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Atkinson wages annual war on leaders' 'conflicts'

By Andy Smith
Staff Writer

ATKINSON -- If pitchers and catchers are reporting for spring training, it's a safe bet that many miles north, people in Atkinson are talking about "conflict of interest."

The allegations and denials of conflict that nearly derailed last week's Candidates Night spilled over into last night's Board of Selectmen meeting. Such heated discussions have become something of an annual tradition as Town Meeting draws near.

Selectmen Chairman Barbara Stewart, whose brother-in-law, Ted Stewart, is the road agent, has spent much of her nine years on the board defending against accusations of conflicts of interest.

"It's a political game we play during election time," she said last night. "And it's awful."

The town has a Code of Ethics in place to define what constitutes conflict, but there is little consensus among town officials on what actually qualifies. Selectmen Philip V. Consentino and Brian Boyle have contacted the New Hampshire Municipal Association for guidance on the code, and its lawyers are expected to contact them with clarification this week.

At the outset of last night's meeting, Stewart rescinded her vote from a week ago for the town to adopt the policies outlined in a new employee handbook. That vote was brought up at Candidates Night during a discussion of the potential conflicts of her possible predecessors -- selectmen candidates Janine Sawyer-Standley and Fred Childs.

Stewart said last night that while she was not sure she was in conflict by voting on policies that would affect her brother-in-law, rescinding her vote "has to do with my conscience."

Consentino told Stewart she should not have rescinded her

with Boyle against Consentino.

Childs is the town's maintenance supervisor, and his election would put two town employees on the board. Boyle believes if Childs is elected, there will only be one selectman available to vote on matters affecting employees.

That would be one selectman short of a quorum, but Childs said his interpretation of the Code of Ethics differs from Boyle's. He would be able to discuss or vote on any employee policy that is not unique to his position, he said.

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