

PRESS RELEASE

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WINCHESTER, NH (May 16, 2006)—Residents of Winchester will find it easy to stay on top of local government activities, thanks to the efforts of volunteers who have developed a Web site dedicated to that purpose. Budget committee member Dawn Lincoln and selectman Sue Newell recognized that it's virtually impossible for any one person to stay informed on all town government business. When time to attend meetings is weighed against time with family or civic service, board and committee meetings are apt to fall low on the list of priorities. Chasing down minutes after meetings isn't a practical pursuit for most people. So Lincoln and Newell (with the help of other volunteers who wish to remain anonymous) saw a need and filled it—by launching the Web site at the end of April 2006.

Winchester Informed Citizen (www.winchester-informed-citizen.org) is a central clearinghouse for public information where interested people can find out when boards and committees meet, then read the meeting minutes on-line or download them. In the privacy of their own homes, at their own convenience, they can now keep up-to-date on important happenings that will have lasting impacts on their lives. The site also provides direct access to some permit applications, maps, rules, regulations, ordinances and other relevant documents (to save people trips to the town hall) and links to other relevant sites. As a bonus, the site offers opinion pieces and fully-documented articles relating to actions of town officials.

Lincoln and Newell hope to add more features, but neither are experienced with Web sites and they say it may take a little time to gain necessary proficiency. Lincoln stresses, "This is a work in progress, so people should check back often. If particular documents aren't there one day, they could very well be posted the next. We're still playing catch-up on uploading core material. Some boards and committees take the full 144 hours allowed by law to post their minutes, and some responses to our requests for copies of documents have been tepid."

When asked if the site conflicts with her role as a selectman, Newell replied, "Absolutely not. One of my campaign promises was to try to establish a public-information access library at the town hall. I haven't been able to get select board support to do that, or to establish a functional town Web site, for the last two years — so I've done the best I could as a citizen to get it done in two weeks. This is all public information. People have a right to know."

Newell continues, "Some public officials have charged that this is a 'political' site. Is it political to publish public documents? To highlight — with documented facts — the actions of officials who are supposed to act in the best interest of the townspeople, and who have sworn to uphold the laws? I think not."

Lincoln says, "When talking to other residents about various official actions that boards and committees have taken, we've discovered that the vast majority of people seem to be in the dark and surprised (sometimes even dismayed) by what's being done at Town Hall."

Newell adds, "Going to town hall during business hours can be impossible for many people. Although officials are required by law to make public information available, they are also allowed to charge for it, and they may question why someone is interested in particular documents. The whole process can be time consuming and intimidating. This Web site gives people access to documents without the hassle."

Lincoln and Newell emphasize that the site is not an official Web site of the Town of Winchester and is in no way affiliated with the Town of Winchester in any official or unofficial capacity.