

## **Special Report on Election 2006**

On May 30, 2006, the Republican Club of Harding hosted a meet the candidates night at George Chorba Hall at the First Presbyterian Church of New Vernon. Candidates present were Republicans Marshall Bartlett, Mary Prendergast and Ned Ward and Democrat Michael Meade. There is a Republican primary election on June 6<sup>th</sup> to choose two candidates for the two seats opening on the Township Committee. Mary Prendergast is up for reelection and Epsy Farrell will not be running for reelection creating the second opening. The results of the election will be known before the publication of this report.

Each candidate spoke in turn for several minutes to begin the meeting. Jim Barry, the moderator, then collected questions from the audience which he edited and addressed to the various candidates. At times other candidates and members of the audience responded to the answers given. Many topics were addressed including, Glen Alpin, the condition of the Municipal building, the proposed Library, development, affordability of housing, town bureaucracy, the quality and cost of the Harding School.

The following summaries by candidate, attempts to capture their positions on the issues raised in the meeting and incorporates their opening statements as well as responses to questions.

### **Marshall Bartlett**

Mr. Bartlett said he was running primarily on the strength of his record of accomplishment on the Planning Board. He cited the new five acre zoning and lot size averaging ordinances for rural residential zones that he felt would help keep Harding from 'looking like Short Hills.' He went on to say that "cluster zoning" should be explored (and is currently being considered for 129 acres near Wightman Farms). According to Bartlett cluster zoning could provide middle income housing and streetscape variety. On Glen Alpin, he said he was in favor of the initial purchase and fixing the roof to prevent further deterioration, but that he favored a "go slow approach." Bartlett said he was in favor of the new Library, that he expected to work on revising the Master Plan as is required every six years. He also said he wanted to work on gaining better access to parking for NJ Transit trains for Harding residents.

### **Mary Prendergast**

Ms Prendergast said her number one priority was improving customer service at Town hall so that visitors felt welcome and got the information they needed in an efficient and pleasant way. She also said she was in favor of rehabilitation of the Municipal Building (some of which is already completed or underway). On Glen Alpin, she cited the recent May 17<sup>th</sup> meeting at which the Mayor presented financial projections for Glen Alpin under several scenarios showing that the project could be "tax neutral." She advocated moving fast to rehabilitate the building and begin renting the facility for special events such as weddings and leasing office space. Ms. Prendergast said that the Township had received many inquiries from people wanting to use the facilities and she felt the

projections were conservative. In response to suggestions that the Township should not be in the catering business, Ms Prendergast cited a successful Mountain Lakes project in Princeton Township, where a not-for-profit manages the commercial uses of the facility.

### **Michael Meade**

Mr. Meade said that has been attending Township meetings for the last six months and was disappointed that there were almost no Township residents at the meetings. He said he was encouraged however by the turnout for this meeting. He said that win, lose or draw, he wanted to get involved in the election to get people involved in the issues facing the Township and that if people wanted to be critical they should get involved. On Glen Alpin, Mr. Meade said he was in favor of the purchase but not the rehabilitation. He questioned who in the Township would really benefit from the rehabilitation and expressed concern that the Township could incur liability from any accidents that stemmed from the proposed catering business as well as other ‘hidden costs’ of administration and management. Rather than spend money on Glen Alpin, Mr. Mead wanted to see the Municipal Building fixed. He sited problems with the heating as well as general lack of maintenance of the building and grounds. He also felt that downtown New Vernon’s infrastructure need to be improved, particularly better access to clean drinking water and water for fire fighting. He mentioned his own experience and difficulty in getting quality water for his home because of the proximity of wells to septic systems. He said the town should look into bring a water main to the downtown are and that such a water source could obviate the need for the \$300,000 cistern requested by the school and the Fire department.

Mr. Meade maintained that the Township’s policy of open space acquisitions had helped push up the price of property in Harding making the Township unaffordable for many children of residents. When asked what the Township could do address this condition, Mr. Meade said he would be in favor of spot zoning to provide for middle income housing.

### **Ned Ward**

Mr. Ward stressed his 40 plus years as a business owner in town and his skills and appreciation for running a fiscally conservative operation. He pointed out that Township debt had grown from \$7.286 million at December 2003 to \$13.732 million recently (excluding school debt) which he felt was worrisome. On Glen Alpin, he said he was 100% against the Township getting involved. He said he thought the financial projections were not realistic and that in his experience, rehabilitation projects always came in significantly over budget. He was critical of the Township’s participation in the so called Collins House and property also known as the “Gateway” at James Street and Harter Road. He noted that of the 15 acres acquired, 13 acres were wetland and therefore could not be developed anyway. Mr. Ward was also critical of the condition of the Municipal building and questioned the \$80,000 planned for window replacement and the piles of gravel in the parking lot. He was also critical of the permitting and building inspection process in town, which he said takes too long and is cumbersome and

confusing. Mr. Ward came out strongly for accessory residences to be used as rentals to address the affordability of housing. Marshall Bartlett noted that the Township currently allows accessory residences on properties greater than six acres or where the owner agrees to keep a historic structure. Mr. Ward favored tax incentives for historical preservation, citing such a tax break as a motivation for his rehabilitation of the Harris House where his real estate business is located. Mr. Ward, responding to prior questions regarding the potential for conflicts between Township Committee duties and his real estate business, said that he was not and never had been involved in real estate development projects.

### **Harding Township School**

All the candidates were in agreement that the Harding School was doing a good or great job educating children. There was some disagreement as to the overall cost of education per pupil and that amount relative to private school costs, when Ned Ward suggested that for what the Town is paying (\$15,000 per student by his estimate) every child could go to the Peck School. Lou Lanzerotti who was in the audience and is the Township Committee member liaison to the School commented that the cost of private school could be double what it currently cost Harding tax payers and that in the past, the School had analyzed merging with Madison or Mendham for example and that taxes would have increased under those scenarios according to the analysis.

### **Public Meetings**

As was explained at the meeting, the meeting was held at the Presbyterian Church because under the Township's insurance policy (which was acquired in coordination with other Morris County municipalities as a cost savings measure), any public group holding a meeting at Kirby Hall must have a certificate of insurance. There seemed to be agreement among the candidates and the audience that the insurance cost savings should be weighed against the benefits of using the Township municipal building for public meetings.