



Seeing red

Civility and government revenue are both in short supply in Holbrook

BY ROBERT PREER

HOLBROOK When first-term Holbrook Selectman Katherine Connolly and her husband started their car on Valentine’s Day, they knew something was wrong. They got out to discover their two front tires had been punctured.

“I called the police and the officer came out and just shook his head,” Connolly says. As she tells it, the officer said finding the perpetrator was unlikely for a number of reasons: There were no footprints, dusting for fingerprints was impossible, and—above all—there were just too many potential suspects.

That’s because Connolly has had one of the leading roles in a string of political battles that has shaken local government in Holbrook over the past year. Charges of mismanagement, underhandedness, and favoritism in the granting of property-tax abatements and building permits have been set against the backdrop of a dismal and disorganized fiscal situation.

At board meetings (some of them preserved on videotape), bickering sometimes turns into shouting, involving both officials and audience members. This is not a recent development: State Rep. Ronald Mariano, a Quincy Democrat whose district includes Holbrook, remembers a stormy selectmen’s meeting years ago, when a member left the room briefly then returned to find that her fellow board members had locked her out. But more recently, officials and activists have called the police on each other, filed complaints with town boards, and sent accusatory letters to the state’s attorney general, inspector general, and ethics commission, as well as to the Norfolk district attorney.

Connolly and her allies accuse the assessors of favoritism in granting abatements, and they say building inspector Daniel Moriarty overlooks vio-

lations of the well-connected, a charge he strenuously denies. Robert Powilatis, chairman of the assessors since 2005, recently accused Connolly of stealing files from the building inspector’s office. Last year, the sniping spilled out of Town Hall onto the Internet, with the launching of rival Web sites—betterholbrook.blogspot.com and thevoiceof-holbrook.blogstream.com—that trade in anonymous attacks.

The escalation of the conflict from words to action—the apparent puncturing of Connolly’s tires—seems not to have had a sobering effect. Connolly claims that shortly after the incident, a Town Hall secretary told her that she had overheard Moriarty say that Connolly could expect worse if she kept things up. Asked about the charge, Moriarty said, “I don’t know why she [Connolly] would say something like that. She must be getting paranoid.”

Powilatis, a frequent target of Connolly’s, makes no attempt to disguise his loathing. An elected member of the housing authority and board of assessors, as well as a former selectman and former town administrator, Powilatis calls Connolly and her allies “terrorists.” He says, “They’re terrorizing town officials. They’re wasting people’s time chasing down things that have no merit.” Of the tire incident, he quipped, “She got a taste of her own medicine when someone flattened her tires. Everyone at Town Hall said it couldn’t happen to a nicer person. Payback’s a bitch.”

IF ADVERSITY FEEDS conflict, then Holbrook’s squabbling should be no surprise. Geography has been especially unkind to the undersized town, and the highway network south of Boston was

constructed such that downtown Holbrook is at least three miles from the area's major roads (Routes 24, 128, and 3). Thus, the highway-oriented businesses that have lifted the fortunes of its neighbors—Braintree, Randolph, Weymouth, Avon, and Brockton—have bypassed Holbrook. The town's commercial and industrial base consists mostly of small stores, a few office buildings, and home-based businesses. And efforts to attract new businesses have been hampered by a state moratorium on sewer hook-ups, imposed in 2005 because of the town's leaky system, which is now undergoing repairs.

The town's small population is another problem. Between 1990 and 2000, Holbrook's population fell 2.3 percent, from 11,041 to 10,785, according to the US census. But during this same period, the population between the ages of 15 and 19 dropped 14 percent, while 65- to 74-year-olds increased by 13 percent and the 75- to 80-year-old population went up 40 percent. These demographic changes have spelled trouble for Holbrook's schools, especially the high school, which in recent years has had graduating classes of between 40 and 60. With such a small student base, sports programs and other extracurricular activities suffer. Parents often turn to private and parochial schools, which accelerates the downward spiral for the public system.

"Holbrook is a great town," says James Boudreau, who was Holbrook's town administrator for three and a half years in the 1990s and is now Norwell's town manager.

"But they are facing a lot of the problems

unique, have been severe. The state tax cap limits a municipality's overall property tax increase to 2.5 percent a year. With certain fixed costs—health insurance, pensions, energy—often rising faster than 2½ percent, the town finds itself increasingly squeezed. Proposition 2½ overrides have been a tough sell in the town, which has passed only two in its history. (The last, in 2003, was for \$382,000 dedicated to "school, police, fire, and library" expenses.) And while the law does allow the tax levy to go up more than 2½ percent if there is new growth, Holbrook, has seen very little of that, either residential or business.

And then there is perhaps the most troubling chapter

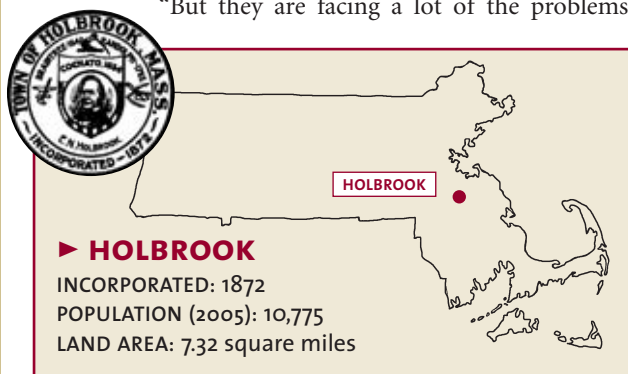
The town became known for a toxic-waste site.

in the town's recent history: Baird & McGuire. In the early 1980s, hazardous waste from the Baird & McGuire chemical plant on South Street was found to have been dumped into a lagoon 500 feet from the Cochato River, which feeds a reservoir that once supplied the town's water. Baird & McGuire became known as one of the most dangerous hazardous waste sites in the Northeast (the US Environmental Protection Agency once ranked it the 14th worst nationwide), a stigma the town bore for many years. The site became a federal Superfund project, and the EPA has spent over \$133 million cleaning it. The soil and sediment work was finished in 1997, but the treatment and monitoring of groundwater is to continue indefinitely.

During the same year that the main Superfund work was finished, the town welcomed the arrival of the Old Colony Railroad (the Randolph/Holbrook commuter station is on the border of the two towns), which finally boosted home values and sparked some new home construction. But the trains, so far, have not brought enough new businesses to make an appreciable difference in property-tax revenue.

In 2002, a Braintree developer proposed converting a former dairy farm between the train station and the town center into a \$42 million mixed-use housing-shopping center, potentially the biggest development ever in Holbrook. The project's design has been changed several times, though, and town officials fear its emphasis is shifting more to housing and less to what the town hoped would be revenue-generating retail. Worried that the project could overwhelm town services, some town officials got behind a petition drive earlier this year to seize the property by eminent domain.

CONNOLLY, 52, WHO works as an administrative assistant for the Boston law firm Foley Hoag, moved to Holbrook



smaller towns face. They have very little land available for new growth, so they are limited very much by Proposition 2½. I don't care where you are, when you have to tell people 'no' a lot, it causes conflict."

State Sen. Michael Morrissey, a Quincy Democrat who has represented Holbrook for the past 14 years, agrees. "It is a community that is fiscally challenged," he says. "It's not like they can cut very much. They don't have a large public works department. Town Hall is small. You have to have some semblance of police, fire, and schools."

Holbrook's struggles with Proposition 2½, while not

in 2003. She and her husband, John Nicholson, live in an older house on Union Street, also known as Route 139, next to a small strip mall. Selectman Richard McGaughey, 68, a lifelong Holbrook resident whose brother was a selectman for many years, got to know Connolly when she started to attend town meetings, and he was impressed with her grasp of issues. When a seat on the Board of Selectmen opened up last spring, McGaughey and an ally on the board, Robert Austin, recruited Connolly to run. She finished second in a five-way race for two seats, with first place going to an incumbent.

McGaughey, who has been at odds with Connolly almost ever since she was sworn in, appreciates the irony. "I worked very hard to get her elected," he sighs. "Sometimes God's greatest gift is unanswered prayers."

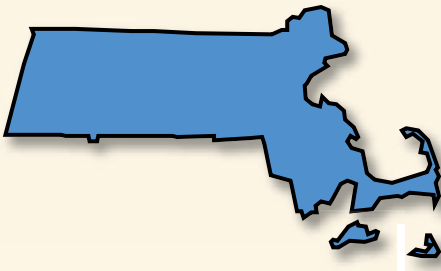
Connolly is now at the center of a small but dedicated group of activists who are at odds with town government. They gathered at Connolly's home one recent Sunday afternoon to meet with this reporter, but almost immediately after everyone arrived, a police officer knocked on the door. Someone had seen the vehicles parked on the side of Route 139 and called to complain. After conferring briefly with Connolly, the officer said the cars were all right where they were.

The activists recount experiences that follow a common pattern: An initial encounter with a town department goes badly. The dispute festers or escalates, and displeasure broadens from one department to town government as a whole.

For example, Carol Ann Murphy was upset when a new subdivision was built near her home and drainage systems in the area malfunctioned, flooding her street. She says that Town Hall was no help. Dale and Jean Lewis were disturbed when new houses were built next to theirs, and a fence and other structures seemed to encroach on their property. Again, they say they got no satisfaction from town officials. Connolly has been at odds with the owner of the NAPA Auto Parts next to her house, after an expansion of the automotive store got close to her lot line and the town approved the work. She maintains that the store addition is closer to her property line than the 20 feet allowed under town bylaw; building inspector Moriarty says the distance is actually 21 feet, according to his reading of property records. The group has been focused of late on assessments, and members have pored over town records looking for irregularities on individual properties, especially those owned by town officials or other prominent residents.

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“We have uncovered properties that are not being taxed, that are undertaxed, that are not even on the tax rolls,” Connolly said.

Powilatis responds that the activists are misreading property cards or seeing something sinister in honest mistakes. “They’ll question an assessment, and we’ll look at it, and it turns out it’s landlocked, or they’ll think it’s 1.52 acres and it’s really .52 acres,” he says. Connolly and her allies say the discrepancies are more serious and often appear to favor those who have some connection to town officials, either through friendships or family.

Building Inspector Moriarty says he has tried to supply his critics with the information they request and has exercised his best judgment on the disputes. “We don’t have any conflicts in the building department,” he says. He says he enforces the town bylaws and building codes without favoritism. (Despite the many complaints to state and local agencies by both sides in Holbrook’s internal strife, there have been no official criminal or ethics charges filed against any of the parties.)

Much of the conflict between veteran officials and Connolly’s group has had a townies-vs.-newcomers flavor. Pat Greely, 43, who moved to town eight years ago and is

aligned with Connolly, says she hasn’t exactly felt welcomed by the old-timers. “When you meet someone,” she says, “they don’t ask your name or what street you live on. They ask how long you’ve lived here.”

Says Dale Lewis, 44, “If you haven’t lived here all your life, they don’t want you here.”

McGaughey, a retired news store owner whose brother owned the *Holbrook Sun* for many years, sees things differently.

“They make you out to be a thief,” McGaughey says of the critics’ charges of favoritism. “They make you out to

Uncollected taxes and other bills total \$2.9 million.

be in cahoots with people. The problem is they don’t know as many people as I do. I’ve been around and know a lot of people.”

HOLBROOK TREASURER ROBERT McKenna sits behind his desk in Holbrook Town Hall one recent afternoon, partially obscured by stacks of papers and folders piled around him.



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A spool of paper from a desk calculator has spilled off his desk and lies tangled on the floor. On the wall are three calendars—two for 2006 and another for 2004.

“I haven’t had a chance to rearrange the things in the office,” says McKenna, who ran his own accounting business before being elected to the town job in April 2006. “I just came in and went to work. I am trying to get the office operating more efficiently. It’s not something that is going to happen overnight.”

McKenna says the biggest problem is the town’s failure to keep up with computer technology. “We do everything by hand. A bill comes in and we process it. I just came back from the bank, making deposits. We would hope to do more of these things online.”

With more automation, McKenna’s clerks would have more time to pursue long-range concerns, he believes. At the top of his list is uncollected taxes. Last year, the state estimated that Holbrook had around \$2 million in tax liens. According to town officials, uncollected taxes and other bills now total about \$2.9 million.

Lisa Juskiewicz, director of the state Department of Revenue’s Data Bank, calls the \$2 million in liens from last year “a high number” and adds that uncollected bills of \$2.9 million for a town of Holbrook’s size would be “excessive.” As of mid March, she could not confirm the \$2.9 million figure, however, because Holbrook officials had not yet submitted their balance sheets for the previous fiscal year. But DOR reports indicate that Holbrook had the worst record of any community in the state in predicting revenue for fiscal 2006. Receipts were 54 percent less than what was anticipated, while the statewide average was 14 percent more.

McKenna attributes the problems to longstanding practices in the office. “In the past, they didn’t have time or they didn’t pursue it,” McKenna says of the uncollected bills. This is changing, he maintains. Last year Holbrook’s town meeting authorized officials to impose a 14 percent surcharge on delinquent water bills and to shut off users who don’t pay. The town will refuse to issue licenses to businesses that are not paid up in their taxes, officials say.

Holbrook also has had trouble balancing its books. Half-way through the current fiscal year, town officials reported the town was running a \$700,000 deficit. But Town Administrator Michael Yunits says there are various accounts with surpluses and the gap can be closed without cuts by holding a town meeting this spring to re-allocate the money.

Yunits, 48, was well-known in town before he was appointed town administrator in 2005. He had been chairman of the Holbrook School Committee, brother of former Brockton Mayor John Yunits Jr., and an executive in his family’s prominent Holbrook engineering firm.

Looking out on Holbrook’s small downtown from his Town Hall window one recent afternoon, Yunits saw some

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positive signs. A small office building is under construction on Route 37. Down the road a new public safety building is running smoothly. The town is in talks with neighboring Avon about saving money by sharing employees and equipment.

"I wouldn't say there won't be cuts," he says of the budget for the next fiscal year, "but I'm encouraged."

Yunits is decidedly in the camp of the traditional Holbrook establishment and has been a sometime target of Connolly and her allies. "The thing that concerns me are the conspiracy theories," he says. "These people have to learn that you make a point, and if someone doesn't agree with you, you move on."

Actually none of the factions appear ready to let bygones be bygones. Connolly and her allies continue to comb through property cards of the board of assessors and probe the details of the town's finances. Meanwhile, Connolly could be a target when her three-year term as selectman is up in 2009. (It could be sooner than that if a provision establishing recall elections, proposed by Powilatis, was approved at this spring's town meeting, which was held after press time.)

MCKENNA IS GUARDED in his outlook for the town budget in the next fiscal year. He says health insurance costs have spiked up, and town employees will be looking for raises when contracts expire at the end of June. "Things are going to be tight," he says.

In its quest for revenue, Holbrook appears willing to go where some of its neighbors have avoided. Officials have offered a town-owned former industrial property near the rail line to a private developer for use as a trash transfer station.

Trucks would arrive with trash, which would be transferred to rail cars and shipped out of state by rail. The town could make millions from the deal and also get its trash picked up for free. In neighboring Brockton and Abington, fierce opposition from residents blocked plans for similar facilities, but in Holbrook, there has been no great outcry, even though the site is ominously close to the Baird & McGuire property. Holbrook's town meeting approved the plans last year, but the project still requires numerous state and local approvals and could face opposition in neighboring Randolph, where many of the trucks would travel.

Yunits and McGaughey say the transfer station would actually be good for the environment, because the company that builds it would clean up existing on-site pollution, while trash processed at the facility is no threat since it will be in containers all the time. And money is important, they say. "It's one of the few things from a financial standpoint that's promising," McGaughey says. **CW**