

Editorial

May be a 'wedge issue,' but we like it

Last week a group of Town of Milton residents presented the Town Board with a petition asking for changes in the Town's ethics code.

The Board did not act pleased to receive the petition.

When told that one of the suggestions on the petition was to prohibit Town employees from sitting on political party nominating committees, Milton Supervisor Frank Thompson asked the petitioners if they were intending to curtail the First Amendment rights of Town employees. Town Attorney Jim Craig volunteered to scrutinize the petition to validate that the signers were all actual Town of Milton residents.

The reaction of the Board can be explained by a comment made by Milton resident Armand Scatena, who witnessed the handing in of the petition. Scatena briefly commented that he favored the ideas in the petition, but then went on, at some length, to voice his skepticism of the motives of the people presenting the petition, since they appeared to be political opponents of current Town Board members.

We would like to take the same approach as Scatena, but change the emphasis. Let us briefly agree that the motives of the petitioners may be suspect. As Scatena observed, those at the forefront of the petition movement do appear to be political opponents of the current Board majority. This in the beginning of the political season that will lead to next November's Town elections, and the petition may well be an attempt to create a 'wedge issue' that will pry voters away from the incumbents.

Having said that, we do agree with the major thrust of the petition. More than most other Towns in the area, Milton has a heavy participation of Town employees on the Republican Town Committee, which provides party endorsements for elected officials, the very people who will be their bosses in Town government. The petitioners also, rightly in our opinion, point to Town Ethics Board as another place where having members who are paid Town employees is an inherent conflict of interest. The Ethics Board's primary duty is to investigate allegations of wrong-doing against Town officials. People who sit on those Boards (which are volunteer positions) should not be dependent for their livelihoods on the people they will be judging.

We further disagree with the initial reactions of Thompson and Craig, that drafting laws that exclude Town employees from sitting on political nominating committees or serving on Ethics Boards is a radical move which would violate the U.S. Constitution and put the Town in jeopardy of law suits.

Lots of neighboring Towns have just such rules, and they have proven noncontroversial and useful. Take the neighboring Town of Clifton Park, as an example. Their ethics code specifically prevents Town employees from holding any office in a political organization. Clifton Park also prohibits employees from having "any" business dealings with the Town. Malta, for its part, excludes Town employees from sitting on their Ethics Board.

Far from being a limit on Town employees, these rules provide a useful insulation from the rough and tumble of elected politics.

Not very long ago, the Malta Ethics Board heard an ethics complaint against the Town Supervisor. One of the complaining parties was a spouse of a Council member. Had the Malta Ethics Board contained Town employees, those employees would have been in a position of having to favor one or the other of two contending factions on their Town Board.

Fortunately for Malta, Town employees are kept out of the political arena. No one who runs the day-to-day affairs of the Town was put in the position of having to choose sides, or was allowed to put themselves in that position. As a consequence, the politicians could squabble as much as they liked, but the business of the Town was still being done.

Milton should seriously consider adopting these useful rules.