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Gilmanton Town Clerk turns out lights on evening hours

By THOMAS P. CALDWELL, The Laconia Daily Sun Mar 27, 2019 Updated 12 hrs ago

GILMANTON — In her 22 years as a town clerk, Debra Cornett has tried to accommodate the public with reasonable hours that allow anyone to do business with the town. On Monday, however, she informed the Gilmanton Board of Selectmen that she would be eliminating evening office hours.

Cornett says it's an issue of safety for herself and her staff — an unintended consequence of this year's town meeting. Voters approved a petitioned article "requesting entrance doors at ... the Town Office Building be unlocked and accessible to the General Public without hindrance/buzzers at any/all times that Town Business is being conducted in the building."

Most such petitioned articles are considered advisory only, but, according to Town Administrator Patrick Boré, the town's new legal counsel advised the selectmen that they were legally bound to follow the request.



Cornett said she has no problem with the open-door policy while there are other people in the building, but if she is to hold office hours in the evening when others are not there, she would want to control public access by locking the doors and admitting them through the buzzer system. That authority has been lost with the new policy.

The town considered ways to make evening hours work, such as holding town clerk hours on the same evenings that selectmen were meeting. Cornett said that would create problems if the selectmen were to cancel a meeting, as they occasionally do.

In announcing new daytime hours, Cornett noted that she was actually increasing the number of hours that the public could meet with her.

“It was 28 hours, but this is 32 hours,” she said of the new 8 a.m.-4 p.m. schedule on every weekday except for Tuesday. The new hours go into effect on April 1.

A town clerk has the authority to set business hours. While serving as a town official, the town clerk is not an employee of the town and is not subject to personnel policies that establish hours of work, according to the New Hampshire Municipal Association.

Cornett deflected a question about the possibility of having a police officer on duty during the evening to ensure security, saying that was not within her purview. Boré also declined to answer why an officer could not be there, suggesting the police department could better answer that question. Police Chief Matthew Currier had not returned a call about the matter at press time.



“It’s the authority of the town clerk to decide her hours,” said Boré, “and she said that the security for herself and her staff no longer allowed night hours. The warrant article on the ballot did not give much leeway.”

He said the article had not been discussed during the deliberative session. The town’s previous attorney said the petitioned article would not be legally binding and no one raised any issue with it before the vote on March 12.

"The new town counsel has a different view," Boré said.

The warrant article arose from dissatisfaction with last year's decision to lock the front door of the Academy Building that houses the town offices due to concerns about employees' safety.

"We had a specific reason, and the board felt the need to address security," Boré said.

The selectmen rescinded the policy on Jan. 16 and let residents know that both the front and rear entrances were again accessible — but the petitioned article had already been submitted, and the town had no authority to change it.



Until the warrant article's adoption, the Jan. 16 policy change allowed open doors during the day and during evening meetings, but on nights when the town clerk's office was the only one open, Cornett could lock the doors and use the buzzer system to admit clients.

In a letter to residents, Cornett says, "This was working, and I received a lot of feedback from our public letting me know it made sense."

The policy change created a dilemma, with the new hours being the only solution in sight.

"This office has offered evening hours for the past 22 years and I was just as frustrated in having to make this difficult decision, as this was a public service convenience to my community," Cornett said.

She noted that some tasks, such as renewing vehicle registrations, dog licenses, and tax payments, can be completed online or by mail.

