

# We've overcome polarization in the past and can again

POLARIZATION is at record highs. Social trust is at record lows. Across America, and here in New Hampshire, neighbors are retreating from one another just when we most need to come together. That was the urgent message Dr. Robert Putnam, author of "Bowling Alone" and the nation's leading civic scholar, delivered to some 200 Granite Staters at The Park Theatre in Jaffrey this past Saturday.



Will Stewart



## NEW HAMPSHIRE VOICES

For Leadership New Hampshire, it was another chance to do what we do best: connect leaders, spark dialogue, and equip people to take action that makes New Hampshire stronger.

Dr. Putnam's message was as timely as it was urgent. America, he reminded us, is living through an era of historic polarization, growing inequality, and deepening social isolation. These forces are national in scope, yes, but we see them here in New Hampshire, too. They play out in our communities, our workplaces, our schools, and our neighborhoods. Declining social capital, the networks of trust and connection that bind us together, helped fuel the divisions we see today.

He also reminded us that the central challenge we face is cultural. It is not only about economics or politics. It is about whether we are willing to see one another with empathy and respect. Too often, groups dismiss or look down on each other, reinforcing division rather than con-

nection. Left unchecked, this corrodes the very possibility of community.

That is why conversations like the one Leadership New Hampshire hosted in Jaffrey matter so deeply. Civic renewal will not be solved by a single policy or election outcome. It will only come through a cultural shift that restores trust and reminds us of our shared stake in one another's future.

The good news is that we have been here before. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, America faced similar divides. And yet, through a focus on locally driven solutions, the leadership of younger people, and a cultural shift toward the common good, our country experienced what Dr. Putnam calls "the upswing." We came together. We rebuilt. We expanded opportunity. The question now is whether we will do it again.

At Leadership New Hampshire, we believe the answer is yes, but only if we

choose it. Our mission is to build a community of informed and engaged leaders. For more than 30 years, LNH has brought together people from every corner of our state and across the political spectrum to learn, connect, and act on the issues that matter most. Our 1,100-plus alumni are business owners and executives, nonprofit directors, educators, elected officials, faith leaders, and volunteers who strengthen New Hampshire not through uniformity, but through dialogue, relationships, and action.

This work is concrete and immediate. It is rooted in the very character of New Hampshire. We pride ourselves on our accessible government, our strong local traditions, and our culture of neighbors stepping up for one another. But those traditions are fragile. Declining participation in civic groups, fewer young people staying in the state, and widening gaps between communities threaten the very

fabric of what makes New Hampshire special.

Hosting Dr. Putnam was not simply about hearing from a renowned scholar. It was about modeling the kind of civic renewal our state and nation desperately need: people coming together across differences to grapple with hard truths, ask honest questions, and imagine a better way forward.

Theodore Roosevelt once said, "On the whole, and in the long run, we shall go up or down together."

That is the choice before us.

Rebuilding civic trust will not happen in Washington. It will happen here in our towns and cities, in our schools and churches, in our Rotary clubs and nonprofits, in the everyday ways we show up for one another.

Leadership New Hampshire will continue to convene these conversations. But we cannot do this work alone. We need leaders and neighbors who are willing to bridge divides, invest in relationships, and imagine themselves as part of a larger "we."

Even if you were not in the audience last weekend, the challenge Dr. Putnam laid before us belongs to all of us. The call is to turn inspiration into action. Serve on a town committee. Coach a youth sports team. Lend your skills to a local nonprofit. Or simply take the time to get to know your neighbors.

Because in the end, civic life is not someone else's job. It is ours.

Will Stewart is executive director of Leadership New Hampshire and lives in Manchester. Learn more about Leadership New Hampshire at leadershipnh.org.

### Letters

#### Freestanding ER won't make Nashua healthier

To the Editor: As president of St. Joseph Hospital in Nashua, I feel compelled to share concerns about HCA/CMC's plan to open a freestanding emergency department on Amherst Street. While it may sound like added convenience, the reality is that this project risks confusing patients, raising costs, and weakening the hospitals that our community has relied on for generations.

Freestanding emergency rooms are not the same as hospital-based ERs. They cannot admit patients, which means anyone experiencing a serious emergency — such as a heart attack or stroke — will still require transportation to a full-service hospital like St. Joseph. For families, that could mean precious minutes lost when every second counts.

These facilities also come with higher costs. Conditions like ear infec-

tions, sprains, or minor illnesses that could be handled in an urgent care or primary care office are billed at emergency room rates. For patients, that can mean hundreds — or even thousands — of dollars in unexpected bills.

Nashua is well served by two community hospitals, each with emergency departments equipped to care for all patients, day and night. Building another high-cost facility does not make our city healthier — It risks pulling away resources from the hospitals that provide 24/7 emergency care along with a full spectrum of high-quality surgical services, cardiology interventions, advanced maternity, and cancer treatment on site.

Health care in Nashua should be about improving access, lowering costs, and strengthening the providers who are here for our community in every way.

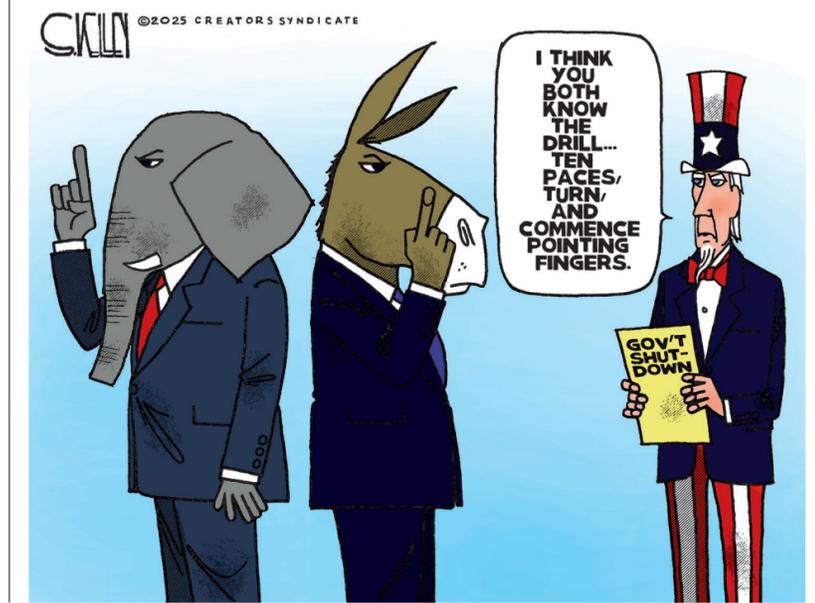
JOHN A. JURCZYK  
Hollis

#### Concerns about those influencing students

To the Editor: The September 30th front page story on the resignation of Timberlane High School teacher Ed Tinney should be a wake up call to all citizens concerned about who influences our students. If the article quotes Tinney accurately, stating that he was glad Charlie Kirk was dead and that America has never been a civil society, then letting him resign instead of firing him immediately was, in fact, too civil a response.

While chastising us for "pontificating" about America losing its civility, Tinney goes on to pontificate that America has never been civil, inferring that it's acceptable to assassinate someone he hates who publicly engages in open and free debates with college students.

I was equally appalled by his sanctimonious, non-apology apology. Instead of taking responsibility as



a mature, repentant man and admitting that what he wrote was reckless, impetuous, hateful, arrogant and dangerous, he instead regrets that his words "may have caused pain or confusion." May have? There is absolutely no confusion

about what he stated! He also states that "his career has been dedicated to encouraging critical thinking, respectful dialogue, and the responsible exchange of ideas." He has got to be kidding! Does anyone truly believe that Mr. Tinney's ap-

parent hate-America-first attitude does not come across in his classroom?

Tinney did the right thing by resigning his teaching position. I wish him well in retirement.

LEN CANNON  
New Boston

# 'Effingham Exception' is a warning other towns should heed

A BUSINESS came to Effingham five years ago with a plan to pump gas in a location where town law prohibits gas stations because a spill would threaten the Ossipee aquifer, the drinking water source for 11 communities.

A handful of Effingham residents opposed the plan and said so. But most sat on the sidelines and left discussions about the environmental risk up to conservation organizations and officials of neighboring towns.

Opponents of the plan said that gas spills are a fact of life at gas stations no matter how good the equipment is. The consequences of a spill at that particular site would be catastrophic, they argued, because of the property's highly transmissible soil.

But their arguments were not enough. The N.H. Supreme Court this month upheld the town's decision to grant a zoning variance to allow the gas station to be built.

The approved development plan contains safe-



David L. Smith

guards that the opponents fought hard to obtain. For example, untreated gas station runoff will not be allowed to drain into wetlands and enter Phillips Brook, which flows into Ossipee Lake. That was a feature of the original plan.

But improvements to the plan don't change the fact that Effingham officials created a new environmental risk where one did not previously exist. The state's highest court has now affirmed the town's right to do so.

The next question is what the other 110 New Hampshire towns with groundwater protection ordinances will learn from what happened in Effingham.

Fear of a recurrence elsewhere is not misguided. It was raised by one member of

Madison's Planning Board at one of the gas station public hearings. It has also been discussed privately by town officials in our area and beyond.

An ambitious developer, complacent municipal officials, and counterintuitive interpretations of state regulations created the "Effingham Exception" — approval of a legal carve-out to an established ordinance in order to allow a prohibited use to become a permitted use even if it creates the kind of environmental risk the ordinance was created to prevent.

Preventing another such Effingham Exception requires three things.

The first is to stop thinking that it can't happen in your town. Some of the Effingham residents who pushed for the town to adopt groundwater protections more than a decade ago were among the zoning board and planning board members who approved the gas station. Things change, people change; expect it can happen.

Second, we need to recognize that we can't count on the state to help us defend our local rules because DES has no legal authority over local groundwater protection ordinances. DES is also prone to interpreting state regulations in ways that undermine their purpose.

A case in point is the DES position that a former underground gas tank site is still a gas tank site even if the tanks were removed years ago and the site was classified as "permanently closed." That particular interpretation allowed the Effingham developer to install new underground gas tanks as if they were replacement tanks, meaning they could be closer to the property's public water supply well. Thus was the regulation's intent subverted.

Third, the Effingham Exception revealed gaps in communication with local officials. The applicant was required to provide the town with a copy of the plan it filed with DES

so it could be reviewed against local regulations. But there is no requirement to confirm that the town received it.

Effingham officials claimed they did not know about the gas station proposal until after DES approved the installation plan. When the developer's agents arrived in town with their state permit, they were in a hurry and unhappy; the town was unprepared. In haste, Effingham's ZBA rushed through an approval that violated the town's groundwater protection ordinance. It then corrected the error, but not by reversing its decision. Instead, it granted a variance that relieved the applicant from having to comply with the prohibition.

The Effingham Exception has created a precedent that makes a repeat elsewhere seem inevitable, but it need not remain so.

Requiring an applicant to obtain local approvals for risky land uses before seeking DES approval makes abundant sense. It would

make local regulations a top consideration. It would also remind town officials that they, not DES, are responsible for protecting drinking water.

Municipal officials should have a higher standard for allowing prohibited uses in groundwater protection zones. The standards used to decide if a shed can be built close to a lot line are insufficient when the issue is a gas station proposed for a former gravel pit on highly transmissive soil above a regional aquifer.

The bottom line is this: Effingham's long-standing groundwater protection ordinance failed to stop officials from allowing a developer to create a new threat to drinking water.

Developers across the state will take notice of the Effingham Exception. Municipal officials from towns with drinking water ordinances should also take notice.

David L. Smith is co-founder of non-profit Ossipee Lake Alliance. He lives in Freedom.

"There Is Nothing So Powerful As Truth" — Daniel Webster

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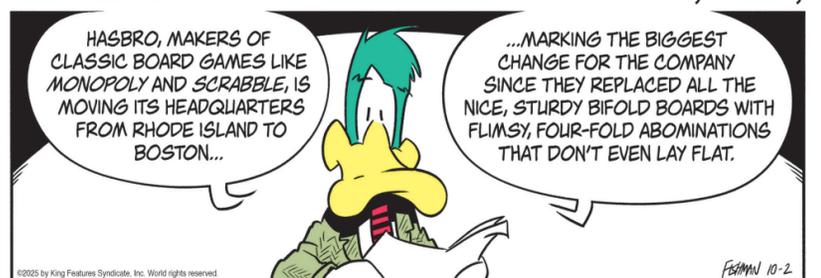
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"Where the Spirit of the Lord Is, There Is Liberty" — II Corinthians 3:17

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#### MALLARD FILLMORE

By Bruce Tinsley



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