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Selectmen impose gag order on town information

By Margo Sullivan
Staff writer

ATKINSON — Selectmen cracked down yesterday on the news coming from their office.

At a morning meeting, the board imposed a gag order requiring that only selectmen release information from the board's office.

The gag order was not on the meeting agenda as an item to be discussed. but moments after the meeting began.

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selectmen Chairman Philip V. Consentino asked for a motion to give selectmen more control over town information.

Selectman Fred Childs made the motion after Consentino proposed that "any information coming out of the Board of Selectmen's office must go through selectmen."

There was no discussion. The vote was 2-0, with Childs and Consentino casting votes.

Selectman John Sapia did not attend the meeting. The meeting ended after the votes were cast.

At the meeting, selectmen did not elaborate on the scope of their action and didn't specify the kinds of information they want more control over. Consentino, who quickly left the meeting, did not return calls seeking comment.

After the meeting, Selectman Fred Childs said the gag order was Consentino's idea. Childs said he went along with it because he did not appreciate newspaper stories about selectmen violating open meeting laws.

"That's the chairperson's prerogative, and that's how he wanted it," Childs said.

Childs also said he was unhappy with a Sunday newspaper column that questioned if selectmen were trying to evade the sunshine laws. Selectmen continued to talk inside their meeting room in Town Hall after their meeting adjourned on June 27. The meeting room door was open, but at one point Consentino went in, shut the door behind him and spoke to Childs privately.

Childs was later asked about the conversation. He said they discussed a foal.

The gag order came one day after The Eagle-Tribune made a request for public records. The newspaper asked Town Administrator Russell McAllister for draft minutes of the selectmen's nonpublic and regular meetings of July 11; the draft and accepted minutes of the selectmen's nonpublic session on June 20; a letter from state Department of Environmental Services regarding Jamison Ridge erosion; draft and accepted minutes of selectmen's nonpublic session on June 6; correspondence from Lt. William Baldwin, then Sgt. William Baldwin, to selectmen; and letters from selectmen to Baldwin.

Selectman John Sapia could not be reached for comment.

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