

My name is Gerard (Gerry) Crémé and I live at 8 Wood Fern Way. This is not about me or a community/senior center. This is about a unique perspective that I offer to you from who I am and where I have been in life.

I am a resident and taxpayer of Andover, CT and have been for 17 years. I am a senior citizen and a retired teacher. I am a volunteer. I have served on the Andover Board of Education for 8 years, and I am currently chairman of this board. I am the father of a 36-year-old daughter and a husband to one of your commission members on the Andover P & Z. As I look at our current situation with the building of a community/senior center, I can share with you my view and feelings based on the tapestry and variety of my life experiences. I will start at the beginning.

I chose to live in Andover because I loved the rural nature of Andover and it was a place that I could have an accessory apartment for my aging parents. When I moved to town, I did not expect any of the services that I was accustomed to in West Hartford. I knew that I would be paying more in taxes and receiving less services in return. I moved here not knowing that I would be receiving far more than what suburban towns had to offer. When my dad died shortly after we moved in, my mom was having a rough time with the loss. I reached out to the Andover Seniors and asked them to invite my mom to join them. They went above and beyond to embrace mom and make her part of your family. They met in a dilapidated old firehouse filled with mold and love. That was my first encounter with the Andover Seniors. Mom joined them for lunches, bus trips and gatherings.

After Anne and I retired, we joined the senior citizens group. We met in the community room because the old firehouse had been shut down. Cathy Palazzi and the seniors welcomed us with open arms. Am I in favor of a senior/community center? How can I not be in favor of it? These friends have been waiting patiently for a long time for this. I have known these people for a long time and want them to have a space to call their own. They deserve the love and respect from all of us.

After I retired, I wanted to keep busy and volunteer my time to help out my town. I saw an ad in the local River East weekly newspaper. The town was advertising for someone to serve on the Board of Education to fill a vacancy. I “applied” for the position. I was the only game in town because no other person applied. I brought only my experience of being a classroom teacher and no administrator or board experience. I certainly had no political experience and did not want any. As time went on, each budget season became a competition for money between the town (Board of Selectmen) and the school (Board of Education). Senior citizens were pitted against parents of students at AES. I don’t know how this started, but it started long before me. This divided the town. There were no winners...only losers. The Board of Finance was in the middle.

After getting to know the school community, I realized that AES was the “crown jewel” of Andover. It was a hidden diamond as someone once said to me that AES was a “school to die for”. There really wasn’t much else in town that gave any value to our property. In order to support our town we would have to increase taxes or start to look for some commercial development in order to help us pay our bills. The battle over money continued every year with the seniors pitted against the school community.

Finally, after the passage of time, our school board hired a superintendent who put children and the school as her top priority. Superintendent Valerie Bruneau came and helped us recover from COVID and brought our school back to excellence. She saw the senior citizens as an integral part of our community and included them in as many activities as possible. The students made birthday cards and place mats for the seniors. Valerie and students would also come and serve and clean up senior luncheons. Valerie reached out into the community and shared her friendship with all. She adopted the seniors into her school family.

Valerie applies for each and every grant opportunity that comes along. Valerie has worked 24 -7 for our school and she receives only a part time salary. As a result of her hard work and endless effort, she has brought hundreds of thousands of dollars into our school and community. This has provided a significant source of additional funds for our school with no cost to the tax payer. She has given her heart and soul into our school and into our town in order to help provide for our students and keep them at the top of the list. With Valerie's leadership, Andover's students can compete on any level and come out on top.

The new community/senior center is now being planned for the space behind the town hall and next to the school. As the planning process moved forward, Valerie and the Board of Education started to have questions about the impact of construction on the safety and well-being of our students and their education. Answers were not forthcoming. It could be that the answers were unknown or because the answers were being hidden...or a combination of both. It also appeared that the boundary line between the town hall and the school was being moved

without any reason given and without any communication with the superintendent or the Board of Education approval. The Board of Education after reading the state laws, believed that our rights were being violated. That is exactly what brought us to the point of seeking legal counsel. The town administrator and the selectmen were offended that we consulted an attorney. They wrongly assumed that we wanted to stop or get in the way of the community/senior center and stop it from being built. Nothing could be further from the truth. First Selectman Jeff Maguire said that he hates lawyers. But at the last public hearing on June 7th, the Board of Selectman had the town attorney, the Planning and Zoning Commission had their land use attorney. The Board of Education did not have an attorney.

As the construction planning continued from the fall through the winter and into the spring, several meetings and phone calls took place. I am embarrassed to tell you that the superintendent and I were personally subjected to profanity, disrespect, threats and abusive behaviors on various occasions. We were lied to on many occasions about the rights of the Board of Education and the progress and details about the planning and construction of this project. I will not name names or give the ugly details. This type of behavior should not be allowed from town officials and board members to other town employees and board members. Remember that all Board members are elected volunteers. We, as residents, should appreciate the time and effort that all town Board members freely give. We may not always agree, but we should expect civility and honesty from the leaders and residents in this town.

The Board of Education has asked on several occasions that the Board of Selectmen work with us and collaborate with us. We were met with silence even though we were reaching out in cooperation and in good faith. The seniors are a part of our family. We are in no way looking to

stop construction. At our site walk of the planned construction site, one of the selectmen told us to have our attorney draw up a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) along with our list of questions and concerns.

At our Board of Education meeting on June 14th, we had invited the Board of Selectman to meet with us and join our board meeting. Only First Selectman Jeff Maguire and Selectwomen Paula King attended. Jeff attempted to answer all of the questions to the best of his ability. He didn't have all of the answers. In my opinion, the meeting went well. Everyone was respectful and calm. Jeff left with the list of questions and the unsigned MOU.

Before Planning and Zoning gives its approval for this construction of a senior/community center, it should be certain that all zoning regulations are followed. Due to the impact of construction on the school, the MOU must be signed before the P & Z issues the special permit. It is my hope that as we proceed through the construction process, all questions will be answered honestly and that people will be kind, respectful and civil to each other.

The question was raised, "Why can't our three major boards, Board of Finance, Board of Education and Board of Selectmen, meet two or three times a year and work together to collaborate and plan together for the future of our town. Great question!! Open dialogue, civility, honesty, and conversation must be our standard of operation. We may disagree on some things, but we have to come to a compromise at times. Instead of a power struggle and a competition for dollars every budget season and throughout the year, why not work together to make our town of Andover the awesome place that it can be. We love this town and we hold no grudges or ill will to any of our residents. I only ask that we cooperate, collaborate and be kind and civil toward one other. I

personally want to extend my appreciation and thanks to all residents who step forward to volunteer your time to serve our town on boards and commissions. Thank you.