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Lesson learned: Do your homework

The Republican supermajority was elected to the Board of Selectmen in Winsted last year with 46 percent of the vote — below a majority of the voting public. Four of the five have never held elective office, yet they charged onto the scene as though they had a mandate. In the short seven months since November 2007, the self-proclaimed “businessmen” on the Republican-controlled Board of Selectmen have:

- Dismissed a town manager at a hefty cost to taxpayers
- Hired an interim town manager at a cost to taxpayers
- Conducted a search and hired a town manager at a cost to taxpayers
- Dismissed a bond issue to address badly needed infrastructure problems, at a long-term cost to taxpayers
- Duplicated school building committee efforts by disregarding already paid-for architectural studies and retaining another architectural firm at a cost to taxpayers.
- Removed a volunteer land use commission chairman without cause; now he must fight in court to regain his reputation and position, at a cost to taxpayers
- Proposed a 1.78-mill/7.12-percent increase in the town budget during a recession with growing unemployment, increasing energy and food costs burdening taxpayers further
- Demonstrated a complete lack of respect for fellow elected officials and contempt for citizens

The actions of this Republican super-majority reflect a fundamental misunderstanding of the role of elected representatives in a democratic society. The governing style of the inexperienced Republican super-majority is based on personal interests, expediency, a “my way or the highway” attitude and downright nastiness. Can we afford this approach to governing until November 2009?

The budget was soundly defeated on the basis of the common sense of the people who understand the economy today. Yet the so-called “businessmen” of the Republican

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super-majority insisted on a 1.78-mil/7.5-percent increase in the budget.

The defacto Republican first selectman attributed the budget failure to hard economic times the next day. But the real message was delivered by the town manager, who said that citizens could expect a “slash-and-burn process.” Does this mean that selectmen have vengeance in mind when fashioning the next budget instead of prudent stewardship of tax dollars and a caring for their fellow citizens?

The sheer nastiness of the removal of George Closson speaks volumes about how this Republican super-majority is governing. A volunteer commission member who has served on Planning & Zoning for more than 10 years, two as chairman, is removed for no good reason. The public comments of an unsavory developer make it evident that they were “out to get George.”

But the more the public condemns the treatment of a citizen volunteer, the haughtier the first selectman and his cohorts become. This behavior

is an affront to all citizens who have volunteered for town commissions and a threat to those who would volunteer.

Governance is the fundamental means by which elected officials connect the public to the municipality. Representation, decision-making, stewardship and accountability are basic standards for proper governance. The fiduciary, ethical and moral duties as public servants are all part of the equation, as are the balance between transparency and confidentiality, the use of sound judgment, and actions that are ethically defensible. Public officials must keep all this in mind if they aim to keep the public trust.

There are lessons that citizens can take from these events. It is no mystery that when citizens sense injustice, are focused on issues that matter to them, then do their homework and take a public stand, they will succeed. Such citizen action reminds us what a vibrant democracy can be like.

Pay attention, get involved, get informed and look forward to November 2009.

Charlene LaVoie is the community lawyer in Winsted. Her office is funded by the Shafeek Nader Trust for the Community Interest.