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Rockport group aims to foster democracy

By Stephen Hagan | Staff Writer
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Bill Tobin, pictured here at Town Hall in Rockport, is one of the members of the new group called the Rockport Civic League.

PAUL BILODEAU/Staff photo



ROCKPORT — An organization aimed at fostering democratic ideals in Rockport government is working through the growing pains associated with any new watchdog

organization.

According to Rockport Civic League group member Zenus Seppala, of the 11 citizen petitions recently offered before annual Town Meeting slated for April 1, all but one received an unfavorable recommendation from the Town Government and Bylaws Committee.

One of the citizen petitions offered by the group that received an unfavorable recommendation by the committee was a petition offered at fall special Town Meeting by resident Toby Arsenian. That measure would have overturned a meeting requirement requiring a 48-hour notice be given before amendments are offered on the Town Meeting floor.

“The (Town) Government and Bylaws Committee recommends unfavorable action on the warrant article,” reads the committee’s recommendation reviewed on Feb. 27 for the “Voter’s Booklet for annual Town Meeting 2023.”

“Forty-eight hours (notice) gives the moving party time to understand the issue and prepare a coherent answer for Town Meeting or to decide to accept the amendment. It also gives Town Counsel and the (Town) Moderator the opportunity to examine the issue before the meeting and give proper advice.”

Further, the recommendation indicates the Town Moderator has discretion to enforce the rule that allows for “reasonableness in the circumstances.”

But Seppala said the measure to overturn the 48-hour notice has merit.

“The (Town) Government and Bylaws Committee is obligated by law to look at those citizen petitions and state whether they think they are favorable or unfavorable,” said Seppala. “If we get some traction, people may find we’re the ones doing public service.”

He added that so far, the group is made up of dozens of Rockport residents and at least 10 residents who are “firmly committed” to the group’s ideals.

Bill Tobin is one of the founders of the group.

On Monday, he said the Town Government and Bylaws Committee may have been premature when they made their recommendations.

“They voted on each and every (citizen petition) first, then, they opened things up for discussion,” Tobin said. “It’s a little bit like are they really worried about the RCL. What in the world could they be worried about?”

Efforts to reach Laurie Kaiser, the chair of the Town Government and Bylaws Committee before deadline were unsuccessful.

Group’s goal: Information

For his part, Tobin said the group’s main aim is to inform.

“We’re just a group that wants to educate the public,” said Tobin. “We honestly believe that with education, people will realize that the Rockport government needs to provide more transparency and accountability in a timely manner.”

For now, the Rockport Civic League is hoping the “make a major impact” in Rockport government via its website. The organization’s website is:

www.rockportcivicleague.org.

Another challenge being faced by the group, according to Seppala, is that, so far, the organization has a regular meeting time in the Brenner Room at the Rockport Public Library on Thursdays at 2 p.m.; not the most opportune time to meet, he said.

“We’re not situated in the best time to have a meeting but we do what we can,” he

said, adding the group meetings need to take place at a time when they do not conflict with other town board meetings.

“We’re trying to get people together who are discontented with the way Rockport government is proceeding,” said Seppala. “We want to educate people on civics and why we feel education about civics is needed for Rockport to make intelligent decisions. We’re not town officials. We don’t speak for everybody else. We do speak for ourselves.”

In the end, Seppala said selectmen will have the final say on whether the citizen’s petitions will be placed on the Town Meeting warrant.

“We’re waiting to see what will happen,” he said.

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