

Dirty tricks, 2017 edition

Last week we talked about some ways to get your voice heard in the weeks leading up to the Nov. 7 election. We reviewed guidelines for writing letters to the editor, sharing tips on how to improve chances for publication. We suggested that you participate in one of the many candidate forums, such as those offered by the League of Women Voters of North East Westchester. Read the candidate profiles and Q&A's in this and future issues. These are all constructive ways to keep informed on the candidates and the issues.

You might have noticed that our list of civic engagement options did not include removing yard signs promoting a particular candidate or party slate.

This is the time of year when crazy stuff happens, when we see behaviors that seem more typical of rambunctious teenagers on Halloween than well-meaning voters going about the serious business of electing our future leaders. Deep into the campaign season, every side is looking for an edge. We get that. So, we weren't exactly surprised by the report that sometime overnight on Oct. 5, about 60 yard signs went missing from private and public property in South Salem and other hamlets in Lewisboro. Maybe they were gathered by an avid recycler, or someone who has a thing against the color blue. Police are investigating the incident, classified as a larceny. The theft of the 60 signs put someone (or more likely a party committee that uses a lot of blue) out about 300 bucks.

The same thing happened two years ago shortly before the last cycle of Bedford Town Board elections. A Democrat precinct leader called this paper to report that thieves targeted his party's signs. Then, a Republican candidate commented, calling it a big fuss over nothing. The story ran quoting both sides, and voters didn't bat an eye.

On Thursday, we received an anonymous package in the mail. Addressed to the editor, marked "Personal and Confidential," it was a post-marked, plain white envelope. A fake return address handwritten in blue script contained an unreadable street name and a made up, six-figure zip code. Inside the package, a cover note, with no signature or name, blazed with these words in a bold, large computer typeface: "This person is a town board

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member. The story needs to be told!" The note continued, "Please read the accompanying documents."

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Tucked underneath was a set of court documents attesting to an ongoing personal legal matter involving the above-mentioned elected official, a person who is well known in one of the communities we cover — and who is seeking re-election in three and a half weeks. Along with the court document was a color reprint of the campaign mailer from the official's party slate.

Put aside, for now, the question of whether this court case is material to the candidate's fitness for office. Certainly the sender is convinced we now have a bombshell on our hands that could blow this race wide open.

We wonder, is this an effective influencing tactic? Could it cause more damage than, say, taking 60 signs out of circulation? The "dirty laundry" package begs this question, too: If this legal difficulty is so potentially damaging, why haven't opponents raised it?

Right — there's that small issue of owning up to the role of attacker, putting your name on it as the sponsor and provocateur. That's a tall task for some in politics (although clearly not for our president, who excels at it).

We recall receiving anonymous robocalls, at dinnertime, urging voters to defeat the proposed Bedford Central School District's annual budget in May 2016, the one that famously broke the tax cap. The script also contained some nasty comments about the BCSD administration. No identifiable organization or person could be connected to the calling campaign, by design. So, there was no way to engage in dialogue with its backers to discuss the substance of the serious issues at hand. As we all know, the budget failed.

Letters to the editor signed with fake names — a ruse that we have, on occasion, failed to recognize — present another form of attack waged under a smokescreen. We have put new controls in place to stop that practice from recurring.

Taking down an opponent is a time-honored tradition in politics. Unfortunately, so is cowardice, in all of its ugly forms.