

# FIRST SELECTMAN'S OFFICE

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October 18, 2017

## SOME THOUGHTS ON THE REFERENDUM

Dear Friends:

I want to take a moment to thank everyone who voted in the Rockwell-Johnson school referendum. No matter how you voted, your participation counted. Some noted that the turnout of 22% was low. It is, but from a historical perspective, it's about average. In fact, we have had some single-issue referendums in the past with far lower turnout. We've also had some with higher participation. But it is indeed troubling that so few vote on issues that have far more impact on their daily lives than most things that go on in Washington or Hartford.

To the "no" voters, I want you to know that all of us in town government take your concerns very seriously. Personally, I supported this initiative because the slightly higher short term costs will save a great deal of taxpayer dollars in the future, as well as produce two schools that are much better equipped to fulfill their mission. I also want you to know that the new costs of these renovations will not come online for several years. In the intervening time, it will be the responsibility of elected officials to mitigate those new costs as much as possible by finding savings in other areas.

I think it's time, as a community, that we have a serious conversation about communication. Some people said they knew nothing about this issue until the last minute. Others commented that they thought this was the most transparent process they'd ever seen. In fact, this issue was communicated no differently than most that are presented to voters. There have been numerous front-page articles in our area's only daily newspaper over the past two years. There have been several informational presentations by school officials over the past six months, where residents could speak with the BOE members, the architects and engineers and ask questions.

The question I have is this: what level of responsibility do citizens have in keeping themselves informed? Governments have a legal requirement to make all information available to the public. What responsibility do citizens have to pay attention to, or seek out that information?

With every voter who mentioned to me that they didn't know about this issue, I asked if they read the News Times. The answer was always, "No, there's nothing in it to read." Even though, with today's technology, you don't even have to pay for a subscription to read it (unfortunately for the newspaper business). You can read most of it for free online. You can even set up a free Google Alerts account which will scan news outlets and send you an email with a direct link to any news article from any source based on keywords you choose. There are other online news sources, as well. But for folks who do not use computers, the News Times is the only area newspaper capable of providing information on a daily basis that voters need. This is how citizens have kept themselves informed for the past 250 years.

Does town government now need to take over that function? Does it need to spend thousands, or even tens of thousands on direct mail campaigns with every issue that comes up? And if it's sent, will voters read it? Or will it go out with the junk mail? This has not been a regular part of the town's past practice. Does it need to be in the future? If so, how do we get around the sticky issue of using taxpayer funds to "sell" a particular proposal? This is permitted under most circumstances, but can be questionable. Under certain other conditions it is illegal. If the town took on this responsibility, who would have the authority to decide which issues are important enough to be proactively sent out at taxpayer expense? Would sending out such information, even if simply informational, open the door to a demand by a person or group opposed to the initiative that they be given equal time at taxpayer expense?

These are the things that we need to discuss. I look forward to hearing from you; my email is [Firstselectman@bethel-ct.gov](mailto:Firstselectman@bethel-ct.gov) or 203.794.8501.

Sincerely

Matthew Knickerbocker  
First Selectman