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We all share a duty to ‘disagree respectfully’ (The Republican Editorials)

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Sam Shumsky, city councilor for Chicopee's Ward 6, said he received physical and online threats after voting to move a zoning and license proposal to a subcommittee hearing in December. Sam Shumsky

By The Republican Editorials

It is hard to find people willing to run for local elected office. Seats go uncontested, or even vacant, in communities across the U.S. One reason for that, experts say, is an increase in animosity in public life – of the sort seen late last month in Chicopee.

After voting to steer a controversial development proposal to a subcommittee, a routine step, the city's Ward 6 councilor, Samuel R. Shumsky, received phone calls from people he said threatened to hurt or kill him. On top of that, the lug nuts on his car were loosened, risking his safety, and that of others, in a serious accident.

Shumsky spoke up about threats he faced. It is a credit to him that he managed, in a public statement, to strike a tone of both calm and resolve. "No other individuals on the council or committee should be at the receiving end of such vitriol," he wrote. "I will not stand silent when (faced with) expressions of threats, wishes, or acts of harm against me to be injured or, even worse, killed."

Shumsky's service to residents of Chicopee is just that: service. The work that he and other elected councilors perform isn't exalted or glamorous. But it is essential to proper management of this city's affairs. Shumsky's vote last month to send a proposal regarding the Pilot Travel Center will result in further debate about the project at a subcommittee meeting at 6 p.m. Dec. 16.

People from the area in Chicopee who would be most affected have more chances to speak up.

In the meantime, we join Shumsky in calling for restraint.

Citizens must do more than refrain from making threats. We all need to speak up when we hear someone resort to anger, rather than to reason and persuasion, when differences emerge over public policy.

People who actually know each other, in neighborhoods and smaller cities and towns, are best positioned to show this basic respect. We are the ones who must hold the line on incivility – and worse – that's on the rise nationally.

Last year, Princeton University's Bridging Divides Initiative joined with the nonprofit CivicPulse to survey 1,400 local elected officials about this problem. Nearly half of those contacted said they'd been personally insulted in their positions. A third had been harassed. And almost 20% said that they, like Shumsky in Chicopee, had been threatened.

That work followed up on a survey by the Brennan Center which found that one in every six local election officials had been threatened.

Unlike national politics, decisions made by local governments aren't partisan. They shouldn't be supercharged by the hostility exchanged between the country's two major political parties, the red states versus the blue ones, the coasts against the middle or however you choose to frame this woeful contention.

And yet angry people at the local level are letting emotions get the better of them, just as we see happening on a bigger scale. According to PolitiFact, threats made against members of Congress climbed more than tenfold in five years, rising from 902 in 2016 to 9,625 in 2021.

Over the Thanksgiving week, several members of Congress received bomb threats signed "MAGA," they reported. Outrageous threats of physical violence have also been made against people who President-elect Donald Trump has nominated for national office, including U.S. Rep. Elise Stefanik, former U.S. Rep. Lee Zeldin, U.S. Rep. Lori Chavez-DeRemer and Pete Hegseth.

We wish Shumsky's message to his city and constituents could reach all Americans. "We are not just Ward 6, Chicopee or Massachusetts," he wrote, "but the United States of America."

We regret that Shumsky's appeal to national pride, with those words, doesn't seem to carry the power it once did.

In his social media posts, Shumsky said that "for the sake of civility, I am asking everyone to please step back and attack the nature of this issue ...."

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The best guide on that, he suggested, is the example set by American democracy over nearly 250 years.

"We have the liberty to agree and to disagree respectfully," Shumsky wrote. "Men and women have fought and died for this right. We do not have the right to threaten those with whom we may have a difference of opinion. I ask that everyone please curtail violent political discourse and remember that we all have the right to disagree respectfully."

Yes, he said "please." Let's all use that word more often.