

# The Weston Voices Oral History Project

Presents

A Conversation with



**Sherwood "Woody" Bliss**  
Weston's First Selectman, 2001 - 2009

Interviewed on April 20, 2018  
as part of a special First Selectman series  
by Arne de Keijzer & Neil Horner

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*A video of this interview plus a bonus  
"Quick Takes" video are available in the Society's  
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## **The Weston Voices Oral History Project**

### **A Conversation with Sherwood “Woody” Bliss**

*Woody Bliss spent his career at IBM, posted in places stretching from Buffalo, New York, to Hong Kong. When he was transferred to White Plains in 1974, and looking with his wife Prue for a place that would best support their three children’s education, they, like so many others before him and since, chose Weston.*

*Asked what jobs he had at IBM, he joked, “you don’t have a long enough time for this.” But he started out as an applied science rep, selling scientific and engineering applications to companies like Bell Aero Systems. Bliss’ interest in math and science had already been sparked by the sixth grade, which evolved into a combined bachelors and master’s degree in a five-year engineering program at Cornell University.*

*Once in Weston, Bliss soon began volunteering, starting with coaching Little League. He joined the Kiwanis Club, later becoming its President, and was among the founders of the Weston Historical Society – of which he and his family continue to be important benefactors, including for the establishment of its Prue Bliss Education Center.*

*He was appointed to the town’s Panel of Moderators, and then elected to the Board of Finance in 1981. He joined the Board of Selectmen in 1999 and was then elected First Selectman in 2001, serving four terms. A longtime environmental activist, Bliss served as co-chairman of the Kelda Coalition, which helped preserve and protect 18,700 acres of open space in Connecticut.*

*Bliss was chosen by the Weston Police Commission as Citizen of the Year in 2013 for his many contributions to the town. In that spirit, he continues his public service as a member of the Police Commission and as a treasurer and general volunteer for a number of local community organizations, including the Friends of the Weston Senior Activities Center, which helps support the Historical Society’s oral history program.*

*Asked what he was most proud of accomplishing as First Selectman, he cites the \$80 million dollar school project and protecting over 1,800 acres in Weston as open space. As for disappointments, he said he had few while in office. “My only disappointments in life, in general, are people who have an opportunity to live up to something, and they don’t do it.” As for advice to anyone running for Selectman, he responded, “To be very open to new ideas, to be open to the citizens of town, to talk to people. Don’t think you know all the answers. Seek advice and listen carefully.”*

*What follows is the full transcript of his oral history interview, edited for clarity and annotated for context.*

**Woody, we will get to all you have done for the town as a volunteer and an official soon enough. But let's start with the basics. Where and when were you born, and where did you grow up?**

I was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, at the Hennepin County Hospital. My father was in the advertising business. During the Depression, the advertising businesses in New York was lousy, which was where he was from originally, so he moved to the Midwest, took a job at, I think it was John Deere, in the advertising department and stayed with that until I was about 18 months old.

Then he moved back to New York City and worked for BBD&O, which is the Batten, Barton, Durstine, & Osborn Advertising Agency, a big agency. We lived in Crestwood, which is part of Tuckahoe, which is part of Yonkers, New York.

We then moved from there to Scarsdale, where I started fourth grade. I went through the Scarsdale school system and graduated from Scarsdale High School.

**Did anyone in particular stand out in your memory from that time? Anyone who might have influenced you particularly?**

Clearly, your parents have a strong influence on you growing up. I recollect lots of incidents about that. In terms of schools, a couple of teachers stand out. In fifth grade, I had a woman whose husband was Frank Sinatra's insurance salesman. She really inspired my love of the English language, and reading, and some of that.

You probably are very vulnerable to those influences at that age, because in sixth grade, I had Mr. Christy, Tom Christy. He struck a chord in my interest in math and got me going on stuff like that. He taught me how to do square roots, for example, and how to use  $\pi$  and some of those other things, which was probably not typical sixth grade material, but he saw that I had interest.

Then in the eighth grade I had a teacher named John Sugarbaker, who was the science teacher and who would run special projects after school. I came in and did a lot of those. From an education standpoint, those were key, key influencers.

**What kinds of things did you and your parents like to do as a family? Did you take trips or play games? Or?**

Both parents were avid bridge players, and they were both life masters. They'd spend a lot of time doing that. I learned bridge at an early age but didn't do that much with it back then.

In terms of family, we used to go to Cape Cod. My Dad would rent a cottage for the summer. He'd come up on weekends while the family was there. Then two different summers we went to Lewes, Delaware, which is on the Delaware River down in the southern part of Delaware, and it was the same pattern.

The interesting thing about that, we were there through a hurricane, which was quite a frightening experience, including the fact that the sand took the paint off the front of the

car. [laughs] We're thinking, "Whoa, there!" He had to get the car painted when we went back home.

I loved the seashore. I love clams, and I love to go dig clams. Down in Maryland, we've got blue crabs, of course, and we had those all the time. Those are some memories. I've got lots of memories [laughs] from my childhood, but I don't think you've got enough time for them.

**(Neil Horner) You and I met four score and four years ago when we were at Cornell together. The only difference was, you graduated, while I went into the Marine Corps. I remember at Cornell I'd always seek you out in the classroom to see where you were sitting because I wanted to sit behind you and maybe some of your engineering intellect would rub off. Did you stay on at Cornell after graduating?**

Yes, I have a bachelors and a masters degree from Cornell. I was in a five-year engineering program, which was a bachelors and a masters degree.

**When you graduated did you go right to IBM?**

I did. I graduated in like June and went to work right after July fourth, so yeah. [laughs] Then I did that for 34 years. *[Neil Horner would later also join IBM, and the two met again at the company headquarters in White Plains. -Ed.]*

**(Neil): I remember walking by your office on Westchester Avenue, that big block building at 1133 Westchester. You had one of the very few offices with a window, which was a sign of prestige and great respect from management.**

Let me just comment on that because that was not the best office I ever had. The best office was at 440 Hamilton in White Plains. Cravath, Swaine and Moore were representing IBM in a law suit and the thing got settled. My boss called me in and said, "We're a little crowded here." This was in North Tarrytown where I was. He said, "We're going to move your department over to White Plains." As a result, I was given David Boise's former office, which had an attached conference room, a bedroom, and a shower as part of the deal. [laughs] That was a heck of an office.

**What jobs did you have at IBM?**

Oh my gosh, you don't have a long enough time for this. [laughs] I started out as an applied science rep, which was applying computers -- this was in the early days of computers -- applying computers to scientific and engineering applications.

What I did was work with aerospace. Bell Aero Systems, which is the space part of Bell, like Bell Helicopter. It's all one big company. It's been bought out now by United Technologies. I worked on scientific applications there.

Then I was a marketing rep in Buffalo. Then I was an administrative assistant to the branch manager. Then I was a marketing manager. Then I was a branch manager in Syracuse, New York. I could go on and on and on because I probably had seven or eight different jobs after that.

**Clearly you have a great deal of technical experience in your background. Where did that come from? Early schooling in science and math?**

Yeah, I go back to John Sugarbaker, who I mentioned earlier, the science teacher I had in 8th grade. He had after school projects for a couple of us to do stuff that I didn't think of [being difficult] at the time. I just thought it was fine, but they were pretty advanced kinds of things. That really awakened me. Then, at Cornell, I had some really good experiences.

In the last year of masters degree classes you had to do a project not unlike a PhD project. My project was to measure torque and force on a milling machine when it was milling parts. I set up a simulation with strain gauges. We measured all that stuff, and I got tons of data.

I was drowning in data, and somebody said to me, "I've got this new IBM computer down in the other engineering school, called the '650,'" which was a punch card. You punched your data on cards, put it in, and it sent your punch cards back. They didn't even have [built-in] printers in those days, so you took the punch cards and then put them into a printer. I got fascinated with that, and I could go on and on about that story, but that's really how I got interested in computers.

**You also spent time overseas for IBM, and we know that one of those assignments had to do with China.**

A number of jobs later, I was director of education for North and South America and the Far East. We got a new chairman in -- Ralph Pfeiffer, who you might have known -- to our international division. Ralph wanted to open up China. He was a big friend of Jack Welch, and GE had been incredibly successful there. Now, a number of companies weren't. Fairchild went bankrupt over the work they did in China.

Ralph used to have these directors' meetings. There were about, I don't know, 10 or 12 of us who were directors, over there. At one of the meetings he said, "I'm leaving, and we have a new guy coming in. I want to introduce him to you. His name is George Conrades."

George comes in and says, "Guys, we cannot market in China here in the States. We've got to go overseas." He said, "I've got jobs in Beijing, Hong Kong, and Tokyo [so] I want you, over the next week, to talk to your wives and decide where you want to go or we can find you something in the domestic company."

I'd been over to Hong Kong a bunch of times. I knew I didn't want to live in Beijing or Tokyo. They're wonderful cities, but there's not as much to do for an American there, other than sightsee. When the meeting was over, I went up to George and said, "George, put me on your list for Hong Kong," [laughs] and then I went home to tell Prue, "We're moving to Hong Kong." That was a really great experience. I got to run the computer operation in the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, Korea, which was also a lot of fun.

**You have just referred to Prue, your wife. When did you meet her?**

We met in 1959 – a long time ago -- at IBM. She joined the business about, I don't know, maybe three, four, five months after I did. It was a training center. She joined in Rochester, New York, but there was a training center in Buffalo, where she was. That's how I got to meet her. We had a bowling league, and she came out to play for it. It was a fun bowling deal, and she and I were on the same lane. She beat me at bowling, so I said, "Well, that's pretty interesting." [laughter] We found we had a lot of similar interests.

### **And children?**

We have three kids. David, who's down in Santa Fe, New Mexico. He's a research scientist for Sandia National Laboratories. It's the old White Sands Atomic Energy group. He's got a PhD at Berkeley. He takes after his mother. [laughs] He's from the smart kids.

Then, Barbara is in North Carolina, in Hickory. Amazingly, she's retired. She went to the University of Rochester and then got a job with a joint venture between Corning Glass and Siemens. She got a lot of founders' stock, and stuff. After 18 years, they were bought out by Corning, and she decided she was going to retire and raise her teenage kids, so that's what's she's doing.

The youngest one, Susan, went to Princeton. She's an OB-GYN down in Charlotte, North Carolina. She just got back from Qatar. I told her she picked a horrible week to go to Qatar. [*Qatar was subject to a blockade by its neighbors Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAR and Egypt, who closed their borders and barred flights to the country. -Ed.*] She's associate professor, also, at the University of North Carolina. Qatar's got the best medical school in the Far East, and people come from all over to go to that school. She guest lectured there.

### **Your friends know you as an avid sailor. Where did that come from? Living in Buffalo? Your time in Hong Kong?**

No. As a kid we did a lot of sailing. I had an uncle who had no kids, so I was his nephew. He loved to build boats, remote-controlled boats and stuff like that, so there was a lot of that.

Then, I started sailing when we lived in Syracuse. We had a Widgeon, which is a 12-foot sailboat. [It's a great boat for sailing in lakes but the thought of sailing it in Long Island Sound] but with one sail in heavy weather there, [laughs] I said, "No, no, no. We've got to get something different," so we switched to Hobie Cats.

I got my first Hobie Cat in about 1978. We sailed those, and then, when I went to Hong Kong, they allowed you a shipping container. The Hobie Cat was 16 feet long, which got into a 20-foot container, so I took my Hobie Cat to Hong Kong, and we sailed Hobie Cats in Hong Kong. I sold that in Hong Kong for more than I had paid for it, which was... [laughs] What was it? 10 years old, or something like that?

**Sailing back to Weston.... The '50s, '60s, and '70s were a period of rapid growth here. Recently, it's been a pretty tough time from the standpoint of budgets, and we're**

**losing residents. What do you think has to be done to retain them and also to come back to the days when this was a very desirable, attractive, competitive town?**

It still is a very attractive town. I think you speak to an important issue and that is that there's just not a lot of open spaces anymore to build houses to get the growth. What you're experiencing is a maturity of turnover.

Plus, the economy in Connecticut is not tremendously business friendly, as we read in the papers all the time. That's slowed things down. The housing market is not as attractive. A couple of days ago I paid my State tax and that's enough to make you want to move to Florida, or Texas, or New Hampshire where there's no income tax. [laughs]

I think it's a bigger problem than just a Weston problem. There may be some nuances about Weston that make it more or less attractive, but I think it's an issue the state has. I think it's one that we've got to depend on whatever the next Legislature is, the next Governor, etc., to work on coming up with solutions.

We've got to be more business friendly though. There's just no question about that. Al Gore had a great idea in the [concept of the] lock box -- remember he kept talking about the lock box -- where money for transportation stays in transportation. Because when you buy a gallon of gas you're paying a significant tax that goes into this transportation fund, but then the legislature steals it and uses it to pay the general budget. You just can't do that because your infrastructure is going to fail over time.

**Weston is known as a town of volunteerism. How would you promote that concept?**

I say god bless the volunteers. That's what makes Weston great is all the volunteers. You guys doing [the oral history project] as volunteers. Whether it's Little League, or Boy Scouts, or Girl Scouts, or school board, whatever, we've just got great talent in the town and great talent volunteering to do it.

I think the responsibility, frankly, of the Selectmen and others, is to encourage volunteers and to bring new people to the town into various activities. That's kind of how I got started and I think a lot of people got started.

**Let's go back slightly. When did you move to Weston and what were some of the first volunteer activities you were engaged in?**

We moved here in 1974. I'm trying to think. The job I had at that time had a lot of travel, so I didn't do an awful lot of volunteering. I was active in Little League because [my son] David was actively playing. I was a Little League assistant. I wasn't a main coach. I was an assistant coach of a team.

We had an interesting thing. I'm trying to think of the guy who was coach because he was great. We wanted to let girls play and Little League didn't allow them. We wrote a letter to Williamsport and said, "We're going to withdraw from Little League and we're going to suggest other towns withdraw from Little League unless you let girls play."

A couple of years later they changed it and girls were allowed to play. Our two girls both played Little League here in town.

So, I did Little League. I joined the Panel of Moderators in about '78 or '79. Then I got elected to the Board of Finance. I was active in Kiwanis. Matter of fact, the weekend we moved in a guy across the street came over and said, "Welcome to Weston. We're your neighbor. Blah, blah, blah. We're starting this new club called Kiwanis. Would you like to join?" In my infinite wisdom I said, "No, I'm pretty busy unpacking here." [laughs] Of course, later I joined.

**You've been in Weston for over four decades now. How would you sum up the most notable changes over the years?**

I think the character of the town is the same. There's obviously been a lot of changes, but I think one of the things that's great about Weston is that some things [like volunteering, two-acre zoning, etc.] don't change.

Back when I moved here the folks coming here were mostly corporate America being moved around. IBM, [which we joked could stand for] "I've Been Moved" or "I'll Be Moving". [laughs] Because we lived in a lot of different places till we came here. As a matter of fact, we'd been here about six months when David at dinner one night said, "Dad, when are we moving again?" [laughter]

Corporate America moves. I think today the moves to here are more about young people coming out of the City. You graduate from college. You get a job. A guy meets a gal. They get married. They have a kid. Now, do we want to pay all that private tuition in New York City to get a decent education or shall we go to Weston, pay our taxes on our house, and get a great education? [laughs]

I think that tends to drive it more. You can't over generalize it. People come for all kinds of reasons.

**We did an oral history the other day with people who've lived in the town a long time who said, "One of the big differences to us seems to be that there's less of a sense of community in Weston now than there was forty years ago." Do you see it the same way?**

I don't, no. That's an interesting comment. I'm trying to reflect on that but, no, I see a very strong sense of community. I'm active in Kiwanis, obviously. I'm active in the Norfield Church and have been for years in both of those. I see a strong sense of community. I see people reaching out. I mean, at Kiwanis every month at least or more often we see new members coming in to the group. I don't identify with that lack or change in sense of community.

**Peer into the future. What do you see for Weston in ten or fifteen years from now? How do you think it's going to change? If there is a need to recover its roots or something new, what would that be? Where's this town going to be?**



A very interesting question. I don't see a lot of rapid change either historically in Weston or it coming in the future. It's got its niche in terms of the two-acre zoning, the rural character, although some people say there is a lack of amenities. I mean, there's no Starbucks or McDonalds or things like that, and I don't see those things coming to Weston.

I think it'll continue to be kind of the way it is. We certainly have kept the emphasis on the schools. I think it's going to continue to offer outstanding education for young people, which I think is probably the main attraction for people coming.

**In terms of amenities that may make the town more attractive for people, do you see a need for a community center?**

I've thought for a long time a community center would be a good idea. I see what's happening with the senior center. I mean, that's certainly been a great success.

I was part of the effort years ago when we wanted to build a community center over on the school property. It would have been between that stretch of road that goes up from Hurlbutt over toward the High School where the Intermediate School is now. A bunch of us worked pretty hard on putting that together but we couldn't sell it.

Yeah, a community center, sure. Those are always I think useful for folks. We had a semi community center over in the portables, the "Kinderland" portables, for kids. There was a teen center over there for a while that was run by volunteers, but it eventually went away. I mean, it was only run for a couple of years then it went away. *[A series of portable buildings adapted for classroom use were installed near the Elementary School in 1998 to handle an upsurge in enrollment (as they would also be in the Middle School). After the Intermediate School was built these portables were converted to offices for all land use related town departments. Weston's total schools population grew from 1,623 in 1995 to 2,267 in 2000. -Ed.]*

**One of the things that people talk about is doing more to keep seniors in town. Your thoughts?**

I think we've got some things [that encourage seniors to stay in town] and they need to be consciously tweaked and improved. First off, we have a senior tax relief program, which helps quite a number of people. We have the senior center. Wendy Petty and her staff do a fabulous job over there. They're expanding the programs all the time.

I'm on the Friends of the Weston Senior Activities Center board. I'm treasurer. Last year we sponsored over fifty events. Most of them were lectures, one or two-hour lectures; we paid the bills for that. We run the car show which, hopefully, you guys have been to. That raises about twenty-five thousand bucks a year. Then we turn around and spend that money on the senior center for various programs. Yesterday there was a bus trip to the New York Botanical Gardens. We paid for the bus. We do a lot. I think that kind of stuff should continue.

**We should note that the Friends of the Weston Senior Activities Center have also supported this oral history program.**

Yes, and the community has supported us by supporting the car show because that's key to us as a revenue generator, fundraiser, whatever you want to call it.

**Let's get a little more specific about the time you served in town government. First of all, how did you start getting interested in local politics?**

Yeah, I have an amazing long resume that probably I could go on for two or three days. [laughs]

Let me go back to when we were first married. In 1962 we bought our first house, in Amherst, NY, for \$21,677. It had three bedrooms. We were in a development on a piece of land that had been a farm that was owned by Joseph Vincent McCarthy. Now, do you know who Joseph Vincent McCarthy was? A manager of the Yankees way back in the '20s or '30s, somewhere a long time ago. He died and his estate sold his land to a developer and so we had these kind of ticky-tacky Levittown kind of houses on lots a fraction of an acre. We moved in there.

Later, the developer decided he wanted to build apartment buildings on one piece of the land because the house sales weren't going as fast as he would have liked, so we fought that. We started a home owners association. That was kind of my first experience because I got to be the first president of this home owners association. We had about 200 houses and 200 families. Almost every one of them joined this home owner's association. That was in '65.

In '67 the teachers went on strike in our school district. Our school district -- New York School districts are not by town, they kind of go across boundaries -- was in Amherst and also Tonawanda, New York. It was called the Sweet Home School District.

Some of my friends came to me and said, "Why don't you run for board of ed?" I said, "OK." I ran for the board of ed. I defeated a guy who had been on there for 18 years, which was kind of interesting. Because of the strike we had four new school board members that year. We did a lot. We built almost a new school every year, which is pretty amazing. These districts are huge. I don't remember the student population, but it was many, many times the size of Weston.

That was my first stage, being a member of the Board of Education in Chambers, New York, which was kind of fun. Then when I came down here, [I ran for and] was elected to the Board of Finance in 1981. It was kind of interesting because I ran against George Guidera's business partner, Tom Birmingham, and beat him in the Republican caucus. [laughs]

So I served on that. It was a lot a lot of fun. We did a lot of good there. What else? Let's see. Panel of Moderators. I was on the Panel of Moderators for quite a few years. I was on the Republican Town Committee. I just got off after 24 years.

I ran for First Selectman in 1999 and lost to Hal Shupack by 21 votes, but I'd gotten enough votes to be on the Board of Selectman. [*The number of votes for the loser in the election for First Selectman get transferred into a pool with those running for the Board of Selectmen, and the top two vote getters in that race are then elected. In this case, Shupack's*

*running mate got fewer votes than Bliss and his fellow Republican, Glenn Major. For Shupack's reaction, see his oral history. – Ed.]*

Then I [decided to] run against Shupack again in 2001. That was kind of interesting to me politically because the election was in November and in August I got two members of the Democratic Town Committee to support me. When Hal heard about that he dropped out of the race. I ran unopposed, basically, because it was too late. It was past the time when they could put another candidate in.

**Before we get more specific about your term as First Selectman let us ask you about party politics in Weston. Generally speaking, candidates promise and voters expect that people serving on boards and Commissions will work in a collegial, even nonpartisan, manner. But, arguably, election campaigns can be quite personal, often rancorous, even venomous. Misleading or inaccurate statements fly. And once in office, it has been said that it's not unusual to see positions taken or actions blocked by one side or the other for political gain. Do you want to comment on that?**

First of all, I did not experience that. I was either a Selectman or a First Selectman, OK? Even though Hal beat me by 21 votes, we worked together very, very well. [*For Shupack's take, which is different, see his oral history. –Ed.]*

We did the early phases of the school project, the \$8 million project. That ultimately would get completed when I was First Selectman, but we did a lot of the planning because we were running out of space. When I got elected to First Selectman we had twenty-eight portable classrooms. That's bigger than the school, I think.

Let me go back to the question. We worked together very well. Emil Frankel was the other Selectman. The three of us got along great. Then Emil left and in 2001, when I was selected First Selectman, Glenn Major was on the team along with Richard Miller. We all worked together great. Then Gayle Weinstein came in on '07, somewhere in there and we worked together fine.

I had three things on my campaign literature and when I did my stump speech. The first thing was maintain quality schools -- best quality schools -- the second thing was fiscal responsibility, and the third thing civility. I spent more time talking about civility than I did about financial responsibility or the schools. [laughs]

**You record on fiscal responsibility helped your re-election campaigns, of course, but issues surrounding tax increases nevertheless kept popping up, whether that was in the context of the schools or the town budget, or such things such as proposals for affordable housing, open space, and so on. As if that wasn't enough, what else did you deal with that was challenging?**

That's a pretty good list, I would say. [laughs] There are personnel issues that come up that don't make the papers and shouldn't make the papers. Those are kind of private and off [the record], but they're interesting ones.

I found that -- and I think that I might have mentioned this before -- my corporate experience really, really helped because when you're a new first line manager you make

mistakes. Hopefully, you've got somebody who's your boss that points out your mistakes and gives you some alternate paths to consider, etc. I found that that was very, very useful. I found the First Selectman job, frankly, easier than the corporate job.

**There were also challenges before you became First Selectman; that is, while you were serving on the Board of Selectmen while Hal Shupack held the post. No doubt the most severe were the suicide of the School Superintendent and the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001.**

I don't think I'm telling stories out of school, but when Janet Shaner sadly passed away, Hal Shupack came to me and said, "Would you run some kind of a memorial service for her?" Tragically his son [had also taken] his own life at a point in time and he said it was just too close to home so would I do that? I said, 'Sure.' I ran the thing. We did it and it worked.

When 9/11 came Shupack asked me if I'd do that one, which I did. Maybe I was a little naïve, but I wanted to get a Christian, a Jewish, and a Muslim guy. I had no trouble getting a Christian or a Jewish guy. [laughs] That was easy. I had observed that there was a mosque in Bridgeport, so I called and talked to a secretary. She said that he wasn't available for the phone, but they'd call me back. They didn't call me back.

Now this happened: 9/11 was on a Tuesday, and we had picked Saturday because it was available for more people to have our 9/11 service. They didn't call me back on Wednesday. Thursday morning first thing I called again and got the same secretary. She said, "Well, yeah, I talked to him, but we don't participate in that kind of thing."

I said, "Well, there's a lot of animus here towards Muslims as a result of this and the Islam religion and what it stands for and all. Don't you think somebody might want to help?" She said, "Well, there's a guy, Adeb," -- I can't remember his last name -- "who is an imam. You might want to call him."

I called this guy up and he indeed came. He did a magnificent job. He said that Muslims do not stand for this kind of thing. That the twelve guys or whatever [had] hijacked the religion, which I thought was an interesting comment. He and I became friends out of this kind of thing.

We used to do an annual deal over at Town Hall because we lost three citizens, three sons in 9/11. We used to do an annual service and he used to come over for the service. Now, I don't know if we've had the service recently.

**Back to your biggest challenges as a First Selectman. You mentioned personnel issues just now, but were there others? And, how were they resolved?**

The most difficult one is easy to remember. That was being involved and notifying some parents of the loss of a child, but you just have to do it. I had good support from the Weston Police Department with me. We did the notifications. That was hard there but for the grace of god got going.

Other difficult situations? [laughs] This may sound egotistical. I don't remember any difficult situations. I'm sure some of the citizens do, but anyway. I guess one of the most difficult ones, frankly, was the issue of a School Resource Officer.

Back when I was First Selectman the federal government would pay for the first year of an SRO if you would commit to doing it for two more years, I think. I put the whole proposal together. I went to the Board of Education. They didn't want any part of an SRO. It just got me furious because when you see what the SRO has [presently] done in school and all the stuff, it's remarkable.

**Speaking of the Police Department, there were some contentious issues there while you were First Selectman.**

Those get to the level of [confidential] personnel issues very rapidly. Peter Ottomano, who was Chairman of the Police Commission at the time, was a terrific guy who was doing a great job. He came to me for advice. This was in regard to Tony Land who was our police chief at the time.

He said to me very honestly, "Look, I don't have the kind of personnel experience you do. Can you help me with this?" Eventually I took over managing Tony out of the business, if you will, kind of thing. [laughs] Quite beyond that, I don't think it's appropriate for me to say anything more.

**Let's return more specifically to issues relating to budgets and taxes. Arguably, the town was thriving until the budgets started climbing. What's your perspective on the budget over these past two decades?**

I think what you're talking about first off is the Grand List. When you've got a lot of vacant lots you can build houses and that increases the value of the Grand List. We're out of that business.

Most of the vacant lots, unfortunately, are rocky and swampy and you just can't build on them. We don't have vacant lots to be able to build the Grand List. Now, we get some tear downs and those improve the Grand List, usually, because you tear down a cheaper house and build a more expensive one and people do improvements.

That's nothing like the building that we saw going on, especially in the '80s, where people were building, building, building. That's not going to be a solution for the future, I don't think so. We're going to have to have to tighten the belt a little.

We only have a commercial base of a couple of percent and I don't think people want to increase the commercial base. I think we're stuck with the Grand List [we have] and [only] modest Grand List growth for the future. I think we need to recognize that facts are facts and that's where we are today.

**What other options do you think we have? Unless you tell us we're wrong, we surely can't keep spending at the rate we have over the last 15 or 20 years or so. What is the list of options that can get us back on track of being financially responsible?**

First of all, it's a very tough job. I think we've got to be very frugal on how we spend our money. I think we've got to find ways to use technology to do things. I think there's probably an opportunity for some consolidation of functions.

I never had good luck trying to cast the bait out to get that done, if you will, but there are things like I don't know why we have two finance departments. One in Town Hall and one in the schools. They could be consolidated. I think probably on buildings and grounds, highway departments, and stuff there's probably opportunity for consolidation with neighboring towns. We do a little bit of that. The Probate Court, of course, is consolidated. We have a off-hours medical support that's consolidated with Wilton.

I'm sure there's several other examples, but I think we need to be looking more actively at how we can consolidate, regionalize, whatever term you want to use. I am a strong believer that that needs to be done from the bottom up as opposed to from the top down. For the State to come in and say, "No, we're going to..." That doesn't work.

We've got to find those opportunities and it's not easy. Dispatch. Redding had the opportunity to get a significant grant from the federal government to build a new dispatch center.

The grounds for it was that it could be the basis for a central dispatch center. I signed off on that one when I was First Selectman. They built the center, but they never consolidated. You just can't do that. If New York City could consolidate [emergency services communications after] 9/11, tell me why we can't consolidate our dispatch with Wilton, Redding, Easton, and the towns around. It makes no sense to me.

**The big and getting bigger elephant in the room is the school budget, of course. Controlling costs there seems to be the most difficult part. Is there a solution?**

I wouldn't be here interviewing if I had a solution. I'd be out making millions explaining it to other towns. [laughs] I don't know what the solution is. You've got to elect people to the school board that understand those kinds of issues. Having been a former school board member, there's a tendency to vote people in who are on the academic side of things as opposed to the financial side of things.

**An easier topic: conservation. What were you able to accomplish in that area during your term?**

I've got to tell you, George Guidera was a great friend and a great help to me. He helped me when I first ran. When I lost by 21 votes he said to me, "You didn't start a one-year campaign. You started a three-year campaign. Keep going." [laughs] Which I did.

On the subject of conservation, he had a little slogan that I really like and that is that every acre we preserve increases the value of every other acre. When I was First Selectman we protected 1,800 acres. We purchased some. The biggest chunk of that was 1,500 acres in the watershed from Kelda Group, the water services company.

I had the good fortune of knowing John Rowland [the former Governor of Connecticut] because I'd worked on his campaign. I was a delegate to his original campaign

convention, in 1995, which was an interesting convention that went to the wee hours of the morning before Weston and Wilton broke a tie to get him to be the candidate for the governor the first time.

I got John to give us \$5 million dollars or for the State to spend \$5 million to buy the development rights for the watershed. What happened when I was First Selectman is that Kelda had filed and somehow originally got approval for a subdivision on their land. I said, "Holy cow, if this happens this is not going to be good for us at all." We fought that and were successful. The Governor supported us. That watershed is now forever protected.

I was also involved in the purchase of the Moore property, I guess, which everybody knows, and Fromson Strassler, and then some miscellaneous pieces. Also, finalizing the deal with Leo Lachat's widow, who had left town. She was in Baltimore, Maryland, outside of Baltimore, to try and get that deal finalized where we had a joint venture with the Nature Conservancy to purchase Lachat.

**What do you think were your most lasting accomplishments?**

Obviously, getting the school thing through. [laughs] Building the schools. I think Lachat and the open space, those are big ones.

**What had you wanted to accomplish but were not able to? What frustrated you?**

I have bulldog blood in my genes and so when I wanted to get something done I really worked hard to get it done. I'm trying to think of anything. Building a community center, I guess, would be one thing that I wish we could have done, but I was pretty happy. I didn't have a frustration list of, here's what I'd like to get done that I couldn't get done.

The people of Weston are very responsive, I think, to good ideas for the community. We've always had very, very good luck with that. Things like the artificial turf on the fields. We had great support on that. The lights, Michael Carter ran that, but I was working with him to get the lights. Mark Butlein was the guy that started the turf field, but I was deeply involved in that. Now we're seeing the first replacement. They're supposed to last 15 to 20 years. This one's lasted, I think, 14. There's money in the budget for the coming year to replace one of the turf fields.

**What advice, if any, did you get from your predecessor?**

George Guidera gave me a lot of advice. I've mentioned the open space piece of it. He had advice about town meetings and budget. George was excellent. I spent a lot of time with [my successor] Gayle Weinstein when she first got elected, giving her suggestions and so forth. I spent some time with [Gayle's successor] Nina Daniel as well on suggestions.

I guess keep Weston the way it is would be my big advice. I don't see the need for a lot of change.

**The scope of our discussions today have been very broad and very helpful and reminds us that the experience you brought to the job helped make this town run well. Which suggests that we really need to recruit more volunteers like you.**

I really believe it's the job of the current volunteers to bring in new volunteers. I believe that's what yields success, is bringing in new people with new ideas and new talents. We've got this new Sustainability Committee. I think that's an excellent idea.

**So you think that the spirit of voluntarism in Weston today is as alive and well as it was when you first became involved?**

I don't have a meter to measure that. [laughter]

I don't know. Let me say I hope so. There are a lot of volunteers doing a lot of good stuff. We've got the Memorial Day Fair coming up. We've got the parade coming up. All of that's organized by volunteers. There are a lot of volunteers over at the Senior Center helping with different things.

Invasive plants are an increasing problem in Weston. Several people, including me, are talking about putting together teams that, if people want us to come to your property, we will remove invasive plants on your property. We think we can get some folks interested in that, which I think is a great idea.

I experienced that personally. We had garlic weed. You know what garlic weed is. I had that all over my property. It took me...Let me start before that. When we moved to our house, the woods were total poison ivy. It took me six or seven years of spraying that damn stuff, which I don't like using spray, to get rid of it.

I had the same kind of problem with the garlic weed. I personally did that pulling the stuff up and throwing it away.

In sum, the spirit of volunteerism is alive and well. We just need people participating. Take advantage of all that talent that's out there.

**Care to share your future plans? Are you going to run for the State Legislature?**

[laughs] No. I might challenge Trump in 2020, but I haven't decided, yet. [laughs]

I'm having fun doing what I'm doing. I'm happy that younger people are taking over the thing. I don't suffer fools, so I don't think I'd be good in the Legislature. [laughter]

Neither Congress nor the Connecticut Legislature are my kind of thing. I don't know how those guys can go up there and do what they do. You would think that going up there, you would have more interest in getting things done so you could say, "As a team, we accomplished this stuff." It seems to be who can throw the best grenades back and forth. I don't want to be part of that.

**That's as good a note to end up on as any. Thanks very much, Woody.**



I thank you guys for doing what you're doing. Weston is a great town. I think all of us as volunteers need to work hard to keep it that way.