

THE WAYLAND TOWN CRIER

An edition of
The MetroWest Daily News

April 7 - 13, 2011

WickedLocalWayland.com

Vol. 137, No. 14 75 cents

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QUESTION & ANSWER

Picking up gavel for last time

Peter Gossels has served as moderator for 30 years

By Susan L. Wagner
Staff Writer

When Wayland Town Moderator Peter Gossels steps up to the podium at annual Town Meeting on Thursday, April 7, he will be presiding over the first of its kind in the commonwealth to take a crack at electronic voting. When he steps down after the last session, it will be for his last time. He has been running this important institution in local

democracy for 30 years, and is slated to be replaced by Dennis Berry, who ran unopposed for the position. Reporter Susan Wagner talks to Gossels on the eve of his retirement.

QIn your announcement to the town late last year that you would not be running again, you noted that you were a refugee from Nazi Germany. Could you elaborate on that?

AYes. I was born in Berlin. In 1939, as

Hitler's intentions towards us as Jews had become patently clear, my family sent me to France. I stayed there until September 1941, when I came to the United States. My daughter made an Emmy Award-winning film, "The Children of Chabannes," based in part on my experience of being rescued, along with my brother Werner, who also lives in Wayland, by the citizens of a small - and otherwise ordinary - French village. We were so fortunate. Most of

my family perished in the Nazi death camps.

QYou have been town moderator for 30 years?

AThat's right. And for 15 years before that I was town counsel and I served on the Finance Committee. So far as I can tell, I am the longest-serving moderator the town of Wayland has had in the last two centuries.



Town Moderator Peter Gossels FILE PHOTO

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GOSSELS

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Q Why are you stepping down?

A It's time. Don't you think?

Q What are some of your proudest accomplishments?

A There are several. One was the institution of time limits on the debates. This has resulted in cutting the average time per article from 33 minutes in 1985 to 14 minutes in 2009. Another was adopting the "pro" and "con" microphones - an idea, and let me be frank, that I borrowed from the League of Women Voters.

This allows me to create a conversation and produces a more civil debate. Third, I created "The Moderator's Handbook for Wayland Town Meetings," which explains the authority and function of town meeting and lays out the rules and regulations that govern the institution. New England town meetings are unique and many residents arrive for their first town meeting without ever having participated in one before. This booklet, then, was designed for them as well as an update and refresher for more seasoned participants.

Q This upcoming Wayland Town Meeting will be the first time that a community in the commonwealth has attempted to use electronic voting. What is your opinion and do you think the effort will be successful?

A I'll be in a better position to answer that after we've attempted it. The town voted to give electronic voting a try and Option Technologies Interaction has donated hardware, software and warm bodies to make that a reality.

That said, I believe that, if, at a later date, the town

decides to implement such a system, it will be expensive, in the neighborhood of \$50,000. And that doesn't count all the labor involved, for example in the check-in process. Also, this is the first time, except for only two very exceptional occasions during my tenure, that secret ballots will be conducted at town meeting. Thirdly, given how detailed the check-in process will be, I'm really not sure that it will save very much time.

Q Do you have a few parting words for the citizens of Wayland?

A I'm extremely grateful to the town for granting me the privilege of presiding over a true democracy, which is Wayland's town meeting. I've tried to conduct these events fairly, impartially, and with a modicum of humor, while treating everyone who participates with respect. This is because I believe that giving everyone a reasonable opportunity to be heard at town meeting contributes to a higher goal than efficiency, namely the peace of Wayland. By the same token, by giving respect, one gains respect.