

Nov 2, 2007



Log on, learn and speak out: Virtual town meetings help residents stay informed

By Meghan Carey , Staff writer
Eagle-Tribune

Some call it free speech, some call it democracy at its best. But no matter what they call it, many local residents are signing on to town blogs to read about, share and discuss issues pertaining to their communities.

Such unofficial town blogs are gaining popularity, regardless of whether the topics are negative or positive. It's proof that people really do want to know what's going on, even if they don't attend the selectmen's meetings.

Or, in some cases, people turn to blogs for information they said they aren't getting through the selectmen. That's what anonymous posters on the Atkinson Reporter talk about all the time, in addition to using the power of anonymity to rip officials.

That town's blog was the spark for contention recently between police Chief Philip Consentino and former Budget Committee member Mark Acciard. Consentino sent Acciard a letter, telling him to stop posting comments about Consentino and his family on the blog or else he'd take legal action.

The chief alleged Acciard was making most of the posts under the alias "Publius." Acciard maintained that he only posts under his own name, but it shouldn't matter either way because it's all about free speech.

Now the town is divided. Town officials and their supporters are furious at the blog, and anonymous blog contributors are ready to wage war against Town Hall and try to throw the elected officials out - or so they post.

Atkinson Selectman Fred Childs said the blog only posts things that are negative, and won't accept positive submissions. For that reason and more, he said yesterday that he doesn't waste his time reading it.

"How do you believe anyone who won't put their name on it?" he said. "No one wants to give up. They keep hammering each other."

Shawn O'Neil, a selectman in Danville, actually helps run that town's unofficial blog, SpeakoutDanville, and discussion on the site tends to be much more productive.

The blog has different topic sections - the town, warrant articles and Timberlane Regional School

District. There's good debate on the issues, giving both readers and contributors different angles and viewpoints to consider, O'Neil said.

Occasionally, he is criticized on it. But O'Neil said he knows he makes mistakes, and tries to research and follow up on any comments made about the selectmen. O'Neil always puts in a disclaimer, saying he is speaking for himself, not for the board.

In a time when schedules often don't allow people to attend regular town meetings, O'Neil said he wanted to start the site so people would have a forum to discuss what's going on, on their own time.

"It lets people participate in the process, whether you want to research at 2 a.m. in your pj's or for 30 minutes at work while you eat your lunch," he said. "Bringing the government to you on your terms."

Regardless of which way readers vote on articles and issues, O'Neil said he knows they are at least informed.

For example, the operating budget for the Fire Department is going up next year. History would suggest that a majority of Danville residents will vote no on the increase in March because it costs money. But if they log on to the site, voters learn the department's calls have gone up 25 percent in the last year and other valid reasons for the increase, O'Neil said.

SpeakoutDanville is one of two blog sites for the little town. The Danville Delivery was launched recently by one of the original SpeakoutDanville organizers, Len Mullen. A disagreement on the original site led to the split months before Mullen began his own blog.

Dennis Herrick, who runs the Plaistow Town Crier, researches town issues for his posts with the aim of "trying to protect the little guy," he said. Herrick and other anonymous posters on the site discuss the good and the bad, or a mix of both.

This weekend, Herrick said he plans to blog about communications, how people need to know what's going on in Town Hall more and suggestions on how to improve. But he said all his posts boil down to his main object - monitoring the increased commercialization of the state border town.

Plaistow resident Dan Bush is a regular blog reader and contributor. He looks to it for a simple explanation of what's going on in town, and a third-party opinion, he said.

Bush runs a show on the community access channel and said he takes a lot of ideas for show topics from the site.

"With (issues regarding) Harriman Road and Testa Corp., there were a lot of extra facts I didn't know until I read the blog," he said.

There's another style of blog in Londonderry - it's meant to share news, not sway opinions.

Steve Young, who runs LondonderryNH.net with Town Councilor Kathy Wagner, said they write about "all things good."

The two of them write most of the stories, but will publish submissions from anyone. Young said they started the site in March, and have since posted 600 stories and received 100 comments.

The stories are meant to help promote the community, farms, volunteer groups, businesses, sports, children, senior citizens and church, Young said - plus anything that's exciting or cute.

And the positive spin is apparently something readers in Londonderry want. Young said 5,000 different people looked at 13,000 pages on his site in the last 30 days.

Area blogs

- * Atkinson Reporter, run anonymously by "Publius"
- * Danville Delivery, run by Len Mullen
- * SpeakOutDanville, run by Curt Springer, Rob Collins, Alfred Thompson and Selectman Shawn O'Neil
- * Plaistow Crier, run by Dennis Herrick
- * LondonderryNH, run by Kathy Wagner and Steve Young

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