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Gilmanton selectmen: Town hall closed by overwhelming response to political sign controversy

By BEA LEWIS Sunday News Correspondent Mar 9, 2018



A sign posted at the Academy Building, which serves as Gilmanton's town hall, advises people to use the rear entrance. The front doors remain locked due to heightened security concerns, according to selectmen.

Bea Lewis/Sunday News Correspondent



GILMANTON - Selectmen last week said an overwhelming number of requests for information two weeks ago, in the midst of controversies involving the town's police chief and signs on private property, led officials to abruptly close town hall Feb. 23 and then to restrict access when it reopened.

In a statement released Wednesday, selectmen said responding to the volume of requests prevented town employees from performing their regular duties and that "the conduct of some of the individuals who came to the town office to make requests, created an environment in which municipal employees did not feel that they could effectively perform their duties."

Board members said they believe in open government and recognize the town's obligation under the state's Right-to-Know Law to respond to public requests for information, but that "(t)he board also recognizes its obligation to the public to assure that the town's workforce is productive and that employees are provided with safe working conditions. At times, these several obligations can be in conflict."

Town offices were closed abruptly Feb. 23. When they reopened, the front doors were locked. People with town business were directed to the rear of the building, where they were required to buzz in through a security door.

In recent weeks, police Chief Matthew Canfield had obtained a temporary restraining order against selectmen, who had wanted to be provided with department work schedules and assignments.

Canfield said disclosing the information could put officers at risk.

Some residents also were angered and the state chapter of the ACLU became involved after the town's part-time code enforcement officer sent letters to property owners who had displayed signs suggesting town officials do not support local police, informing them they were violating the town zoning ordinance and risked a \$275 a day fine if they did not remove the signs.

That order has been rescinded.

In their statement last week, selectmen wrote that "(w)e have used the time since Feb. 23 to look at work flow and access issues, in order to assure that the town can be responsive to information requests with minimal disruptions to normal operations. The board will continue to assess workplace needs and implement additional changes in the work environment in order to assure open government, workplace safety and employee accountability."

A candidates' night, which includes the office of selectman, will be held Monday at 6 p.m. in the Gilmanton School cafeteria.

Selectman Michael Jean is seeking reelection and is being challenged by Dan Shallow, Gary Anderson and Michael Wilson.

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