

Ethics can be a pretty dull subject — unless you are involved in an ethics complaint.

Mayor Patricia Murphy recently proposed streamlining ethics proceedings. This may be laudable, but it also begs an explanation as to why she delayed an ethics hearing against John Spatola for 14 months, after a full bipartisan Ethics Commission found probable cause. John Kane, a New Milford First candidate for Town Council, brought that complaint.

The issue was that Spatola, as a Finance Board member, acted to prevent the town from bidding competitively on United Water Co. land that his long time partner, Tom Pilla, already had bid on. The town had the right of first refusal. When the town could not bid on the land because of the Finance Board decision, Spatola then, within months, bought from Pilla and developed at least two lots in the same subdivision.

During the 14-month delay, all but one Ethics Commission members were replaced. Two, including the chairman, resigned in protest.

This year, New Milford paid Spatola's attorneys \$90,000. “I believe,” Kane said, “Mr. Spatola did not have to spend \$90,000. I believe he did it because he knew the Republican-controlled Town Council would use taxpayer money to pay his attorney — just like the Republican-controlled Ethics Commission allowed him to get away with voting on a matter in which he had a financial interest.”

The town has spent nothing on its own legal counsel and did nothing to pursue its own commission's findings. “It is interesting to note,” Kane said, “that the Republican-controlled Town Council has appointed Mr. Spatola's attorney to the Board of Education and has appointed the Ethics Commission chairman to the Town Council. “It may just be a perception,” Kane said, “but it sure is interesting that the two principal players in this case got appointed. I thought the ‘Spoils System’ ended long ago.”

Kane and New Milford First have called for a state ethics code with regional commissions. “Some local politicians clearly are not capable of policing themselves,” he said. New Milford First, an innovative, inclusive alternative to politics as usual, will be on line 3 of the ballot. For more information, visit www.NewMilfordFirst.org.