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## Selectmen call for ethics inquiry

**By Michael J. Fisher and Barbara Taormina / NORTHANDOVER@CNC.COM**

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The Board of Selectmen voted this week to ask the state Ethic Commission to investigate possible ethical and financial violations surrounding the publication of a high school newsletter.

Selectwoman Wendy Wakeman proposed the investigation after several other selectmen complained that the Parent Advisory Council newsletter, which was mailed to homes just before Town Meeting, contained false and damaging information about the board and the budget process.

"We have to investigate who paid for this and who wrote it," said Wakeman. "This is clearly a violation of campaign finance law."

Meanwhile, at a School Committee meeting one day later this week, Superintendent William Allen reacted by calling the charges raised by selectmen, "Much ado about nothing."

Selectmen were upset with a small unsigned piece on the back page of the Parent Advisory Council (PAC) newsletter that urged parents to attend Town Meeting to fight off more budget cuts to the schools. The letter arrived in the mailboxes of high school parents just before Town Meeting, May 12.

The selectmen, the Finance Committee and the School Committee have yet to agree on a budget, wrote the author of the piece.

The writer went on to say that selectmen were now looking at making deeper cut to the school budget.

Selectman Jim Xenakis called the piece entirely misleading and said the three boards agreed about next year's town budget prior to Town Meeting and the selectmen never called for deeper cuts.

"Whoever wrote this did a tremendous disservice ," said Xenakis.

Selectman Mark Caggiano, who along with chairwoman Rosemary Smedile, voted against the investigation and cautioned fellow board members to try and tone down the rhetoric.

School Committee member Bruce Baker acknowledged that the Selectmen had legitimate concerns but asked the board to let the School Committee look into the issues before they went forward with the Ethics Commission.

But selectmen wanted accountability and an objective review of the communication issue and opted instead for an Ethics Commission inquiry.

Meanwhile, Allen downplayed the idea of an Ethics Commission investigation.

"The Ethics Commission is the wrong venue for the resolution of this ... the author of this document is terribly astute and terribly careful" not to violate any campaign finance laws, he said.

He said the document was reviewed by Dennis Kennedy of the Office of Campaign Finance, who deemed it appropriate.

"I just wish they had called me, or even talked to the Town Clerk," he added.

School Committee member Charles Ormsby said he wanted more information about the situation. "I do have a problem with (the PAC) taking partisan political positions that not all in town would support," he said.

Leanna Pristash, head of the PAC at the high school, and author of the document in question, assured Ormsby that the PAC did nothing of the sort. She said the newsletter was intended to be factual, nothing more.

"It is a fine line, but we know where that line is," she said.

She said that when the letter was written, one week before Town Meeting, \$247,000 "was still in play. Selectmen had requested that this be taken from the School's budget," she explained.

She said she did not include the \$247,000 figure in the letter because she couldn't be sure that number would be accurate when Town Meeting convened.

Ormsby, School Committee Chairman Dan Murphy and School Committee member Bruce Baker all agreed that bringing the Ethics Commission in before any inter-board communication could have taken place on the matter, was inappropriate.

"To move this thing to the Ethics Commission and circumvent this board, after we have all been quote, unquote working together so well, well I have a problem with that," said Murphy.

Ormsby suggested that for the future, the School Committee should have a policy in place such that they will have some oversight over the publications of any group the school committee publicly sanctions.

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