

Saugerties Town Board members explain where they stand on the ceasefire issue



Susan Poretz

The Saugerties Town Board meeting on Wednesday, May 1, started much as such meetings have over the past two months: A large number of speakers signed up to ask the board to take a stand for a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip, a peace agreement between Israel and the Arabs in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and a return of hostages.

This meeting was different from previous ones, however, in that board members explained their positions on adopting a resolution on the subject, as have several municipalities in New York State, including Albany, Newburgh, Beacon, Ithaca and

Rochester, according to news reports from those cities. Reuters states that more than 70 US cities have passed resolutions calling for a ceasefire, and some news outlets have placed the number as high as 100.

Several speakers expressed their frustration at attending meetings over several months and getting no response from the board. As the meeting was winding down, and deputy supervisor Lianne Thornton had asked for a motion to adjourn, one resident asked that the members state their positions on a resolution in support of a ceasefire in Gaza. "Is it possible you could tell us where you stand on the ceasefire issue?"

Councilman Zach Horton first thanked the speakers for coming to meetings and expressing their opinions. "I don't put myself in the camp of people who feel bullied by your presence," he said. "If anything, I think it's one of the silver linings that I've seen amidst all the tragedy and turmoil, and I respect the emotion surrounding this issue. But the biggest conflict for me — I don't mean for this to sound as a copout — but I do have trouble with the idea that localities and municipalities should be addressing this. The biggest reason behind that for me is, and I'm not trivializing this issue, but it was raised to me that 'You could adopt certain language, certain verbiage to specifically address the situation in Gaza.' While acknowledging that some municipalities have done that, but by us doing that, we're trivializing other federal issues and other foreign policies.

"The reason I ran is to become an expert on Saugerties issues, and believe me, folks, I'm far from that still. I might never accomplish that. But where I stand on this is I do not believe that this is an issue that the municipality should take up."

Horton cited the "polarization" at board meetings over the past months: "I think that by us memorializing this officially, we will only further that divide." He said that he welcomed calls from citizens and asked that they continue.

Councilman Mike Ivino said that, while he had not expected to speak and had no prepared remarks, he does not think the issue is "a Yes or a No vote, but more or less a neutral standing on the matter. Obviously, every time we come, we see you come out in numbers, which we appreciate; but we have seen what you might call the other side of the spectrum." In his conversations with constituents, Ivino said, he has heard varying opinions, adding that he thinks he is not knowledgeable to vote on the issue at this point. "I do not want to take a stand on this one way or the other," he said. "I wanted to put forward a resolution on peace, and stand in solidarity with everyone. But I had a backlash on that as well, and it made me realize that it doesn't matter what we do up here; we're damned if we do and we're damned if we don't. That's why I

wholeheartedly feel that being neutral on this topic is the best step forward for me." Ivino later said that the town board has many issues to deal with, including road maintenance and improvement, parks and recreation, accomplishing the many tasks that need to be done, and stated that these are what he sees the need for the town board to focus on.

Councilwoman Peg Nau noted that the board represents over 20,000 residents. "The opinions expressed at the recent public comment periods total less than one percent of those residents. It is not within the scope of the Saugerties Town Board to take sides in foreign political issues. Some speakers have appealed to fear of being attacked for not doing what the speaker wants, with such terms as 'We are crowds,' 'We elected you,' 'We will grow in number.' I will not be intimidated; I will not support any issue that is outside the scope of our serving this town."

"After watching on the news this last week-and-a-half what's going on on our college campuses, it took me back to my days in Washington, DC, following the assassination of Dr. King and during the Vietnam era," said deputy supervisor Leeanne Thornton. "I guess I'm dating myself, but that experience of being in the capital of our country and seeing tanks and armed guards on campus was something I thought I would never witness again. As the grandmother of three beautiful granddaughters, after watching the horror of what took place in Israel and in Palestine, and watching the United Nations health groups being attacked and intimidated by not being able to get medical aid, not having access to electricity or water, I just put myself... If I was living in either Israel or Palestine and having to face this as a family and explain this to children who are totally innocent."

Political leaders are the ones who will make the decisions, Thornton said. However, she added, "I did put together a resolution — perhaps it's from my League of Women Voters experience over the last 50 years — addressing the humanitarian and economic impact and the social impact on families and children, to draft a statement that I thought was something that as a board we

might look at. When I put this together, I sent it to my fellow board members, and the supervisor and I said this is just a basis for conversation.”

Supervisor Fred Costello was not at the meeting. Reached afterwards, he said that he has discussed the issue with board members individually, and there is at this point no consensus on a statement on which all the members could agree. Nor have people with whom he has discussed the question agreed that the board should take a position. While the death toll among Palestinians is horrific and growing, for many Israelis, the fate of the hostages and the need to free them is important.

A statement specifically appearing to favor one side or the other would be impossible to agree on, and simply saying that the loss of life is a bad thing is something everyone might agree on, but it falls short of what the people are asking for. “Unfortunately, it doesn’t seem that we can find a statement we can come to a consensus on,” he said.

The board had not come to a consensus, he said. “I totally appreciate those of you who have come several times; many of you have come three or four times now to express your concerns. I know that neither side that we’re looking at here — you have compassion, you are concerned. I think the fact that our elected national leaders are kind of oblivious to making a commitment one way or the other... I would encourage you to continue to reach out to them. You’ve got to make your voice heard.”

What has been happening on college campuses is disturbing, Thornton said. “It shouldn’t come to this. And it’s coming to this because the international community... Hopefully the Egyptian government can bring Hamas and bring the Israeli government to the table.”

“It’s not as if we’re not listening; we hear what you’re saying,” she added. “Unfortunately, [Marc] Molinaro, Pat Ryan, Kirsten Gillibrand, Chuck Schumer — they’re the ones who have the clout here, to put the pressure on President Biden.” There is no easy answer, she said.

One resident said that the board seems to be misunderstanding its job. "Do you see yourselves as representing Saugerties?" she asked.

During the public comment period at the start of the meeting, several of the speakers asked that the town board come to a decision. Most of the 17 speakers favored a ceasefire resolution. Janet Aisian was one of several speakers who pressed the board to vote on the issue, or at least state a position. "We tell you what we think, and we expect you to tell us what you think: Why you'd vote yes, why you'd vote no or why you wouldn't vote at all. I personally need to know; everybody here needs to know what you have to say about this publicly, not behind closed doors." She went on to offer her feelings that "The violence that peaceful protest is being met with by militarized police in our country, in my opinion, is one of a very long spectrum of what has turned into genocide in Gaza, and what was the Holocaust in the Second World War. It's militarized state police action against people who have done nothing to deserve it."

Joe Puma said that he would support the board's decision. "You guys were elected by Saugerties; Democrats, Republicans, Independents elected you. I voted for not all of you, but I'll stand behind you." Puma's main point was that with one exception, the speakers did not mention the hostages still held by Hamas, some of them Americans. "Move a resolution to bring back the hostages first, and then I might think about a resolution for a ceasefire."

Susan Rosenberg said that she would support a board resolution to ask the US government to support "a permanent ceasefire in Gaza, the release of all hostages, condemning all forms of Islamophobia and antisemitism and an entry of humanitarian aid to the people of Gaza." After describing the images of destruction and death in Gaza, Rosenberg said, "It's true we can't make these things happen. But I think we have to add our voices — for ourselves, and to show our grandchildren if you see something wrong, you have to stand up and say something."

However, Susan Poretz vehemently opposed the board's taking a stand,

saying that the protesters showed their ignorance in demanding a resolution, "because foreign affairs is not in the purview of the Saugerties Town Board and the functions that they have to perform. This group [should go] to Washington to make their statements." She characterized the protestors' demands as arrogance, "because they are so full of themselves and their obsessive belief that they alone hold the truth, and that it gives them the right to waste our hardworking board's time. I sincerely hope that you, my town board, not take any action on their obsessive compulsion to coerce and wear you down into doing what you were not elected to do."

Several speakers pointed out that the issue affects local municipalities because money that might be used for local infrastructure or other town needs is instead being used to fund the war.

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