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By Deidre Consolati

LEE

NOW THAT the dust has settled on Veolia Water North America's unsuccessful plan to privatize Lee's water and sewer systems, let's take a stroll through a reconfigured landscape.

Gone from the town is Veolia's corps of crisp-shirted consultants who carried bulky briefcases and held cell phones to ear while they briskly came and went from Memorial Hall. Gone is the van that parked in front and the printer who unloaded box upon box of documents, as the draft, and then the final copy of a weighty 20-year contract came into being.

And free to get up in the morning and go to their jobs without anxiety are the seven Lee workers who stood to be transferred to the water giant whose corporate ties were global in scope.

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Nowhere to be seen is the loser, Christopher Hodgkins, former state representative for District Four and vice president of the corporation that had waged an intensive campaign to bring the project to fruition [a figure of \$500,000 has been cited].

Through the local media, he optimistically predicted success. A South County weekly ran the "Supporters predicting Lee will approve Veolia." The paper also cast the resistors as near the brink of defeat: "Opponents of the plan, however, will hold out hope that they can marshal enough support to stall or kill the project." In light of the decisive 41-10 vote by Lee representatives on September 23 that sent Veolia packing, one has to wonder how Hodgkins had got it so wrong. Didn't the numerous public statements made by local wastewater experts during the negotiation process, or the depth of ire shown by the workers or the high number of anti-privatization neighbors who showed up at public meetings, or the involvement of the local Green Party and Quaker Friends and Northampton-and Boston-based organizations, tip him off? Hodgkins stuck to his frequent argument that an "emotional few" were spouting misinformation. "Critics of public-private partnerships use emotional arguments to block progress," he wrote in a July letter to The Eagle. The Lee Selectboard took his cue. "A few people are distorting the facts," said Frank Consolati and later, "In the end, emotion took over." Patricia Carlino said, "The issue regarding Veolia is complicated, emotional and requires change. Although facts are stated repeatedly, emotions distort them," Gordon Bailey noted. "Misinformation has been a huge point."

The town administrator even weighed in: "I do know that the effect of all the emotion involved was to deflect the issues. Passion and emotion are great. But it should not have gotten in the way of the facts."

From the present perspective, it is hard to believe that a small number of agitated people could have influenced so many residents throughout Berkshire County to lend their support to the opposition in Lee. Indeed, the word "emotion" needs to be replaced with the more descriptive phrase, "civil disobedience."

When the news emerged that Veolia was the sole bidder on the plan to build a new sewage plant and that the impetus to privatize came from Lee's own native son, the dissidents [quite a number, actually] scrambled to get the wider picture. They downloaded stories about Veolia's corporate transgressions in cities such as Lynn and Rockland, Mass.; Angleton, Texas; Indianapolis, Indiana; and New Orleans, La., to the chagrin of the proponents. As recently as Sept. 30, the Boston

Globe reported that a saga of embezzlement and countersuits involving U.S. Filter [now Veolia] in Rockland had come to somewhat of a conclusion. The guilty party was indicted and the suits are ongoing.

It is not a coincidence that the former mayor of Schenectady, Albert Jurczynski, showed up in July to woo the Lee representatives, or that the former mayor of Taunton, Richard Johnson, an employee of the corporation, worked closely with Hodgkins to finalize the contract. As it turns out, Veolia is the sponsor of a "Meet the Mayors" program nationwide that is a branch of their corporate lobbying strategy.

Just before a United States Conference of Mayors in Washington, D.C. in January, the following on-line letter was sent to the nation's mayors, inviting them to create a tape so as to be better heard at the council: "You may arrange for your taping which will only take 5-10 minutes, by going to the mayors.org booth located in the main lobby of the hotel. A representative of the Conference and Veolia Water North America will then escort you to the taping room or schedule an appropriate time for your taping."

But how many of those mayors were later approached with an offer from Veolia officials to tour their water or sewer services and come up with recommendations? It happened twice in Pittsfield, once under the leadership of Mayor Gerald Doyle [where the City Council turned down the idea] and later under Mayor Sara Hathaway, who insisted on being shown the actual cost savings, which never materialized. In a telephone interview, Hathaway said that in 2002 and 2003 she attended meetings of the Massachusetts Mayors' Association in Boston, both of which were sponsored by U.S. Filter [now Veolia] and others. "Richard Johnson sat with us during conferences and if I played golf I probably would have been invited for a game."

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Certainly it's important for Lee's leaders to move on since the defeat of Veolia's plan and they are wisely making the effort. But if they wish to have clear sailing, they must seek resolution with their constituents. And that has yet to happen. Regardless, the jack-in-the-box that used to be Lee's voting populace can never again be pushed back into its tight, dark space. The town's 40-year stranglehold in representative government is over.

The landmark vote has spawned a movement to expand the Selectboard from three to five members and to run alternative candidates to challenge pro-privatization incumbents. The town moderator's seat presently held by Hodgkins is being eyed with interest. Sometime soon there will be public discussion on returning to one-person, one-vote meetings in order to includes the town's new advocates.

Democracy, in this moment, is at its best in Lee.

The writer is an organizer of the grass-roots group Concerned Citizens of South Lee.

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