

COPYRIGHT ©2010 VALLEY NEWS



PUBLISHER: MARK TRAVIS
 EDITOR: JEFFREY A. GOOD
 EDITOR-AT-LARGE: JIM FOX
 EDITORIAL PAGE EDITOR: KATHRYN STEARNS
 CONTROLLER: DANIEL D. McCLORY
 ADVERTISING DIRECTOR: RICHARD B. WALLACE
 OPERATIONS MANAGER: BOB MATHEWSON
 CIRCULATION DIRECTOR: JAMES CAREY

EDITORIAL

SWEET CHARITIES

THE VALUE OF NONPROFITS TO TOWNS



IN THE PERENNIAL effort to save money, budget committees in both Canaan and Enfield have recommended against funding nonprofit organizations that provide an array of social services, from free bus transportation to fuel assistance to nursing and psychiatric care, to name a few.

The recommendation is perhaps understandable: As officials throughout the Upper Valley try to get a bead on items that could be eliminated from town budgets, regional nonprofits requesting annual appropriations are easy targets.

In many towns, such requests are routinely folded into operating budgets. But Canaan and Enfield have decided to withhold funding this year. Instead, nonprofits were asked to file petitioned warrant articles, forcing voters at Town Meeting to decide whether to fund nonprofit organizations on a case-by-case basis. The warrant in Canaan includes five articles from nonprofits asking for a total of \$30,700. In Enfield, eight organizations are requesting appropriations totaling \$50,100. These amounts represent small shares of the towns' operating budgets, which total \$3 million in Canaan and \$4.8 million in Enfield.

Doug Pettibone, who serves on Enfield's Budget Committee, cited "philosophical opposition" as the main reason why officials cut the nonprofits out of the general budget. "Taxpayer money should not go to nonprofit organizations," he said.

That's one point of view. Here's another: Taxpayer money should support the commonweal, or common good. Reasonable people can disagree about what is common and what is good. But it is undeniable that many of the nonprofits seeking financial assistance from area towns offer public assistance that government does not. That's partly because county government in the Twin States is among the weakest in the nation; elsewhere in the United States, counties (that is, taxpayers) provide many of the same regional services offered by Upper Valley nonprofits such as Listen Community Services, the Visiting Nurse Association, Tri-County Cap, West Central Behavioral Health, Advance Transit and so on. All are attempting to fill gaps in the safety net, and they do so relatively cheaply and efficiently, without the administrative overhead that would have to be replicated town by town were localities otherwise obliged to provide these same services. If these nonprofits suffer, so too will the region's most vulnerable residents. And — here's where pennywise turns pound-foolish — taxpayers would ultimately pay a high price for the consequences.

This is something for voters to keep in mind at Town Meeting, as they consider the costs and benefits of helping nonprofit groups. Indeed, Marilyn Bourne, executive director of Listen Community Services, which provides fuel and housing assistance, pointed out that towns' attempts to cut nonprofits' funding could be shortsighted. "They're not taking into consideration that these organizations are removing a significant tax burden," she said, estimating that the actual value of services provided to Enfield by Listen was about \$60,000 last year, far greater than the \$2,900 that Listen is requesting from the town this year. Similarly, the Visiting Nurse Association paid more than 2,000 visits to Enfield residents last year, amounting to \$141,000 in uncompensated care. The VNA is asking for \$13,900 from the town.

As these examples well illustrate, the value of services rendered by nonprofits is far more than the towns' individual contributions. The towns — and the townspeople — are getting a good deal by sharing the financial burden. It seems only right that they should continue to support nonprofits that in turn support the commonweal.