

What's up with the balloons?

I have heard questions about the balloons that have started to appear in town, on people's front lawns and attached to my campaign signs. They will be appearing more often in the coming weeks, so I thought I should explain.

About eight months ago, I heard it said, in connection with the decision to close the Sharon Alternative School, that trying to solve the logistical problems of a choice program in the public schools was like trying to put balloons in a box—every time you got one in, another one popped out.

I will leave the story of the demise of the Alternative School, as well as the debate about whether that was a good or a bad thing, for another day. At the time, and to this day, I found the analogy a curious one. I wondered why the balloons were supposed to go in boxes in the first place. I wondered why nobody asked whether there wasn't a bigger box out there somewhere. I wondered, perhaps tritely, why we couldn't think outside of whatever metaphorical box we were trying to fill with balloons.

These questions bothered me. Unlike the boy in "Sixth Sense," instead of seeing dead people everywhere I now saw balloon/box analogies everywhere in the school system. Parent input seen as valuable in school decisions as long as it was in its appropriate PTO box. Student and teacher input applauded when it fit, punished when it did not, sometimes quite harshly. Community concerns and opinions neatly categorized then either highlighted or ignored based on that categorization. Preconceived ideas about particular courses of action that did not appear able to bend when the reaction of stakeholders suggested a different direction.

So I decided to use balloons in my campaign, either as representative of children, other people involved in the school system, or just generally a symbol of things that we care about but can be messy to deal with. Having wrestled with the temperamental qualities of helium and helium-filled balloons on a number of occasions over the past few months, I would like to report some of my findings:

- Balloons don't care how big the box is; they are not inclined to be in one, whether it is a car, a truck or a horse trailer- sometimes it is necessary, but their reaction would suggest using that strategy sparingly;
- They have to be filled one at a time, no matter how many there are or how looming the deadline, but many hands make light work;
- If you don't fill them full enough, they do not float for long;
- If you put too much hot air into them, they are prone to bursting;
- Change is hard for balloons- if they are filled with helium in a warm room and set out in cold air, they droop; and
- In the end, if you pop the balloons they actually fit quite nicely into boxes.

No question, some things belong in boxes. There are fixed boundaries in the education system that we need to respect and work within, including budgetary constraints, state and federal requirements, and some basic logistical realities of transporting and educating a town full of children. That said, however, I believe it is an important when something seems complex and difficult to manage to ask the question: is this something that belongs in a box, and if so, what should the box look like?

And if I am elected to the School Committee and fail to ask that question, or appear to be stuck on an issue that requires creativity and flexible thinking, I hope all of you who have read this piece will take it upon yourself to remind me that I promised to ask the question.