

09-26-14 Civil Servants

Working at a town hall is really, really interesting. I meet so many people and have the opportunity to help so many people. That is truly gratifying.

Having recently moved, I had the opportunity to be on the other side of the counter and be the resident who doesn't know what the heck is going on, what to do, when to do it or how to arrange it.

It served as a reminder of what I have believed for the last fourteen years: we are civil servants and our job is to assist in any way we can, with professionalism. That does require patience, perseverance and a willingness to be proactive. Often times, we have to intuit the needs and point people in the right direction, for they don't always know the question to ask; they only know they need to know more.

So, there I was with inquiries at the Plymouth Highway Department. I was using rural terminology such as "dump sticker" and must have sounded like such a hick! The woman heard "sticker" and told me to go to the town hall, where they have the actual stickers. Even though I introduced myself as having just moved to Plymouth, she wasn't proactive in offering any helpful information beyond sending me to the town hall.

At the town hall I met several very helpful people. The first one, a woman at the tax collector's office, was kind enough to write a list of other departments I needed to contact, such as the assessor, the clerk and the water department. I asked if the water department was on the same floor. "Oh, no. They are on Camelot Drive, at the Highway Department." "Darn", I thought; that is where I just was, when I was directed to the town hall!

This truly gave me a first-hand taste of what it feels like to be lost in a maze of rules and regulations completely new and unknown to the newcomer. It is not a good feeling or an easy experience! I am grateful to the helpful women I met at the Plymouth Town Hall and am now a paying member of the Curbside Trash and Recycling Pick-up Program, (not known as Dump sticker), known to the assessor's office as the new owner of my house and am registered to vote. I don't know if the Water Department knows about me yet, as I have not found the time to return to the place I already visited. It will work out somehow one of these days. (Speaking of water, I do miss my well and the sense of independence, as the owner of my water and septic system. Rural people: enjoy what you have and take good care of it. It is, in my opinion, preferable to paying others for the oversight.)

The process of settling in with a new community made me realize how important it is that we provide information, including clear steps along the way toward various goals.

Providing that information to the public also requires established partnerships within our town halls. This topic is currently being discussed in Plympton, where an "all departments" meeting was recently held. I wasn't at that meeting but asked the Board of Health at our last meeting if anyone has considered the flow chart of inter-departmental connections. It was created in the 70's and is really good! It is taped to the table in the Plympton Board of Health

and is well worth re-visiting. The Board informed me they are re-creating it electronically, so that all can consider it.

While at that meeting, at least two residents made the same statement, of “just wanting to know what the process is”. It is our job to answer those questions, because we are civil servants and that is our job; to help others and inform them of the process. Once that is accomplished, we can partner with others, follow the process and get things done, with consistency and with the assurance that we are, in the case of the board of health, protecting public health.

It is interesting work; that is for sure.

It can be challenging to be civil, while being the servant to people who are stressed, overwhelmed or angry but that is part of being a civil servant.

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