



DISCOURSE:

Local Officials Share Their Strategies
for Dealing With Bloggers, Commenters,
and Other Harsh Critics

By JOHN OUELLETTE

They're out there. The often-anonymous critics of local government—indeed, of government at all levels—are making their voices heard all day, every day, in blog posts, on newspaper websites, and in any other online forum they can find. Their posts, often fraught with misspellings, grammatical errors and misinformation, hurl vitriol and personal insults in the direction of those who are elected or appointed to serve their community. Taken on their face, these comments would suggest that local government is a haven for corruption and mismanagement. Reading the comments, one could also conclude that politics has gotten ugly—really ugly—even at the local level. People are mad as hell and, well, you know the rest.

What has happened to civility in public discourse? And what *ever* happened to agreeing to disagree?

There are those who argue that the current economic climate—a sluggish economy, job losses, foreclosures, and budget cuts at every level of government—has exacerbated a downward spiral in our political discussions. There may be other contributing factors as well: residents are more transient and less rooted in their communities than they were a generation ago; they are less likely to read newspapers and keep up with local issues; they have more competition for their time; and they are just plain stressed out.

But the reality is that politics in America has always caused a few scrapes and bruises. Remember duels? As Natick Selectman Joshua Ostroff puts it, “Nineteenth century

political pamphlets were far more insulting than anything that's posted today.” The biggest difference may be that no one has to print pamphlets to make his or her voice heard. Nor do they have to march on the Mall in Washington, D.C. All they need these days is an Internet connection. With a touch of a button, their rant can be read by thousands. “Now,” says West Boylston Town Administrator Leon Gaumond, “if you want to beat on the local board of selectmen ... you don't have to wait for town meeting, you don't have to write letters to the editor and hope that they get printed. ... You can wake up at four in the morning and say, ‘The people have the right to know my opinion about the board of selectmen!’”

It's possible that widespread access to technology and the Internet are distorting our sense of how angry people actually are. While local officials sometimes feel the sting, many also counsel that you have to keep it in perspective; while these online critics are certainly vocal, they *are*, generally, small in number. “Basically what it comes down to is that same dozen or so people just talking to themselves,” says Waltham Councillor Robert Logan. “It's the fraternity of the miserable.”

For many local officials, the best response is to find ways to rise above the chatter, and allow it to roll off their backs. The following is what seven veteran local officials had to say about the current political climate and their strategies for dealing with the most vociferous critics. (The interviews have been condensed for space reasons.)

John Ouellette is the Publications Editor and Web Director for the Massachusetts Municipal Association.

JOSHUA OSTROFF



There are really a couple of issues here. One is, how do you engage people who want to participate and play a constructive role in local government? And then how do you deal with people who want to just offer criticism, usually anonymously, through online or other forums? ... I think the key to dealing with the second is to make a strong effort on the first.

If you make it a goal and a practice of local government to provide opportunities for people to participate in all the decisions that are made in their names, then you have a more robust local democracy, you feed the pipeline for future leaders, and you make decisions that reflect the most balanced possible perspective of the citizenry.

I think we owe it to ourselves to ... make it easy for people to apply to be on appointed boards or to run for office, easy for people to engage with their elected and appointed officials.

My strategy is that I will engage online, in a newspaper comment section, to provide factual information, and I'll do it under my own name. There's no mandate that a mayor or a selectman or a city councillor go online and engage with a blogger or a commenter. ... Some folks are well-served by taking advantage of the opportunity, but most do not. I'm definitely in the minority.

I believe that everything we do as local officials is modeling the behavior that we expect from our citizens.

I'm reading the news stories anyway. ... If thousands of local residents are reading misinformation in the form of comments on a newspaper's website, I believe that it's a duty to correct misstatements and fill in the missing pieces, so that the readers have a more balanced perspective.

Somebody may call me a ne'er-do-well—or even scoundrel—but I don't think you need to rise to the bait for that kind of ad hominem invective. No purpose is served. It's better to just forgive people and move on, and focus on what your goal is as a public official. I was not elected to argue with people.

People have a right to say whatever they want to say.

I tell people running for office that they need three things: an open mind, a steady hand, and a thick skin. You can't take this stuff personally. And I think if people feel that it's too wearing on them then, yeah, definitely don't read it.

You cannot get into this business pretending that it's going to be about "Robert's Rules of Order." And there's not going to be a protocol officer making sure that everyone is respected and valued.

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Too often, the online commenters are filling an information void. I think government has its work cut out for it in trying to put accurate and timely information out there.

Joshua Ostroff, a selectman in Natick for the past five years, is president of the Massachusetts Municipal Association.

SCOTT LANG



People have the right to extreme points of view, but it's certainly important that you try to bring them back toward a common-sense, common-ground type of perspective. You have to be able to find some stability in your day-to-day public debate. Otherwise, you'll end up having the old-fashioned mob rule. The person with the loudest voice, the person who drives the hardest position, will be the one who runs up in front.

If it's a disrespectful or prejudicial viewpoint, then I try to make people understand very quickly that we're not going to tolerate that kind of dialogue. But by and large, I take people's well thought-out positions—regardless of what they are—seriously.

I do a weekly radio show. ... [It] is a fluid discussion. ... The old style used to be you'd line up ten people to call you on the radio. My radio show is completely blind every time. Whoever calls, calls.

If someone calls and makes a ridiculous statement and I know who it is, I will identify them. ... I try to keep it friendly, but I'm not willing to yield when it comes to important positions or facts.

What I try to do is have the facts available, and in essence present the positions that I hold based on the facts.

I let things roll off my back. ... The last thing you want to do is get in a shouting match with a madman. It doesn't make sense.

I think everybody saw that when you push things to an extreme, and you end up with violent behavior [such as the shootings in Tucson, Arizona], it brings everybody together regardless of their position. All of a sudden everybody calms down and sits there and looks at each other and says, "My God, what have we reaped here?"

I think the dialogue will ramp up for the better as people begin to recognize that our problems are not solved by slogans. They're very difficult problems to solve.

To each extreme there's always a point of view that gives you some clarity on an issue and helps you formulate your own point of view. Even if it's the most minority of all positions, there may be a grain there that you find that you say, "You know, that's not a bad suggestion or idea. I should look at that." It may morph into something completely different, but the raw energy of let's do it right, or let's really look at it again, is something that you can always use and embrace.

Scott Lang has been the mayor of New Bedford since 2006 and is president of the Massachusetts Mayors' Association.

COLLEEN CORONA



You just have to continue forward, knowing that you are doing what you think is best for your community.

Definitely tensions are escalated because of the current economic situation. People are very concerned about their money, and where their money is being spent, and how their money is being spent.

One of the biggest complaints that you get is that you're being secretive, that you're not providing the public with the information that they need. And we try to forestall those comments by providing as much information as possible. So it's our policy to put everything on the Web—everything.

We've discussed at length that we feel that we should be respectful to everyone who comes before the Board of Selectmen, be they an employee of the town, a citizen of the town, or a business in the town. ... And I think that if you treat people with respect, and don't raise your voice, and don't belittle them in any way—or belittle each other in any way—that the community mirrors that behavior to a certain extent.

My personal policy is, I will never raise my voice to anyone who comes before the board. I will never embarrass anyone who comes before the board, to the best of my ability.

If I get a very irate email from somebody who's very upset about something, it's my policy to call them, instantly. ... And, frankly, ninety percent of their anger is generally dissipated when they realize how quickly you've called them back and how willing you are to discuss the problem that they're having. I've had people hang up on me, don't get me wrong. But for the most part ... I really haven't had any major problems.

The atmosphere that's out there now is, if you change your mind, you're a flip-flopper. If you say, "I don't know," you're uninformed. ... So it's discouraging when you get into this field and you realize that everything you do, someone is going to find a fault with. But you just have to continue forward, knowing that you are doing what you think is best for your community.

I think the most important thing is to make sure you have a really good relationship with the [local newspaper reporters and editors], so they feel free to call you and ask you anything.

I know it's going to sound trite, but my thing is, you treat people the way you want to be treated and generally it works out.

Colleen Corona has been a selectman in Easton for nine years and has served as chair of the board for the past eight years. She is a former president of the Massachusetts Selectmen's Association.

LEON GAUMOND



I've been doing a blog for almost twenty years—even before the word blog existed. When the Internet came about, I saw it as a tool.

When I do my town budget, ... I do a little piece and I throw it up on my blog. Everybody in the town should know about this.

There's a guy in town who's been doing his own blog—him and his father—for a number of years. It's sort of the anti-government blog of West Boylston. ... The father ... was known to beat on the selectmen and beat on the town administrator on a regular basis. He passed away, and I ... did a blog post, saying, "We didn't always agree, but I think we had a mutual respect." ... Basically saying he cared enough about his community to shine the light on it. ... And I saw [the son] at an event just a few weeks after the death, and he came up to me and said how his family was so appreciative.

You know, everyone loves to beat on the unknown government. Who knows who the town administrator really is? Who knows who these selectmen are? ... What I did was I ended up using technology in the response as a tool to try to make government more accessible and more human at the same time.

It helps to make the community leaders viewed not only as the eggheads you see on television at the selectmen meetings or in the newspaper talking about this, that or the other thing, but they're also people who have their own families. They have their own lives, they're trying to be part of a community.

I very rarely write things just for my blog. Usually the things that I'm sending out in my blog are things that I'm writing about anyways.

I don't allow for public comment [on my blog]. ... Anybody who wants to send me an email can send me an email, and I can have a conversation with them. But following public conversations and making sure they are correct, not violating anybody's civil rights, or not using four-letter words, I don't have the time for that.

Leon Gaumond has been the town administrator in West Boylston for seven years and previously served in a similar position in East Longmeadow. He is president of the Massachusetts Municipal Management Association.

ROBERT LOGAN



I understand the concept of allowing anonymous comments. The intention behind it is that it would allow for free-flowing discussion, whereas if people had to identify themselves, they would maybe fear some reprisal. ... What instead has happened is that it has allowed these basically nasty people to drive all intelligent discourse away. It's really very unfortunate, because I think that some of these things could have provided a vehicle for, an opportunity for, intelligent discourse on every item that's brought up.

How many people read [the newspaper] online? And then how many of those people actually bother to scroll down and read the comments? And of those who scroll down, how many of them actually take any of the garbage seriously?

I get a kick out of it, because I always know that I got under their skin more than they'll ever get under mine.

If you acknowledge them, if you respond to them, if you try to engage them in debate, you're not going to get any kind of intelligent debate going. They're just going to come back with the name calling and the sarcasm and everything. What you would do is lend them a credibility that they don't have and they don't deserve.

Generate your own positive publicity by working hard and coming up with new ideas and introducing new initiatives and taking what you believe to be the best stand you can on issues and just doing the best job you can. That will more than offset any babbling by the minute fraction of the community.

Everywhere I go ... people are always stopping me, and either asking me about something that they want to know more about, or giving me their opinion of what they think ought to be done. A lot of it is still taking place the good old-fashioned way, face-to-face.

The nature of political office is that you make decisions, and every time you make decisions, anywhere from some small percentage to up to half of the people are going to disagree with you. ... So you're going to have people out there that are going to be talking trash about you.

One of the things that I've seen recently is a drop-off of activity in a lot of these comment sections after the [newspaper] articles. I think the few people that were in there trying to offer something intelligent have basically given up, and I think maybe some of the cranks are starting to realize that it's just them talking to their little circle of disaffected friends.

Robert Logan has been a city councillor in Waltham for twenty years. He is president of the Massachusetts Municipal Councillors' Association.

ROBERT DOLAN



I often compare it to the way they judge diving competitions. They throw out the top score and they throw out the bottom score—the top score being the people in the community who think everything's OK all the time; they're wonderful people, but they don't want to look at anything negative. And then you have the bottom score, which are the people, for whatever reason, no matter what you do, they're going to be against it.

I believe that the people who disagree with me vehemently want our community to do better. ... I don't take that personally, I think that's great.

The more you get out, the more people feel that they can be honest and open with you. I'm an assistant T-ball coach, my kids go to swim team, I go to the local day care with my daughter. So I'm in a lot of settings that are very informal.

The blogs, when not monitored and used appropriately, can be one of the most damaging,

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negative, hurtful things ever invented. ... You should be able to say anything about me that you want, but when teachers are being called out by name on the blog sites, when people are insulted, when Little League All-Star teams are discussed, when what police officers are doing in their free time is discussed, it creates an incredibly negative atmosphere. That is detrimental to the political discourse.

I think in many communities, that is the number one issue that's damaging political discourse.

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I've had discussions with mayors, and this job is harder on their wives and their mothers and their fathers than it is on them. And that also discourages people from running for office. I think you'll find that the number of people running for school committees, selectmen, mayor, is at an all-time low.

A lot of people say, "I like the schools. ... I'd really like to run for school committee, but I'm not going to put myself and my family through that craziness." So where does that leave government?

Good, honest, well-meaning people who have a strong view, they will drive the community debate. When there's a vacuum in the debate, that means the least common denominator is going to fill that vacuum, because they're the loudest.

I try to fill [city boards and commissions] with people I think can be good community leaders in the future.

Robert Dolan has been the mayor of Melrose since 2002. He is a former president of the Massachusetts Mayors' Association.

JOHN PETRIN



The [newspaper feedback sections] that we get here are extremely nasty. They have no credibility. And they are not productive.

Obviously we always have to be listening to critiques and constructive criticism ... but you can't really take away from those types of blogs any true information.

If we knew that these blogs were swaying any portion of the public, then I think we'd have to develop a strategy, but I really don't believe they are.

I think we need to work around the attitude sometimes that people feel more entitled these days than they did maybe when I started my career, and people are more demanding. And sometimes they think that coming across strong is the best way to get things done.

What I try to do is show a little empathy to begin with and get them to converse with you. I'm not afraid to tell someone to get the hell out sometimes. ... I don't mind people yelling at me as much, but sometimes if they're going after my staff, I'll say, "You need to find a proper voice. Just because we're public servants doesn't mean you have the right to mistreat us."

We're not perfect in government. Sometimes they have a legitimate beef. But the one thing I do tell my staff, and I tell everybody, is that the difference between government and business is that the customer is not always right. ... We need to be able to explain to the citizens why we do things, and that what we do for you, we will also do for the next customer who walks through the door.

I always go back to why I'm in the business, it's public service. And I always try to go back to the person who was very appreciative of the service you provided, and there are more of those than there are the people who don't want to understand.

In the old days, when I first started in the business, you had to control the rumor mill at the local coffee shop. So you made sure someone got the information out at the coffee shop quickly. And almost everybody read the newspaper.

People aren't as involved in their local government anymore. They don't even know if they live in a town or a city anymore. ❁

John Petrin has been the town manager in Ashland for the past six years and previously served as the town administrator in Harvard and executive secretary in Pepperell. He is a former president of the Massachusetts Municipal Association.