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Selectmen stick around after meeting concludes

By Margo Sullivan
 Staff writer

Atkinson Notes

Margo Sullivan

Sunshine Laws refer to rules that say selectmen and other elected officials must conduct the people's business in the open.

The laws are not new. Government records have been public information from the days before the Revolutionary War. Ideally, every record would be open to public inspection, but Sunshine Laws still allow for some leeway. For instance, if someone sues the town, Atkinson selectmen can hold a secret meeting to talk about legal strategy. Before they shut the public out, however, they have to tell the reason they are meeting in secret. If it's over a lawsuit, the case has to have a real docket number or the selectmen must have a letter in hand advising them this complaint is imminent.

This week, the regular selectmen's meeting ended Monday at 8:35 p.m., and selectmen did not vote to go into secret session.

They just hunkered down in their seats and sat there while the Channel 20 crew shut down the cameras and packed up to go home.

To a reporter, it looks suspicious when a meeting is over and selectmen stick around.

Were they evading the law that say the public's business is supposed to be conducted in the open?

Selectman Fred Childs said no. They really did not discuss

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anything about town business.

"I'd tell you if we did," he said. "We were talking about a calf and stuff. Jack and I are friends. He lives around the corner from me. He's been having all kinds of trouble putting a pool in with all the rain."

At one point, selectmen Chairman Philip V. Consentino walked out in the hall and asked if a newspaper reporter was lost.

The reporter said yes.

"Yes, Chief. I'm lost in Atkinson."

The door to the meeting room stayed open, so a reporter could hear the selectmen loudly swap horse stories and complaints about children's college tuition. Then a couple of voices would get very quiet, so it was like listening to an AM radio, fading in and out.

Selectmen stayed in their seats for 25 minutes after Consentino adjourned the meeting,

Selectman John Sapia strolled out and wanted to know why he never saw a story about how he was paying for his children's college educations.

"Maybe the contributions would start rolling in," he said.

At this point, Consentino walked out and said something about locking up the front door. Then he walked back inside the meeting room and shut the door behind him and said something to Childs.

Consentino and Childs represent a quorum, and a session between the two of them, behind closed doors, might be a violation of the open meetings law.

It all depends on whether they still were talking about horses or, say, buying another police cruiser.

Stormy Weather

Sunday's storm uprooted trees, snapped power lines and trapped three cars on Maple Avenue under a web of wires and leaves.

According to Edward Stewart, the road agent, the water cascaded over roads but did isolated damage to pavement.

"The only one that really took a beating was Scottsdale Road," he said. In front of his own home on Main Street, the road bed was mostly submerged temporarily. He could see just four feet of the road, he said.

Stewart said 150-foot high trees came up, "pulled right out of the ground." The line of destruction went from the back of Hog Hill to East Road, he said.

Selectman Fred Childs said the microburst felled four trees on his property and pulled trees up by the roots. Childs said just before the storm hit, he had started out to pick up some bales of hay in Hampstead. He turned back when the rain started and made it home. Childs said at the height of the storm, he could not see anything from his windows except a gray sheet of pounding rain.

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