

# Conflict in the county

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## Discord over finances; some say it's politics

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The county delegation on Friday approved the final piece of paperwork needed for the state to set tax rates for Sullivan County.

But the conflict that has dogged the budget process for months remained until the end, with  **Newport** Rep. Peter Franklin, D-Newport, clashing with board of commissioners chairman Don Clarke during a board meeting prior to the delegation vote.

The scene was indicative of a growing rift between the county delegation and county commissioners that New Hampshire House candidates said they would make a priority to mend next year.

"When we're at loggerheads, not much gets done," said Franklin, who is vying for one of three District 2 House seats.

During Friday's delegation meeting, Franklin joined Rep. Larry Converse, D-Claremont, who is seeking one of five District 4 House seats, in voting against the approval of minutes from the meeting two weeks ago in which the delegation ratified a revised MS-42 budget form.

The approval, which passed 7-2, was part of the packet of forms the state Department of Revenue Administration requires to set county tax rates. The DRA must have completed paperwork from the county, municipalities and schools before it will set rates for any of those entities.

Despite the potential to hold up those rates, Converse and Franklin said they voted against approving the minutes because they still had questions about the MS-42 form the county filed with the DRA.

At the DRA's behest, county accountants in late September revised the fiscal blueprint the delegation originally approved in July to remove \$1.2 million in transfers between county agencies that had been listed as revenues.

"I don't think we had a good explanation of why the MS-42 was not right," Converse said Friday. "There was definitely something wrong with the MS-42 if we had to move all those figures around."

Franklin raised similar concerns earlier in the morning at the county commissioners meeting, when the commissioners held an exit interview for fiscal 2005-2006 with county auditor Sheryl Burke of the Nashua-based firm Melanson Heath & Co.

After the interview, during which Burke confirmed that county finances were in order, and in fairly good shape with a more than \$300,000 fund balance, the commissioners opened the meeting for questions from the county delegates.

Franklin dominated that portion of the meeting, posing a series of detailed questions, such as asking auditors to reconcile a line item from a draft May monthly report with the same line item in the final version of the report.

Franklin's questioning was cut short several times by Clarke's gavel. The chairman chided Franklin for repeating material covered in other meetings and for what he said were attacks on Burke's capabilities.

"We're here to answer questions," Clarke said. "I'm not going to subject these people to you questioning their professional opinion."

"She has gone through this and gone through this," he added. "And if you don't like the answer you get, you ask again."

Clarke also clashed with Franklin over where the representative would ask his question. Franklin said it was his understanding that the auditor would be on hand at the delegation meeting, but Clarke said that since Burke was hired by the commissioners, her presence there would be inappropriate.

"The auditor works for the commissioners," he said. "You're overstepping your authority and trying to go around us."

Such confusion over jurisdictional boundaries, Clarke said in a separate interview, may be at the crux of the distrust and animosity that has crept into the relationship between the commissioners and delegates over the past two years.

"The number one priority is to improve that relationship and that has to start with both the commissioners and delegation understanding what their role is," he said. "Where do the responsibilities and authority of the commissioners stop and where does the delegation's responsibility and authority begin?"

In general, Clarke said the delegation's role is limited to oversight and approval of a county budget while the commissioners are responsible for policy making and administration of the county's day-to-day affairs.

Several delegates, including Beverly Rodeschin, R-Newport, and Joe Osgood, R-Claremont, as well as House hopefuls Henry Rodeschin and Gordon Flint, both

Republicans, said that the friction between the commissioners and delegates came from several of their colleagues crossing those lines.

"We approve a budget, we give them appropriations and the commissioners are those that are to make sure those funds are spent correctly and properly," said Beverly Rodeschin, who is running for a District 2 House seat. "We do not micromanage, that's not in our purview. In my humble opinion, some of my present delegation members are doing that."

Such interference in county affairs might be more understandable if Sullivan County were in dire straits, Rep. Joe Osgood, R-Claremont, said. But he said that is not the case.

"In my estimation, if things are going smoothly, our oversight should be an easy job," said Osgood, who is seeking a District 4 House seat. "Other than the friction being caused by a couple of the delegates, things are going smoothly. The county home is running in the black."

But Democratic candidate for commissioner Jeff Barrette of Claremont said that the commissioners also are at fault. While the delegation may have no real authority over county policy, they should be kept adequately abreast of important decisions, he said.

"I think that if the commissioners as a collective group have an opinion that differs from the delegation and it is in the end the decision of the commissioners, they need to be proactive in explaining why they have the feelings they have," Barrette said.

Rep. Tom Donovan, D-Claremont, agreed, adding that the commissioners' failure to take those measures before bringing Genesis in to manage the county nursing home is what caused friction in the first place.

"This whole thing began when Genesis came on board and we were not party to it," said Donovan, who is running for a District 4 seat. "That was the beginning of the breakdown of communication."

From there, things only got worse, said Franklin, with information becoming harder and harder to obtain from the county. He said answering all of his financial questions would be a first step toward bringing the delegation and board of commissioners closer together.

Democrat Sue Gottling of Sunapee, who is vying for the town's one House seat, suggested that the answer might be making budget forms clearer.

"Clarity is absolutely essential," she said. "Then people can have a discussion."

But Gottling's opponent, Republican Charles Balyeat of Sunapee, said that it is likely more than confusion that is driving the two boards apart.

"I think it's a lot of personalities," Balyeat said.

There may be some truth to that, said delegation chairman and state Rep. John Cloutier, D-Claremont. With important issues such as the management of the county nursing home on the table, he said strong feelings sometimes trump civility at meetings.

"It's too bad it's become personally acrimonious," Cloutier said.

That element needs to be replaced with concrete ideas, county commissioner candidate Robert Beaudry of Charlestown said.

"Bring me something else that has been tested and works and I certainly will lend my ear to it," he said. "But just telling me you don't want them (Genesis) and not why you don't want them (is not helpful)."

District 4 candidate Ellen Nielsen, a Democrat from Claremont, pointed the finger at the inability to simply get along.

"Part of the problem is partisan politics," Nielsen said. "It's tempting to say that we should just elect Democrats, but the reality is that at the county level, intensely partisan politics is a luxury that Sullivan County cannot afford. Despite their different opinions about the merits of privatization of public services, the commissioners and the delegation need to learn to work together in a bipartisan way to provide excellent services without wasting tax dollars. I think the county might save money in the long run by hiring a neutral outside facilitator/mediator who is skilled at working with organizations in conflict."

In the short term, Cloutier said that the solution to the commissioners-delegation rift lies with the voters, who in November will have the opportunity to elect members of both entities.

But whoever ends up winning those contests, Cloutier said that the election will not end conflict between the two boards. It will be essential for delegates and commissioners to sit down in January, air their grievances, set some ground rules and find a way to work together in the future, he said.

"It's two different branches of government and like all branches of government, you're not going to always see eye-to-eye. That's inevitable," he said.