

Commentary

The
Southington Observer

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Our Views

Probate takes center stage this year

Up until recently, most people likely did not know that probate judges were an elected position. People probably always assumed that they were appointed by their peers in the judicial field.

However, the election of probate judges has come to the forefront in Southington politics recently, with an emphasis on the upcoming Republican primary.

One likely major cause for this coming to the forefront at this time is the consolidation of the probate courts in the state.

Probate courts throughout the state are being consolidated under legislation signed last year by Gov. M. Jodi Rell. The legislation is backed by lawmakers, who are trying to reduce costs in a system that some estimate loses \$20,000 a day.

The consolidation plan reduces the number of probate court districts from 117 to 54.

The location of each court is up to the member municipalities. Southington is the host court for the consolidated Southington-Cheshire Probate District, effective early next year.

Southington Probate Judge Bryan F. Meccariello said the local probate court hours and uses will remain the same. Cheshire will still have some probate issues handled in that town and the hours will change.

All original probate volumes from both towns, including those from Wolcott, will be preserved at Southington town hall.

Meccariello, a Democrat, is seeking election to the judgeship for the



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Thoughts around town

Southington-Cheshire Probate District. He will face either Peter Bowman or Matt Jalowiec, both Republicans.

Bowman received the party's nomination earlier this year. Jalowiec is squaring off against him in a primary.

The gloves have come off for both men.

The primary is August 10.

Both Republican candidates have had Letters to the Editor from their supporters appear in The Observer the last few weeks.

Another reason the probate courts have come to the forefront in recent months is because of the Smoron land issue.

Whoever wins the Republican primary will likely make this a big issue in the general election.

The Valley Spring Farm on Spring Street was owned by the Smoron family for decades and ownership has been in dispute since the death of Josephine

Smoron last year.

The Spring Street area, with its proximity to I-84, has been a priority for Southington officials and developers. The incoming BJ's store is on a spot that once belonged to the Smoron family.

In the 1990s, Josephine Smoron had a dispute with her brother, Stanley Smoron, about the future of the farm. He intended to will the land to local churches, but Josephine Smoron intended it to remain as farmland. She prevailed in the dispute and changed her will to designate "absolutely and forever" longtime caretaker Sam Manzo as heir to the land.

More trouble started when court-appointed conservator John T. Nugent created two trusts claiming that the land was "relinquished" to three churches.

This outcome was approved by Meccariello, and Manzo has filed an official complaint.

Meccariello eventually recused himself from the situation, and the trusts were upheld by New Britain Probate Judge Walter Clebowicz.

A public hearing about Meccariello's role in the Smoron property controversy is slated for September, following a ruling by the state's Council on Probate Judicial Matters.

Meccariello released a public statement, in question and answer form, to The Observer a few weeks ago.

In it, he describes his views on what happened, as fully as the law will allow him.

We will find out how much the Smoron land issue will affect Meccariello's election chances this fall.

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Moving ahead Ideal

Like many Southington officials we are looking forward to the plans for the Ideal Forging site moving forward.

The old Ideal Forging property downtown is an eyesore. Meridian Development Partners, of New York, purchased the property several years ago. Since then there has been little development on the site.

Greenway Commons, also called the Meridian project, passed in 2007 by Southington's Planning & Zoning Commission, is plan for a huge condominium complex along with some retail development and open space areas near the Quinnipiac River.

Town officials have given the plan enthusiastic support throughout the process, and the Meridian developers have maintained their commitment to the plan despite setbacks.

In 2008, Meridian made a presentation to the Town Council about a special tax district encompassing the 14-acre parcel where the development was set to take place.

This district, which needed to be approved at the state level, would give the developers the ability to issue bonds to help finance the remediation costs at the old Ideal Forging site. The property is highly contaminated and the cost of cleaning it will amount to millions of dollars.

The initiative was approved by the state legislature, but was also lumped into a bill with similar, more expensive, plans going on in Naugatuck and Norwalk. The final bill came with a price tag of over \$20 million, vetoed by Governor Rell because of her unease with the expenditure. The Southington legislators were unable to get another bill through before the end of that legislative session, and came back in 2009 claiming the bill would be their highest priority.

The bill again passed through the legislature, and this time landed on the governor's desk unattached to any other projects and was signed by Rell.

However, Meridian officials have said the worsening economic conditions have made the district somewhat less viable.

Late last year, the Town Council voted unanimously to apply for a newly available grant from the state in an effort to help Meridian Development partners finance the cleanup of the old Ideal Forging site.

Unfortunately, this fell through when it was not put on the list for state bonding earlier this month. This was despite a letter from Town Manager John Weichsel urging the Governor to do so.

"The current blighted condition of the property may threaten the progress and transformation Southington's downtown is currently experiencing," Weichsel wrote in a letter dated June 29.

Weichsel also noted the employment opportunities, both short and long term, which the project will allow for. He also noted the various taxes that would bring in more money to the state and local economies.

Town Council Chairman Ed Pocock III also recently showed his support for the project in a letter to the Secretary Office of Policy and Management. Pocock said the proposal could "breathe life into an area of our town that is currently dead."

Pocock is right. The area is dead. It is now up to the parties involved to bring it back to life.

Beware of suburban minivan gang members

I get a fair amount of email each week in response to my humor column. Some emails offer positive comments, while others express the sincere desire that I soon will be locked up.

Sheesh, those McDonald's corporate lawyers are tough.

Occasionally I receive emails that offer suggested topics for future columns, which the writers assure will be tremendously hilarious. Most of the time, however, these emails offer only two possible topics worth discussing: 1) the fact that many people have very odd personal definitions of the word "hilarious," and 2) certain members of society really ought to start taking their medicine again.

But recently I received an email with a suggested topic, and I found it to be so bizarre and twisted—which happens to be my personal definition of the word "hilarious"—that I just had to use it. I'm sure the email writer does not want his name mentioned, so for discussion purposes, let's just refer to this anonymous emailer as "Mark Ryan," and let's just say he lives in an unidentified place we'll call "Watertown."

Mark explained in his email that he and his wife are suburban parents and most of their friends are suburban parents, and one thing they have in common is the fact they all drive minivans.

Recently Mark and his wife, who we'll refer to anonymously as "Karla," got together with some of their



Bill Dunn
Laugh or Death

friends. I suspect this gathering included a large quantity of "suburban parent conversational lubricant," also known as wine, because a primary issue they discussed was a longing to be as carefree as motorcycle riders.

To quote Mark: "We were talking about how cool it must be to ride a motorcycle! You get to wave to other passing motorcyclists as if you belong to the same club....We as minivan drivers decided that we wanted to be part of a cool club like that too."

At this point, it got a little strange (a word which is also part of my personal definition of hilarious). Mark and his friends spent a full hour laughing hysterically, after many liters of conversational lubricant, no doubt, and invented the rules and regulations for membership in their club of renegade, counter-culture minivan drivers.

The most important aspect is the official minivan hand gesture, which gang members flash to each other as

they pass by on the road. It's a quick three-part gesture.

First, the minivan driver sticks his or her left arm out the window and points three fingers downward, signifying the letter "M." Next, the hand is raised upward with two fingers in a "V." Finally, the "thumbs up" sign is given. The unmistakable message is: Mini. Van. Yeah!

Mark assures me this gesture can be done smoothly and confidently with a little practice, so the kids in the back seats will think their parents are only semi-dork-like rather than full blown dorks. I'm sure local chapters of this wild and crazy gang soon will spring up all over the country.

Just to clarify a few things, so this newspaper is not accused again of supporting drinking and driving, Mark and his friends were on a camping trip when this conversation occurred. After laughing together well into the night, they crawled into their tents and slept. They did not saddle up their rumbling minivans and ride off to terrorize unsuspecting citizens. (Camping? Ugh! See last week's column.)

All I can say, folks, is if you see this wild bunch roaring down the street, step aside. You never know what gang members will do next, especially gang members known as "khakis with attitude."

Bill Dunn is a freelance writer who resides in Torrington. He can be reached via his Web site at: www.boomertrek.com.