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Larchmont Board blocks public statement by Village resident

Volunteers launch petition calling for referendum on Fire Chief

By Mimi Koren

What started as a quiet Larchmont Village Board meeting on June 4 ended with a bang, when the Board barred a resident from speaking.

The status of the Fire Department was not on the agenda, but at the end of the meeting, Mayor Liz Feld chose to comment on it anyway, saying, "Every single call for service continues to be answered as it always has." She further alleged, "There's no list available of current members and their equipment, except their pagers. [We're] not going to know what they walk out the door with" when they leave the Fire Department on or after June 16, as they have said they would.

Former Trustee Ned Benton, a volunteer firefighter and plaintiff in the volunteers' lawsuit against the Village, tried to respond. Rising to the mike,

he charged, "You claimed you would not talk about the Fire Chief." Before he could go any farther, the mayor promptly ended the meeting. Benton continued to speak, but was shouted down by the mayor and Trustee Jim Millstein, who sought to dismiss him with the words, "Ned, you can talk to the press." The two, joined by Trustee Richard Ward, then walked out, and live television coverage ended. Trustees Anne McAndrews and Marlene Kolbert remained at the desk briefly, speaking in quieter tones to Benton, but shortly they too got up and left.

Taking Millstein's advice, Benton proceeded to talk to this newspaper. He complained about the mayor's insistence that "everything is just fine [in the Fire Department], when

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obviously it's not....To fight a fire it takes about 12 people." Since the Board's appointment of a paid Fire Chief on May 16, he continued, the average number of volunteers responding to an emergency call has dropped from 7.3 to 3.8. "Larchmont does not produce the number of people it needs to fight a fire... [The Board] is not dealing with the reality the Village is facing."

Before shutting down the meeting, the mayor had asserted that it was "irresponsible...of anyone to scare residents simply to promote their own agenda." She was apparently referring to efforts by volunteer firefighters and their supporters to gather names on a petition. "We are not scaring anyone," countered Ettore Viazzo, another volunteer, explaining that the petition would give the electorate a chance to vote on the Board's decision to hire a Fire Chief, counter to tradition - and law, as volunteers charge in their lawsuit. "The people I talked to ... signed willingly... they thought it was fair to be able to have a say," Viazzo said. As of Tuesday night, Benton reported, 414 residents had signed, almost 11 percent of registered voters. Village law states that if 20 percent of voters (800 people) sign the petition within 30 days (June 16), the issue must go to referendum.

Benton further said that in rising to speak, he had wanted to respond to

the mayor's allegation that volunteers might steal Village equipment. "Every year we have to bring our gear to a meeting where it is inventoried by the Deputy Chief and documented," he said. That inventory has been posted on the internet at lfdny.com, so it would be easy to ascertain what equipment a departing volunteer should return.

Reached subsequently, one Village resident labeled the Board's actions "outrageous." Another, Gerry Beitel, a frequent speaker at board meetings, accused the Board of "abuse of the democratic process." (Beitel is stepfather to another plaintiff in the lawsuit.) In irate tones, he slammed the mayor for sending out letters "on our dollar" explaining her position, "but if anyone else sends out anything, she labels it wrong....She can present whatever she wants over the airwaves, but as soon as an opinion from a resident different from hers is going to be offered, she gavel the meeting closed....It's preposterous!"

Meanwhile, the volunteers have petitioned in State Supreme Court for an injunction barring the Board-appointed Fire Chief from serving in that capacity. The Village was due to submit papers to the Court on Wednesday, and the volunteers had until Friday, June 8, to respond. Judge Orazio Bellantoni could issue a decision regarding the injunction in the coming week.