

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Responsible GOVERNMENT

Anonymity, hate and cyber-bullying

Last December, about the time I was sworn in as a newly-elected member of the Pottstown School Board, a new Web site appeared called Save Pottstown.

The purpose of the Web site, its anonymous authors explained, was to save Pottstown from the depredations of yours truly, Tom Hylton. Just as Sherlock Holmes described Professor Moriarity as the “Napoleon of Crime,” Save Pottstown exposes me as the perpetrator of virtually all civic evil in Pottstown going back 30 years or more.

Nearly every day, Save Pottstown serves up new examples of my depredations, starting with planting street trees, creating a European-style park at Beech and Charlotte streets, and championing back-in angle parking and bike lanes on High Street.

But my greatest crime was leading a successful election campaign in 2007 to unseat Pottstown School Board members who planned to build a \$54 million centralized campus for 1,800 elementary school children in the Washington Street corridor.

I believed, and still believe, the megacampus would have bankrupted Pottstown and eliminated Pottstown’s greatest community asset — its neighborhood elementary schools. Save Pottstown believes otherwise.

Now that I am a school board member, Save Pottstown disparages proposals to better utilize our existing facilities and install energy-saving systems that will preserve our neighborhood schools and extend their useful life for decades to come.

There is a supreme irony in a Web site that boldly claims to be saving Pottstown but declines to identify the “saviors” that run it.

Nonetheless, day after day, our anonymous bloggers portray me as a “nasty,” “arrogant,” underhanded “liar” who has “left a long trail of destruction going back to the 1970s.” All this defamation is justified, according to our mystery writers, because “Hylton is an ass and deserves all the ridicule and scorn coming his way.”

Save Pottstown fosters an illusion of community support for its tactics by establishing a comment section for other anonymous bloggers from the community. This makes it easy, through the use of fictional identities, for a handful of people to pretend to be a multitude of admiring followers.

Save Pottstown titillates readers who enjoy seeing someone publicly skewered. And its appeal is significantly enhanced by its anonymity. As playwright Oscar Wilde wrote,

“the commonest thing is delightful if only one hides it.” But that element seems to be ending.

Last month, two of Save Pottstown’s most avid anonymous bloggers revealed themselves as former school board members Amy Francis and Judyth Zahora. Francis has been blogging under the name “mssilencedogood” and Zahora goes by the name “Iagreetoo.” Both have used their numerous blog entries for innuendo and personal attacks.

Current school board member Michele Pargeon has also revealed herself as “Eyes Wide Open.” She has been shredding my character for about a year now, first on the Mercury’s Web site and now on Save Pottstown. At least one other board member

and one former board member (or spouse), I believe, are doing the same. I can’t say for sure, of course, because everything is anonymous.

This steady stream of abuse does nothing to advance the public welfare. Instead of discussing ideas and issues, these “civic leaders” spend their time and energy attacking personalities. They make rational deliberations almost impossible.

The founders of Save Pottstown have yet to identify themselves, but they are as clear to me as if we were sitting in the same room.

Only a few people are still obsessed with the centralized campus and how it was going to be the panacea that would solve all of Pottstown’s problems.

Only a very few people can remember details of obscure events going back 20 years or more that are discussed on the Web site.

And only three or four people have such an enormous capacity for hatred and malice that they are willing to scour the Internet, search public records, and write voluminously every day in an effort to find something — anything — that will lead to my complete public disgrace and humiliation.

Hatred, I believe, is a debilitating and self-destructive emotion. I don’t hate anybody and I don’t want anybody to hate me. I accept personal attacks as the price of public service in a rough-and-tumble world. I hope such attacks will make me a better person.

But people of good will need to step up now and try to tone down the acrimony. Otherwise, we will never get anything done.

This column expresses the personal views of Tom Hylton and does not represent the views of any organization with which he is affiliated.



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