

Four battle for two Pownal seats

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POWNAL — Four candidates, Michael Gardner Jr., Ronald Bisson, Neal Krawczyk, and Stephen Kauppi are in the running for two one-year seats on the Pownal Select Board in the annual town election.

Gardner, who served on the Pownal Elementary School board for seven years, works as an office manager for Dufour Transportation, a busing service that provides transportation to many area school districts.

Gardner stressed his independence and said he votes based on how he feels about issues and what he thinks the voters of Pownal want. Gardner said he is open to new ideas and welcomes being spoken to by people with concerns.

As for changes, Gardner said he wants to see more accountability on the board and less tabling of issues. Gardner said an issue involving the steeple removed from the Pownal Community Church in 2006 dragged out for too long. The steeple was removed because it was in need of maintenance and set down on a nearby strip of pavement, which a resident claimed was an access point to the back of his property.

The resident, Ray Shields, eventually sued the town citing lack of access to his property, and the town's insurance company settled out of court for \$3,500. Gardner said the steeple should have been removed sooner.

Gardner said the board has also deliberated for too long on getting a new town office building, and too much time has been spent dealing with the former Green Mountain Race Track site, a 144-acre property that once served as the hub of the town's economy. Gardner said the board has no control over who owns the track or what they end up doing with it.

Bisson, who previously served a two-year term on the board, said that at the end of his term, people were telling him that he was "behind the times."

He said people told him they were sorry to see him off the board, and that he has spent the past two years reading the newspaper and following current events.

He ran the first time because he thought the board needed a different viewpoint thrown into the mix. "I'm a little more conservative than the people on there now," he said.

One of the areas he thinks the town could stand to be more conservative in is housing.

He said many of Pownal's homes are what is deemed "affordable housing" or "low-income." He said the town does not need more such housing situations, or at least not without the jobs to support them.

As for the affordable housing projects that do exist, he said they need to be improved upon, but not expanded.

Another aspect of the affordable housing situation Bisson said needs to be addressed is how taxation and ownership works for mobile homes in parks.

Pownal has had problems with unclear ownership of trailers and taxes on those trailers. Bisson said the town needs to get control of the situation.

Bisson, who once worked at the defunct Pownal Tanning Co. in North Pownal, said the town should try to work with the state to make it easier for businesses to set up in town.

He said Vermont is a difficult state to do business in, and towns should both cooperate with and put pressure on the state to make the Act 250 process easier.

He said he is not afraid to hold a different viewpoint on the board, and said he was one of the few opposing the purchase of an open water source from Williamstown, Mass., located near the Pownal/Williamstown line a few years ago during his term.

Bisson said enough of the town's money and energy has been put into the former Green Mountain Race Track, and it time to simply await a decent proposal from a developer.

Krawczyk, 54, and owner of the Discount Food Store along Route 7, was elected to the board last year.

He said Thursday that he first ran for a board because of comments people made to him while shopping in his store. He said Pownal residents were concerned about the lack of businesses in town, and that he, as a businessman himself, might be able to change things.

Krawczyk said his first year on the board has been a learning experience. When he began his term, he said the town was dealing with the new sewer system and the track property. Krawczyk said there was a lot of catching up to do when he began, but his experience as a business owner helped him get over the learning curve.

He said that before he started the food store, which he began as a restaurant, he said he had a construction business and owned a campground for a time on Lake Champlain.

One idea Krawczyk has for attracting business is to begin some form of advertising campaign to let businesses know Pownal is a good place to set up shop. He said the town has plenty of homes available for purchase, but jobs are needed to fill them.

Stephen Kauppi has been on the board for the past four years. Kauppi owns Center Auto, a used car dealership and towing service on Center Street.

Kauppi said one of the things he tried to do when he was elected was to make the board more open to the public.

He said he wants the people of Pownal to feel they can come to meetings and express their concerns, even though they might not be on the agenda.

He said managing a town is much like managing a business, with which he has experience. A Pownal native, he said wasn't going to run this year, but the economy being in a recession, he said now was the wrong time to step down.

Kauppi said he is over the learning curve and works well with other board members, although they disagree at times.

There is no one problem Pownal has that can be made a priority over others, he said. The town needs to maintain its equipment, but at the same time has to keep taxes down.

Kauppi said Pownal has its share of problems, among them a lack of jobs within the town itself, and the town will recover some day.

However, with the economy in the slump it's in, he said revitalization won't occur soon. He said the best the town board can do is keep costs down while they can and be ready for opportunities.

In the other Select Board race, incumbent Don Prouty is unopposed for a three-year term.

Elections for town and school offices will be held on March 3 at the Pownal Center Firehouse from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m.

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