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Editorial: SMOC feud must end

By
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It's been more than two years since South Middlesex Opportunity Council, the region's largest social service provider, sued Framingham, its largest town. It has been an unhappy - and expensive - period for SMOC and the town, and it's time for the standoff to end.

As often happens with feuds, spectators and even participants may well have forgotten what the fight is all about. The SMOC projects that formed the basis of the organization's federal suit - the Sage House program for homeless families and Larry's Place, a housing program for veterans - cleared the last regulatory hurdles and are serving SMOC clients now. SMOC long ago dropped the most objectionable part of its suit, charges against citizens whose comments about SMOC the organization didn't like.

But battles like this can take on their own momentum, especially when guided by lawyers paid by the hour. To decision-makers in the center of the storm, personal grudges and organizational politics can get in the way of seeing the big picture.

The big picture is that there will be no winners in this battle. SMOC isn't going to leave Framingham, nor should it. The federal court isn't going to put Framingham in receivership over delays in the permitting process long since resolved. We can't predict a judge's ruling both sides have been waiting months on a petition for summary judgment, with no decision in sight but we doubt any large amount of money will change hands when all is said and done. The money spent so far \$750,000 in town funds and probably at least that much spent by SMOC has been flushed away forever.

The question is how much more money must be wasted before key players on both sides come to their senses.

In private conversations and there have been lots of private conversations between people associated with SMOC and people in town government, many of whom are old friends there is general agreement that the SMOC suit has done more harm than good. Most say the suit could be settled tomorrow, with no money changing hands. All it would take is a memorandum outlining a few procedures to ensure better coordination and communication between the town and the agency - and a willingness by the leaders of the two sides to put away their pride, let the other side save face - and get the lawyers out of the room.

There has been movement in recent weeks toward such a meeting of the minds, but the key players can't quite bring themselves to the table. They need to try harder, and they need a push from their friends.

Consider this such a nudge. In the spirit of the season, families put aside their differences to concentrate on the many things they have in common. They pack up worn-out feuds with the old year and start the new year on a fresh page.

It's time Framingham and SMOC did the same.

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