. It appears that the editorial was timely and on target because, as of this writing, Ms. Jacobson is no longer Sleepy Hollow's Village Treasurer.

Diane Jacobson had been at her position for 4 ½ years and, by all accounts, brought stability to the position that had seen a revolving door of previous Treasurers. When she took on the position, Sleepy Hollow's General Fund had a balance of $400,000 which, according to the professionals we spoke with, was a limited amount of reserve money for any “rainy days” the Village may have encountered. Jacobson increased the General Fund to $1,600,000 and did so by renegotiating insurance contracts, tightening purchase order procedures within the Village, and instituting solid accounting procedures. Her efforts were commended publicly by Village auditors and Trustees alike. And yet, in early February she was treated in a manner that gave no recognition of her professionalism and accomplishments. Her phone, for a time, was disconnected, her computer disconnected and her responsibilities turned over to the Village Administrator, who, by New York State law could not execute the duties of Treasurer.

There were no reports in local papers about this incident. No investigative reporting from the self-proclaimed champions of the people. Nothing was said about what could be construed as a serious breach of rules and regulations pertaining to appointment and responsibilities of Village Treasurers within New York State. The logical question put to Ken Wray, his administrative staff
and Trustees —“Why was Treasurer Jacobson being treated like this?” — was met by a tepid and questionable response: “We have no comment. It is a personnel matter.” Did Treasurer Jacobson do something to warrant the abrupt cessation of her responsibilities or was she, as many now believe, one more casualty of inexperienced political power running amuck? And if the latter was true, were the elected Village officials concerned about the legality of their behavior and decision-making surrounding Ms. Jacobson? A Separation Agreement and General Release of Claims initiated by Sleepy Hollow on March 18, revealed that Mr. Wray and his Board members may have been seeking shelter from the heat of the law.

The 6-page document was enlightening. It stated that “Jacobson shall resign from her position as Village Treasurer, effective March 18, 2010 upon submission of the tentative budget to the Village, and, as of which date, she will relinquish her title of Village Treasurer and be relieved of any and all further duties or responsibilities of Village Treasurer. ” Interesting in light of the fact that Jacobson had not intended to resign from her position and even with the workplace restrictions placed on her, was able to deliver a tentative budget of just under a 5% increase for Sleepy Hollow.

Under the agreement’s Continuing Pay and Benefits the Village has provided Jacobson with approximately 2 ½ weeks of pay along with a lump sum payment equal to 5 months salary. Sleepy Hollow has also continued to provide her health care benefits through September 3, 2010. Should she file for Unemployment Insurance Benefits the Village won’t contest it and “the Village shall represent that Jacobson’s separation from the Village’s employ was due to functional consolidation.” The term “functional consolidation” may indeed mean something but can just as easily be construed as legalese. In addition, the Village made a lump sum payment for her unused vacation time. Calculations from Jacobson’s annual salary as reported on the agreement put the total compensation and benefits package in the neighborhood of $64,000. That approximate figure did not take into account the possibility of unemployment benefits.

River Journal asked officials in other villages whether spending that amount of money was significant in light of the current economic difficulties they face. The answer was a resounding yes! $64,000 was important to any village, and as one official said of his Mayor and Board, “We have argued back and forth over sums a lot smaller than that.”

The agreement’s Release of Claims section may have been boiler-plated, however it was revealing in its language. Jacobson and the Village, mutually and fully, forever, irrevocably and unconditionally release the other…from any and all claims, controversies, liabilities, complaints,
…and the list goes on and on. In short, Mayor Wray and his Board are released from any past, present or future liability with regards to their actions surrounding the former Village Treasurer Diane Jacobson. They are now free to search (and emails reflect that they have) for a new Treasurer. Depending on how long that takes, resident taxpayers will either be paying for a Treasurer they don’t have or paying for two when only one reports to work.

With each and every taxpayer calling for fiscal responsibility at both local and national levels, fiscal irresponsibility in government has been highlighted and duly noted on a day-to-day basis throughout newspapers, talk-radio, the internet and television. In the mid-1950’s a TV game show, The $64,000 Question, became a huge success. Contestants chose a subject category and then were asked increasingly difficult questions in their attempt to win the top prize of $64,000. If the TV game shows were around today (scandals saw the demise of many) and the subject category was “finance” the $64,000 question could easily be asked of Sleepy Hollow’s Mayor Kenneth Wray and Trustees Bruce Campbell, Thomas Capossela, Barbara Carr, David Schroedel, Evelyn Stupel and Karin Wompa. Realizing that it would be a tight fit in the isolation booth, the question would be… "Is this the best that money can buy"?