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Budget panel leader offended by chief, selectman

By Andy Smith
Staff Writer

ATKINSON -- Budget Committee Chairman Jane Cole said yesterday she was "thunderstruck" by the negative reception she received at this week's Board of Selectmen meeting, where selectmen and Police Chief Philip V. Consentino refused to answer questions about the chief's budget.

One quarter into the financial year, Cole approached the board to give an update of the town budget. Among other questions for department heads, Cole asked Consentino why all but \$50 of his heating budget had already been spent. Consentino responded that he was attending the meeting as a selectman and it was inappropriate to ask him about the police budget.

At that point, Cole addressed the question to Selectman Fred Childs, who began to provide an answer but was cut off by Consentino, who again said there was no need to answer the question during a selectmen's meeting.

Yesterday, Consentino maintained that Cole had no right to raise the question at a selectmen's meeting and said she should have contacted him at the police station. Consentino also said he had originally requested \$1,800 for heating expenses, which the Budget Committee reduced to \$1,100 -- the amount he spent in 2003.

"This was one of the coldest winters we had in history, and the price of heating oil is going up," he said yesterday. "So whose fault is it that I don't have the money? It's not mine. I budgeted \$1,800. So shame on you, Mrs. Cole, you should've given the police chief what he said we needed. Don't come crying to me now."

Cole said she was merely trying to point out possible problem areas to the selectmen on Monday.

"There's not really any big problems with the budget aside from a couple lines that we should keep our eye on," she said.

"Every year we say we're going to work together with the selectmen, but here we are reporting to them, and they're telling us to get out of their face. I was really taken aback to see the board shut off a department head."

Selectmen Chairman Brian Boyle was excused from the meeting with an illness, and watched on television from his home. He said yesterday he, too, was surprised to see the way Cole was treated.

"Whether it's a town official or a resident, we usually do our best to answer the questions asked of us," Boyle said. "I think most every week since he's been a selectman, Phil has read police reports as a police chief and department head."

Another issue Consentino refused to discuss at the selectmen's meeting was the way the Police Department and elderly affairs budgets are handled.

Cole said the elderly affairs budget is small and solely devoted to paying the salaries of the part-time officers who give rides to senior citizens. Gas, auto insurance and all additional department expenses were to be withdrawn from the police donation account -- a system to which she claims Consentino agreed.

But so far, there have been no withdrawals for the elderly from that account, Cole said, and she does not know from where the department's expenses are being paid.

Consentino said he never agreed to run the police donation account that way.

"She wants every single solitary thing -- gas, oil, insurance -- taken out of the donation account," he said. "She needs to keep her hands off that account. That is money donated by the residents of this town, and it is not hers to spend as she so desires. It's for use by the police chief, not by Jane Cole. There's absolutely no ifs, ands or buts about it."

Consentino said he had no problem discussing these differences of opinion with Cole, as long as it is not on a Monday night.

"She can come in and sit down and say whatever she wants. She knows where I am," he said. "And she should keep the selectmen informed of the budgets. But don't come asking specific questions of a selectman when he's sitting as a selectman. That ain't going to happen."