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front page story

Supporters rally to Crocco's defense

By DIANE VALDEN

ANCRAM—What started out as a proposal to replace Planning Board Chairman Joe Crocco turned into a substantial show of support in favor of his reappointment.

At the January 16 Town Board meeting, the board again took up the matter of the reappointments of Joe Crocco as Planning Board chair and Steve Olyha as

Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) chair. At the Town Board's January 2 organizational meeting, Councilmember David Boice proposed not to reappoint Mr. Crocco as Planning Board chair. Mr. Boice instead wanted to appoint Mr. Olyha, who was serving as the ZBA chair, as chairman of the Planning Board.

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Also, Mr. Boice wanted to appoint John Ingram, who previously served as Planning Board chair, to chair the ZBA to replace Mr. Olyha.

Both Mr. Boice and Town Supervisor Jim MacArthur cited alleged complaints they had heard about Mr. Crocco “not paying attention to our laws” as the reason to replace him. (See January 9, 2025 story in *The Columbia Paper*, “Two board chair appointments put on hold.”) Ultimately at the January 2 meeting, the board voted to table the Planning Board and ZBA chairmen appointments until the January regular Town Board meeting.

When time for discussion of the matter came up during the Old Business portion of the January 16 meeting, more than a dozen letters and statements from Ancram citizens in support of Mr. Crocco and critical of the Town Board’s handling of the matter were heard. Many, like Andrea Barnet, called “the proposing specific names for outside chairpersons...completely inappropriate and disrespectful. The members of each board need to be part of any decisions regarding their leadership. Attempts to override volunteer boards for the sake of political interests is undemocratic and disheartening.”

Ms. Barnet and many others said, “Joe Crocco and

the Planning Board deserve a public apology not only because they work hard and in good faith to follow the law and the updated zoning regulations, but also because they are doing this on behalf of the entire community. Let us remember that these are volunteer positions and these members give generously of their time.”

In her letter, Planning Board Vice Chairperson Erin Robertson pointed out the irony that the same law Mr. Boice accused Mr. Crocco of not following, Mr. Boice did not follow when he made his alternate appointment proposals.

Ms. Robertson quoted from the Ancram Zoning Law, noting that “The Town Board shall appoint one of the Planning Board members as chairperson, to preside at all meetings and hearings and to fulfill the authorized duties of that office. The chairperson shall annually appoint one of the Planning Board members as Vice Chairperson.”

The same goes for the ZBA, the Town Board must appoint a member of that board as chair.

“The law does not give the Town Board written authority to pick a non-board member to be the chairperson of either of those boards. If the Town Board had voted on the suggested replacements and

approved the measure the town would have broken the law. Mr. Olyha as chair of the ZBA should have known the law but became complicit in the illegal proposal when he publicly supported it.

“The lack of transparency of [Mr. Boice’s] proposal gave the other Town Board members no time to research the legality of the proposal and they unfortunately voted to not reappoint Mr. Crocco because of the alleged complaints which I believe is a violation. The vote left the Planning Board without a chair for the meeting that night. I think you all assumed I would be the vice chair, but as I understand the law...the chair appoints the vice chair. If there was no chair to appoint me as vice chair, was I legally the vice chair and was the meeting and everything we voted on legal?”

Ms. Robertson made several requests of the board including that board members “meet with the Committee for Respectful Behavior to understand the dynamics and repercussions of treating a volunteer so disrespectfully.”

In a statement she read to the board at the meeting, B. Docktor said, “What a shameful way to treat a volunteer [Mr. Crocco] who has given so much time and energy to the Planning Board.

“I am a volunteer on the Affordable Housing Committee, and I was demeaned by David Boice at a public meeting in August, 2023. I also was not there,

and what he said about me was not true or correct.

"Playing with people's reputations is not good for the town, and certainly does not help to create a sense of community. How does that make people feel about volunteering for town boards and committees? I know I am not the only person who feels infuriated, disheartened, and wonders if volunteering is going to make you a sitting duck for unkind and unwarranted treatment from town board members."

In her statement, Councilmember Colleen Lutz apologized to Mr. Crocco and the whole Ancram community noting, "The way we handled the reappointment of the planning board and zoning board member/chairs at the organizational meeting was wrong. In retrospect, the discussion should have been held in executive session and for that I apologize for not recognizing it the moment that it happened.

"The Town Board is expected to follow and uphold the laws of the community, including the Zoning Law and Subdivision Law. These laws were created in accordance with the Comprehensive Plan, which was approved by the community. If we, the Town Board, choose not to follow our laws, what incentive is that for others to follow them?"

Ms. Lutz called volunteers "the backbone of our community!" She estimated that well over 100 volunteers serve on the town's boards, committees, councils, task forces and fire company. She

said, "I made a personal vow not to forget the work and sacrifice all our volunteers make for our town."

In his statement, Mr. Boice further criticized Mr. Crocco, saying, "He has not met the required training for several years;" he "exhibited a complete lack of fiscal responsibility by overspending the budget...with no warning or report to the Town Board;" he "further lacked the ability and oversight to manage a number of escrow accounts which have taken months to straighten out."

Mr. Boice said, "We have received complaints about the operation and function" of the Planning Board from the public. "If we do not take action and investigate and evaluate these issues, we will set a precedent where we do not investigate or act on the public's complaints."

In her statement Councilmember Bonnie Hundt said she was "embarrassed" by the actions of the Town Board January 2.

She said what happened was "an attempted take over of the chairmen positions of two major boards that run our planning and zoning departments. Instead of following our longstanding and legal process of reappointment those hard-working volunteers some members of the Town Board and the ZBA instigated a surprise illegal coup to install people who had not even applied to the seats that weren't even open...this is not how a transparent, considerate, by-the-book board functions." She said the board's

behavior was "a slap in the face and shows no respect or gratitude to all those people who step-up everyday. We applaud you and thank you for all that you do." She also apologized to Mr. Crocco, who was present in the audience.

In his defense, Mr. Crocco said he had nothing to do with the budget and was not initially aware that the Planning Board had a budget. He said he came up short in his training because the credits he needed were not offered.

"That's no reason not to reappoint me—that's just BS—trying to justify his [Mr. Boice's] poor behavior."

He said Mr. Boice should "be resigning because of his ethics and the way this was handled."

Mr. Crocco said, "I have been dragged through the mud for no reason...over somebody complaining about me asking for them to add dimensions to a plot plan...This is just a sad state of affairs...I should be suing this town for slander, but I'm not because I am a gentleman."

Ms. Hundt then motioned to reappoint Mr. Crocco as chair of the Planning Board and Mr. Olyha as chair of the ZBA. Ms. Lutz seconded it.

Ms. Hundt, Ms. Lutz and Councilmember Amy Gold voted in favor, Supervisor MacArthur and Mr. Boice abstained. The motion was carried.

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