

Candidates accuse town of questionable purchases

By Masha Rumer

First Place Winner in the New York Press Association's 2006 Better Newspaper Contest, News Story, Category 1
Westmore News, Port Chester, New York. Nov. 4, 2005

The Town of Rye is "lacking purchasing practices," claim William Villanova and Joseph Carvin, Republican candidates for the two open Town Council seats on Nov. 8 elections, in response to the town financial documents they received anonymously.

The candidates furnished the press and the State Comptroller's Office with sales receipts from Ace Hardware in Rye Brook, which show that personal items were bought in the Town's name between June 2002 and December 2003.

The sales receipts document not only Town maintenance items like cleaning supplies, but also personal items like men's socks and underwear, a grill, a Nicoderm patch, Playstation and 81 packs of cigarettes.

"There are receipts that bear the name Town of Rye and Wise Supply and on the receipts there are cigarettes," said Villanova. "I don't have all the answers, and we're asking the New York State Comptroller's Office to come in and audit the Town of Rye."

The sales receipts, which read "Town of Rye c/o Wise" or vice versa in the "sold to" section, are signed by Rye Town Parks Foreman Frank S. DeLeo. Wise refers to Wise Supply, the Town's chief supplier.

Rye Town Supervisor Robert Morabito conceded that the charges look "bad" and "inappropriate."

"If he wants to open his own account, it will have his personal name on it, not the Town of Rye's," Morabito said. "He did something he really shouldn't have done."

But, he added, DeLeo is "harmless, extremely trustworthy and loyal. He's as honest as the day is long."

Nobody in the town government knew about these personal item charges on the town account until two weeks ago when the issue came up during the candidates' forum held at the Westmore News offices on Friday, Oct. 21.

However, Morabito has since questioned DeLeo and he paid Wise Supply for all the items he charged to the town account. "The Town of Rye has never paid for any employee," Morabito stated.

Wise would later bill the town via invoices. Those, however, did not match the original Ace Hardware slips and did not reflect any of the personal purchases.

Robert Wisan, owner of Wise Supply, Inc., a Rye Brook-based company, said he was just helping DeLeo out when he was short on cash. DeLeo didn't have a checking account until he got married, Wisan suspected, and he would let the man get personal items along with the town supplies. DeLeo would always repay in cash when he got his paycheck the following week, Wisan said.

"When he was broke, he said, 'Can I go buy cigarettes?' I said, 'Charge it to me,'" said Wisan. "I never billed the Town, never charged them for any personal items. Whatever he bought, he paid me for--cigarettes, deodorant, shaving cream. He once bought a grill and paid me over three months."

"When he got engaged, he stopped running around," said Wisan. "All I was trying to do is be helpful to Frank. I never knew this would come up."

But Wisan has no documentation to support the fact that DeLeo ever paid him back, nor does he remember when the personal purchase practices began and ended.

DeLeo, employed by the Town for almost 15 years, called the allegations about his charges to the Town “outrageous and slanderous lies.”

“I demand that Mr. Villanova and Mr. Carvin produce one shred of evidence that I purchased these items and they were paid for by the Town. It is simply something they cannot do, due to the fact that these invoices were paid by me and never by the Town of Rye,” he said in a written statement.

DeLeo denounced the attempt of the Republican candidates to “tarnish the reputation of me and my family that I worked so long and hard to build.”

Democratic incumbent candidates Michele Mendicino and John Walter dismissed the Republican claims that the Town paid for DeLeo’s items. DeLeo paid for his own items later in full, they said, though they lacked supporting documentation.

“Lies become the truth when you want to believe them,” Walter said. “(The Republicans) are grasping for straws.”

Wise Supply questioned

The Town has been cited by the New York State Comptroller’s 2003 audit for overspending its budget and failure to solicit bids for items and services of \$20,000 or higher.

The Republican candidates challenged the Town earlier this fall on the issue, to which Mendicino and Walter responded that the town bought items and services in parts and could not predict the total in advance.

Carvin pointed out that this year the town already overspent its budget and did not solicit bids from its main suppliers, Wise Supply Inc. and Zicca Landscaping. “The Town of Rye does not use a competitive bidding process,” said Villanova.

But Morabito and Mendicino said the town also relies on services and goods from other local companies like Feinsod Hardware, Datino’s Landscaping, Floral Fashions and Healthy Clean Buildings out of Melville, N.Y.

Morabito explained that dealing with Wisan, who has been supplying the town with goods for 10 years, makes accounting easier.

“The advantage is to keep everything under one bill so we don’t get bills from 15 different vendors,” Morabito said.

Wise Supply works as a broker to the town and has a catalogue representing 100 companies offering items like janitorial supplies, coffee, Sweet ‘n Low, and light bulbs, Wisan explained from his home office at 11 Longledge Dr.

“I go to whoever I’m buying from, depends on what they want,” Wisan said. “Somebody says ‘I want pruning sheers,’ I go to the source where I buy my pruning sheers.”

Wisan does not mark up the items, he said. He charges the town for Ace Hardware items the same as if the townspeople were to walk into Ace Hardware on their own. Some products may cost more because they are heavy-duty items to suit the town’s needs.

“I don’t want to involve anybody else,” he responded when asked about his other clients.

Healthy Clean Buildings and Feinsod Hardware said they bill products directly to the Town. Hardware store owner Jay Feinsod has never heard of Wise Supply.

“Why should they do that? That’s crazy,” said Feinsod about going through a middleman. “We have a very simple system here,” he said

Jananne Abel contributed to this story.