Is library fence a line in the sand?

Detractors blast new ‘spite fence’ adjacent to Tiverton dog park

BY RUTH RASMUSSEN
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An already frayed relationship between the Tiverton Library Board of Trustees and supporters of the Raymond E. Jones Memorial Dog Park took a turn for the worse last week after the library installed a new fence along the dog park’s border, adjacent to the library’s parking lot.

The fence, which has been on the library’s list of “to do” projects for more than a year, is intended to clearly show the dog park’s boundaries and its entrance point, and to encourage visitors to use parking spaces on the nearby town recreation property on Roosevelt Avenue, rather than library property, when using the park.

But not all appreciate it, and in online discussions have called it “spite fence,” a vindictive act, and more dramatically, “the Mason/Dixon line of Tiverton public property.”

In addressing the pushback, library director Catherine Damiani said David Paul, co-chairman of the dog park advisory committee, made a commitment to the library trustees in the spring of 2022 to build the fence.

Eventually, according to Damiani, the library trustees decided to handle the project themselves. After soliciting bids, they hired a contractor to build the fence at a cost of $3,490, using funds from an account made up of contributions from the Friends of Tiverton Libraries, general donations, and fee income. She said the trustees updated the dog park’s representatives and town officials on their plans throughout the process.

But in correspondence with the Tiverton Town Council earlier this fall, and in a recent interview, Paul acknowledged discussing installation of the fence with Carol Herrmann, chairman of the library’s board of trustees, but denied making any promises to her.

“I never said ‘We will put up a fence,’” he said. “It is something we would look into, but we didn’t know how that was going to affect access and maintenance.”

Paul said he and his fellow board members have been waiting to hear about a suggested date for a meeting with town officials and the library’s representatives regarding creation of an easement for the purpose of using library property (technically town-owned property) to access the dog park.

“The next thing I know, they’re putting a fence up.”

While Paul blames poor communication between his committee, the library and town leaders for ongoing tension, he said the library’s handling of the fence installation is unacceptable.

“What right does the library have to restrict access from taxpayer-funded land to taxpayer-funded land?”

While he believes the library’s 70-plus parking spaces are more than adequate for everyone, he said he often urges dog park visitors to avoid the lot and use the dog park’s designated parking spaces on Roosevelt Ave. Some have refused, telling him, “I’m a resident, I pay taxes, and I’ll park here if I want.”

Paul and others on his committee said the fence creates a host of problems, including the elimination of a staging area for deliveries of materials such as wood chips and stone, as well as the loss of a convenient access point for emergency vehicles. Committee members who worry about safety issues for individuals and their dogs crossing Roosevelt Ave., say the town needs to install a speed bump for better protection of pedestrians on that stretch of road.

Paul believes the best solution is improved communications. “There are far more important things to deal with than a petty fence issue,” he said. “I don’t want to see the library get bashed. The concept of what a library is and what they do over there is fantastic. But it all comes down to lack of communication in this town.”

Damiani noted that information related to the controversy is posted on the library’s website at https://tivertonlibrary.org/recent-media-inquiry/.

Expressing concerns about negative comments on online forums directed towards library staff, she said, “Those making such comments should understand that, other than myself, the library staff have never been involved in this project or process. Any questions or concerns should be made directly to me or the Library Board of Trustees via email, phone, or in-person contact.”

Residents should be alerted when a continuance is expected, they told zoning board

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A recent Tiverton Zoning Board meeting at the high school was noteworthy for both its brevity — it lasted less than 30 minutes — and for the anger expressed by some in the audience who said they’d wasted their time coming in the first place due to a lack of communication from the board.

Several audience members said they would not have attended had they known in advance that an item of interest to them would not be heard that evening. They had expected to hear deliberations on Tiverton resident Alfred Sousa’s intention to build a single-family home on a substandard lot on Cranford Road. His proposal, which had originally been on the board’s October agenda, was continued to the recent meeting because the original submission contained incorrect paperwork. Unbeknownst to many of those who attended, there was a request in place to continue it again prior to the meeting.

At the start of the meeting, zoning board chairwoman Lisa Gescheidt asked for a motion to approve the second continuance, since Sousa’s attorney was not present and the town’s building official was absent due to illness. The motion passed by a vote of 4-1, with council member George Alzaibak opposed.

In explaining his vote, Alzaibak said that although the zoning department received Sousa’s request for a continuance at 1 p.m. that day, abutters were unaware of it until they heard about it that evening when they arrived at the high school. Some, he said, had made special arrangements to be there.

“I’ve got a problem with the way we handle our applications. We put people on the moon, but somehow we cannot notify the abutters before they get baby sitters and skip sporting events to sit here, while the petitioner is at home watching the TV.”

He recommended that the town’s initial notification to abutters include a request for contact information so similar scenarios could be avoided in the future.

An audience member who abuts Sousa’s property angrily confirmed Alzaibak’s point of view.

“I take time out of work to do this, so it’s nonsense,” he said. “I live right across from this mess they want to put up, so you guys need to get it together.”

The discussion gradually evolved into a shouting match as audience members demanded the board notify them early in the day when a cancellation is likely, while Gescheidt tried to explain that the rules make that impossible.

“I can’t say the meeting will be cancelled until we all vote on it,” she said, her voice rising in frustration.

Town solicitor Mike Marcello, acknowledging attendees’ criticism, said the town will look into ways to get appropriate messaging to abutters in the future, when needed, perhaps via the town website.

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