

Hooper makes a run for Middlebury board

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— Andy Hooper

MIDDLEBURY — Andy Hooper looks at the current state of national politics and shakes his head.

But he still has confidence in local government — where people tend to work together for the common good of constituents — and he wants to be a part of it.

That’s why Hooper, 48, is making another bid this March to join the Middlebury selectboard. There are three three-year terms up for grabs. As the *Independent* went to press on Wednesday, there were three confirmed candidates for the spots: Hooper, and incumbents Esther Thomas and Heather Seeley.

“It’s something that I really enjoy, all the different connections to so many people who are active in doing things in the community,” Hooper said during a recent interview.

His family has had a colorful history.

Hooper’s late father was a math professor at Middlebury College during the late-1960s when he met his future wife (and Andy’s future mom) while she was a student in one of his classes. Hooper noted the college had promotional material that included a photo of his parents making stained glass together.

But stained glass and classrooms couldn’t contain the newly minted ’60s flower children, who would leave campus to sample commune life — first in Maine, and then in Vermont’s Northeast Kingdom, at a place called Frog Run Farm.

“They became fast friends with a local farmer who knew how to work the land and not kill your (honey) bees,” Hooper said with a smile.

The couple moved to Newport during the 1970s to start a family, and that’s where Andy was born in 1975. The family moved to Northfield when Andy was five. That’s where he attended public schools through the eleventh grade, followed by a senior year at Vermont Technical College in Randolph. Then Hooper, in his own words, “went as far away as I could imagine for college, eager to see bigger and better things.”

All the way to the West Coast, where he’d been accepted to study physics at the University of California at Berkeley.

Diploma in hand four years later, Hooper decided to delay his formal entry into the workforce pending one more big adventure.

“I went up to Nome, Alaska, with my bicycle after college to find a friend who wasn’t there,” he grinned, while thinking about his ill-fated excursion to “The Last Frontier” state in 1996. “He had been reporting about his summers up there, and it sounded good.”

No friend? No problem. Rather than making a U-turn back to the continental U.S., Hooper extended his stay by grabbing a job as an internet service provider in Nome.

He returned to Vermont in 1997, finding jobs in the tech industry in Montpelier. Then it was on to the Cato Institute in Washington, D.C., in 1998, followed by his entry into Columbia Law School in 1999. He cut short his Columbia career in order to take advantage of the tech boom of the early 2000s, in his native Vermont. He settled in Montpelier, got married, and started a family.

“I lived in Montpelier through my 30s, working first for an internet startup, then as an IT consultant for small and medium sized businesses and non-profits around central Vermont,” he said.

It was while in Montpelier that Hooper got a taste for civic engagement and local politics. A friend urged him to volunteer on the Central Vermont Reparative Probation Board, working with first-time offenders. He also served four terms on the Montpelier City Council and as the city’s representative to the Central Vermont Solid Waste District, the ECFiber Communication District and assorted committees of the council.

Then, 11 years ago, he took an IT programming job at the Agri-Mark/Cabot corporate office in Waitsfield, where he continues to work. He mines data to help make the cheesemaking process as smooth and efficient as possible.

“The little quip I throw out is that I’m a cheese programmer,” he smiled.

MOVE TO MIDDLEBURY

His first marriage having ended in divorce, eight years ago Hooper met, and eventually married, his second wife — Caitlin Myers, a Middlebury College professor of economics. The couple has a blended family of three sons, Cullen, 12, Finn, 14, and Zeke, 20; and a daughter, 15-year-old Bea.

While he hasn’t lived in Middlebury that long, Hooper has been looking for ways to give back.

“I spent a few years figuring out my new community, my new commute (to Waitsfield) and our big blended family, and then re-entered political service,” he states in his campaign literature.

Hooper currently serves as treasurer of the Ilsley Library Board of Trustees and is a Middlebury representative to the Addison County Communications Union District, now known as “Maple Broadband.”

For the past couple of years, he’s had his eyes set on the Middlebury selectboard. Hooper last March sought election to a one-year term vacated by former Selectman Victor Nuovo. Esther Thomas won that seat by a 812-633 margin over Hooper. He’s giving it another shot on March 1, this time shooting for a three-year term.

If elected, Hooper's priorities include increasing the local affordable housing stock, making the community more business-friendly, and finding ways for surrounding communities to share in the funding of infrastructure and services that are enjoyed by all, but are largely shouldered by Middlebury taxpayers.

"One of the problems facing towns like Middlebury and Montpelier is that they function as downtowns for the more rural communities that rely on them for services," he said. "I think the focus for a lot of Vermont public institutions needs to be on regionalization and trying to get all the stakeholders to recognize these tradeoffs and contribute equitably toward their provision."

A possible solution, according to Hooper: strengthening county government in a manner that would allow fair-share assessments to communities for amenities provided by the shire town.

Middlebury already has a local option tax of 1% on sales, rooms, meals and alcohol.

"I think what you need is more of the fire district, water district, solid waste district model, where you actually have a larger view of the services and resources and citizenry affected," Hooper explained. "States other than Vermont have larger counties that provide a lot of these things. The focus on local control has perhaps created this mismatch and made it preferable for so many to live in the rural towns, around the services."

He called for more communication and better relations between Middlebury and its largest employers.

"There's often an animosity between the municipality and the large employers," he contended. "In Montpelier, it was National Life and the state of Vermont. Here, there's the town-gown divide, and it shouldn't be that way. The interests of the large entities should be aligned as much as possible."

Hooper believes Middlebury could stimulate affordable housing growth by making "the zoning as non-restrictive and clear as possible, wherever possible."

Middlebury, he said, is blessed with an experienced and competent municipal staff, which allows the selectboard to focus on policy.

"The town is like this collection of really well-run businesses that have this very important role," he said. "So much of the town staff's energy is spent on water, sewer and roads, dog licenses and voting... and the selectboard operates on the margin, pushing to steer the elephant a little bit."