

EDITORIAL



Shrinking government in our back yard

It was George Will, writing in a Cato publication, that alerted us to the lessons of the crisis in Greece. The Greeks, if you have been following the news, had a riot on their hands. The rioters were government employees rioting against the government that employed them when it threatened to cut wages and benefits.

When government expands, it creates new classes of people receiving benefits. Those benefits are then described as "entitlements" and academic types start using words like "property rights" to describes those entitlements.

We have seen how this dialectic works in our own back yard. The Taconic DDSO was supposed to close sometime around the year 2000. More than half the campus was sold off in full expectation that the remaining 200 acres would soon be freed up and the remaining patients moved to the more humane and more efficient care given in group housing. But the decision-makers did not factor in the clout of the unions and the tendency of the bureaucracy to protect its own. There were about 700 workers who depended on the Wassaic campus. They were represented by a union with clout in Albany. No one wanted to take the union on. The union said the campus stays open and the politicians basically said "Yes sir". So a reason to keep the campus open was invented. Create a LIT class of patient that needed institutional care. There are now 60 LIT (up from 30 in 2001) patients at Wassaic and, according to words spoken and written, some of them could be moved to group housing. Yet there is a plan afoot to double the LIT capacity to 120 by spending something like \$48 million for new LIT facilities. Many of the present 545 employees would presumably stay on at a cost of \$26.4 million for salaries, many more millions for other services and an average of \$3 million a year to keep the campus in repair.

There is no sign that the decision on these new buildings was going to be submitted to the SEQRA process, as it should be. This is a decision that will have wide environmental repercussions.

There is no sign that the LIT decision was made in a context that considered how a LIT would affect the adjoining property, the town or the region. As our article pointed out last week, when the LIT decision emerged, plans to develop the land around the Ten Mile River railroad station came to a halt.

One must ask, should plans to close a hopelessly inefficient state facility be abandoned because of union pressure?

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The Millbrook Independent

Yet Another note on Affordable Housing

David Strayer, one of the 12 comprehensive plan committee members, submitted a lengthy piece to this paper on his understanding of the affordable housing issue. As it was much length greater (over 1300 words) than what we can fit into a column, we suggested he shorten it. In an email he declined to do so. Because he does raise issues of importance, we summarize his points.

First, he raises the legal point that courts have declared comprehensive plans and zoning laws void for failing to deal with the affordable housing issue, or for failing to provide for family housing that would overcome a presumption that the law was deliberately exclusionary. Fighting such law suits is expensive. Second, he finds that the community survey does reflect a concern for affordable housing if one looks only at the surveys from people in the lower income brackets and from people who rent.

Third, he says the scarcity of affordable housing threatens to radically change the character of the town because of the wide gap between housing costs and incomes.

He says he would like to keep affordable housing as a priority and to take a hard look at strategies for increasing opportunity for affordable housing "while not unacceptably compromising ability to reach the other goals that our community believes important."

While much of the discussion of affordable housing is murky, the behavior of courts unpredictable, the statistical evidence illogical, what is clear is that the issue is not going away simply because we wish it to. It is clear the issue is likely to be troublesome until it is dealt with in an honest and thoroughly professional manner. For this reason, we suggest to the town and to the comprehensive planning committee that professionals be brought in now to help the community deal with this issue. There are lawyers and planners who are on top of the issue. One of the leading firms in the Hudson Valley has a web page devoted to it. Among the issues they meet is a cooperative initiative between village and town to address the issue fairly and honestly. As we have pointed out more than once, the relationship between the town and the village is ill-defined regarding sharing infrastructure costs and the burden of supplying housing needs of the workforce and for other groups that may require certain kinds of housing, such as the elderly and the handicapped. The comprehensive plan is the proper place for a road map of intermunicipal cooperation to be laid out.

Sadly, the comprehensive planning committee is handicapped by a lack of professionals amongst its members. If we make progress, we urge the town board to expand the membership of the comprehensive planning committee so professionals can participate. Amateurs can only do so much. Affordable housing is an issue needing professional assistance. They experts are there. We suffer from not employing them.

The state government, now totally broke, is actually planning to spend over \$500,000 per patient per year to satisfy union demands. This is not government for the people, by the people and of the people, this is government for a special interest group.

The Poughkeepsie Journal did much of the spade work. Their reporter found the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD) was charging Medicaid \$4500 a day for institutionalized patients. Running an institution became a cash cow. It did not cost \$4500 a day to keep an institutionalized patient. But the agency could get away in billing Medicaid this amount so running an institution, in a sense, became profitable. It was a means by which our state government could commit fraud on the system. Whether people will be prosecuted is going to be interesting. (Medicaid pays half the cost, the state pays the other half, so the fraud was half on the Medicaid, the other half on ourselves).

If the Wassiac campus is no longer the means by which the OMRDD can game the system, if it has to pay the full cost of running the campus from the state's own budget, then economics should dictate the closing of the campus immediately. It shouldn't take 545 people to take care of 60 LIT patients, and that's all that will be left of the 150 now on campus after the present non LIT patients are placed in homes. Some of the LIT patients may also be placed in homes and those that can't can be referred to other institutions, including voluntary institutions where the cost of care per patient is roughly one third of the cost of State institutional care.

Will our elected politicians demand that OMRDD take the steps to operate efficiently, or will they bow to union pressure? Will the politicians start asking the questions that should be asked? Why is this campus still operating when it operates so inefficiently? Why isn't the Comptroller's office making a full scale audit of how this agency spends the billions it is given each year?

A report of the OPDD (as OMRDD is now called) submitted to the Senate Committee on Government Efficiency last week failed to mention the Wassiac facility, the Poughkeepsie Journal article or the plans to build more LIT facilities at Wassiac. It did recognize that private or voluntary services were far more efficient than state operated facilities. It also failed to mention the size of the department's budget, \$4.8 billion, a sum that cries out for major pruning.

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Department of Corrections and Lame Excuses

A page one article on July 28 introduced Ivy Detterback as Millbrook's oldest citizen at age 104. This was not true. She is 104, but at least two citizens seem to be older. We normally do not disclose the age of our readers. Our sources have told us that Theresa Rotunno may be older than Ivy Detterback. One other reader called in claiming to be older, but we can neither confirm nor repudiate the claim, and stand corrected. We think it is of interest that at least one of our citizens have reached 104. Are there more? We are glad to hear from you.

The issue of August 4 carried an article ("Wetlands matter") by William Schlesinger without identifying him as the President of the Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies. A page one story in the same issue failed to make clear that Willie Murphy plus an engineer with the Chazen Center oversees the ball field project for the Town of Washington.