

September 4, 2012 – Message From Select Board Chair Stephanie O’Keeffe:

Amherst’s policy regarding commemorative flag display for September 11th has been grossly distorted and misunderstood. Here are the facts:

The flags we are talking about aren’t the American flags that fly every day in front of Town Hall, and at our Fire Stations and Police Station, and at our Schools. Nor are we talking about the flags that countless residents fly at their homes.

The flags we are talking about are 28 commemorative flags lining the downtown area on light poles – the kind that many towns, including Amherst, put out for Fourth of July and other occasions.

The question is whether September 11th should be one of those occasions.

Some people think this display feels somber and respectful. Others think it sets a festive tone, inappropriate for such a solemn occasion. Surely, reasonable people can disagree about this.

The real issue here is grief, and how best to mark it. We all feel the grief of September 11th deeply, and many have very strong feelings about how to honor that grief. Those who feel that having the commemorative flags lining downtown sets a festive tone are upset by this, while others consider it the natural option.

I think the best analogy is a wake, because it is also about how we mark grief. Some people prefer a wake to be a quiet and somber occasion, while others prefer more of a light-hearted and sometimes boisterous celebration of the deceased person’s life. Very different styles of honoring grief, and some people will have strong feelings about one or the other. In some cases, a compromise is best: first one, then the other. That can be a way to respect and include everyone in the communal grieving process.

That, in my opinion, is exactly what the compromise is about regarding flying the commemorative flags on 9/11. By doing so every fifth year on the anniversaries – i.e., 10th 15th, 20th, etc. – we are being inclusive of those who find that most meaningful and appropriate; by not doing so in the other years, we are recognizing those who feel otherwise. We are doing this with utmost respect for both perspectives on how best to mark the overwhelming grief of that horrific day.

In the years we fly those commemorative flags on 9/11 and in the years we don’t, we have a very poignant ceremony that morning downtown with our Fire Department. The AFD Chaplain leads us in prayer and in silence, the big brass bell is rung in memorial tribute, and the American flag is raised and then lowered to half-staff. It is an opportunity for all to pause and remember.

I hope this information might help to clarify the various ways this situation gets mischaracterized.

Sincerely,

Stephanie O’Keeffe
Chair, Amherst Select Board
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