

Interview with Town Clerk Candidate Gina Sinon

AllAboutArmonk.com President Michelle Boyle discussed what's expected of the Town Clerk with Gina Sinon. She is circulating a petition to run for North Castle's Town Clerk in the upcoming November 2010 election.

"When there is an election" Sinon says, "you find people with a fresh perspective."

AAA: How and when did you know you wanted to run for Town Clerk?

GS: I started to think about it when Ann Leber retired in December. I began to research the position and gather information. At the same time, a number of people began to contact me and told me they thought I would be perfect for the position, given my skill set and work and volunteer experience.

AAA: Gathering that information was there anything in particular that surprised you or that persuaded you to say, yes, this is something that I want to pursue?

GS: Being Town Clerk is a multifaceted job. It helps to have some knowledge of private business sector, and then bring the government up to speed. The criticism of government is always that it lags behind the private field. I'm also great multi-tasker, I'm detail-oriented, and very organized. My husband always says, "If you want something done, give it to a busy person," and that's me. I enjoy being challenged. That can be done with the Town Clerk's office. And what better place to do this than in the place where I grew up, attended school and spent half of my life. I find this part of the job very appealing.

AAA: What does the Town Clerk do?

GS: Instead of repeat the requirements of the Town Clerk from the web site, I prefer to tell you what the Town Clerk's office should be doing. It must be proactive. The most important role of the office is to act as liaison between the people of the community and the town government. There should be an open door policy. There should be a feeling that everyone is welcome to come in for information and give feedback as well. We also need to be more proactive in our communication with the town. During the most recent board meeting, the point was raised that the town currently doesn't have an email list for its residents. The Town Clerk's office must assume the responsibility of obtaining and organizing this list. While it may be time-consuming, the town will ultimately reap the benefits of having a list. The town has a master list with everybody's address, and an email list can be created from this. In addition, a comprehensive email list of businesses in town is not available. Currently, there are five people that work in the Town Clerk's office – there does not seem to be a lack of personnel to accomplish the task.

AAA: It seems as if our town officials are under a big magnifying glass, and now the job of Town Clerk is under pressure. How will you handle that?

GS: Yes, I agree with you. That can be a daily part of any business. I bring a fresh perspective, a perspective from having worked on my own. I've seen what works and what doesn't. I have worked for a big law firm in Manhattan, have a small private practice, and have helped build my husband's company. Different-sized firms give you different perspectives and I've seen the many different ways things are done.

A fresh perspective is good, but it is also very important to listen to what people have to say. A lot of people find it hard to take constructive criticism. I don't. When you work for the people of North Castle, you have to be open to what people they say. You may not agree with someone. His view may not always be right, or put forward in the most polite way. You need to listen and have a thick skin. When people feel they are heard, it makes them feel better and sometimes that's all that is needed fix the problem.

AAA: As you may know, a resident foiled the town for their email list and this is circulating all over town. How do you prevent this from happening?

GS: Information that the town has is subject to Freedom of information Law ; however, there are privacy issues. If someone requests that personal information not be shared, that can be done. The project is still viable, even if certain limitations need to be implemented.

FOIL requests are the way the town communicates with the residents that seek information. Most people are not aware that the Freedom of Information Law requires the state, federal and town government to provide information to citizens. To suggest that it should be curtailed shows a lack of understanding of the law and rights of the citizens. While we may not always agree with what is being requested or asked, the town is sometimes the only source that has the necessary or requested information. Is it time consuming? Yes; however, the answer is not to curtail requests since that is a right given to every citizen. The answer is how we make it easier for the town to handle those requests. For example, if you have a hot-button issue like Westwood, you need the copies of the contract related to it readily available. You should anticipate that people are going to request it or FOIL it. Prior to the board meeting, copies of documents related to the topic being discussed should be readily available to the residents. All pertinent documents should be scanned into the Town website. Such action would certainly cut down on FOIL requests since you are making the information readily available to the residents. It is essential – and legally required - that the information be provided to town members in some manner.

Moreover, The FOIL requires the Town Clerk's Office to make the records accessible, but does not require the Town Clerk's office to sift through a paper trail. That too would cut down on the amount of time necessary to comply with the law. Once again, the answer lies in finding a more economically, efficient way to accomplish the task, rather than eliminating the task itself, especially when you cannot legally do so.

Another method of communication that needs improvement involves the absence of televised broadcasts of the board meetings in parts of North White Plains. We need to consider the needs of residents of North White Plains. You have to consider why North White Plains is not a priority. Since they are part of the town of North Castle, their needs must be recognized.

AAA: How do you address this issue?

GS: Another important issue is necessitating that the appropriate people in the Town Clerk's office have the skills sets to do the job. As an attorney, I would be able to perform the duties that perhaps the layperson wouldn't be able to do. I would also recommend utilizing technology to cut down on paper usage and improve productivity. Excel spreadsheets could be used to outline hours and benefits of town employees, rather than using outdated paper records.

I think it is important to note that there are five employees in the Town Clerk's office at a budget of \$400,000, of which I believe 95% is salary and benefits. Given the economic times we find ourselves in, I think the rationale of that decision has to be evaluated. We need to ask whether it is necessary to have so much money and resources spent in this office. Moreover, half of the goals listed by the Town Clerk for 2010 are associated with recycling. While recycling is important and necessary, we have a volunteer recycling committee. Do we really want to spend half of the Town Clerk's resources on recycling?

Other improvements and efficiencies for the office: There should be an outline of the job responsibilities of The Town Clerk's office and a road map for residents who need guidance and assistance in accomplishing something they need done in the town.

The web site should lists links where town members can click and print out forms they need; this would cut paper costs and offer a convenient way for citizens to get what they need. Many other towns currently offer these links on their web sites.

AAA: Let's talk about your career. How do you continue your career and simultaneously be Town Clerk?

GS: I have my own private law practice but I don't know if I will continue my practice if I win. The clerkship will take a lot of time and I'm willing to put that time in. It is not just an 8:30 - 4:30pm job. There are night meetings. I'm fine with that; I went into law to help people. That's what I enjoy. In a big firm, I couldn't always do this. Now I do transactional legal work, real estate closings, contracts, and the setting up of corporations, trusts and estates. I went into private practice to help people and have a connection with them. The pay certainly was less, but I got more personal satisfaction helping clients. I spend more time then I charge for, and I work one on one with most of my clients throughout the day. I would welcome the opportunity to help the people of North Castle. For a lot of the areas of law that I practice now I am self-taught; it was not what I

did at my law firm, and it was a challenge. I like a challenge. I like it when there is always something new that comes up.

When my children were preschool age, I was involved in the Byram Hills Preschool Association. I was probably on every committee that the organization has. My final year, I was chosen president, an achievement I am very proud of. I'm also proud of serving on a committee started by Robin Glat, who was just elected as a new school board member. "Little Helping Hands" was about getting preschool age children to give back to their community. Glat had asked me to lead the committee that year. We had a lot of nay-sayers who said, "You can't teach a three-year-old to be empathetic and you can't teach a three-year-old to give back and know what it means." We convinced everybody that we could. We wanted to start a wide variety of projects so that the children would stay interested and see a wide variety of things. This is testing my memory now, but I know that we made blankets for a group called Project Linus, for children that were ill and spending a long time in a hospital. The children decorated the blankets and then a group of local women sewed the patches together. We collected dog supplies, and had seeing eye-dogs visit. We did so much.

I also serve as the Co-chair of the Events Committee of St. Patrick's Church. I'm good at getting people to help and getting people excited about an event. I've participated the Meals on Wheels program, and helped with the Food Bank in Greenwich. And I try to get my children and other young people involved. I was involved in the literacy program that taught adults how to read in Yonkers. Even when I was in high school, I was a teacher's aid, and I did this in college as well.

As an undergraduate I went to Washington University in St. Louis, then to Law School at Fordham. I graduated cum laude.

AAA: This election is an unusual circumstance. The term is just one year. Another election occurs in November 2011. There are two scenarios, Anne Curran gets elected and finishes a second year, or you get voted in and the 2011 election comes just a year from now. Can you project to November 2011?

GS: The term of the Town Clerk is four years, but this elected term is for just one year, to finish out Ann Leber's term, because Ann retired in December in the middle of her term. This election is for a term of one year because the Town Board can appoint an interim Town Clerk for only one of the two years that were remaining.

The campaign has just begun and I have put so much energy into learning about the Clerk's position, and into meeting people. I'm in this for the long haul and this is definitely something I want to continue.

I'm excited to be part of the election process and the change in administration. Government has to change, and I don't think that can be accomplished in just one year. Can I predict what will happen in a year? No, I can't. Am I interested in the clerkship and is it something I would run for again? Sure.

AAA: How important is the relationship between the Town Clerk's office and the Town Board when it comes to working for the residents of the community? Are there improvements to be made?

GS: Providing the Town Board with all the information necessary for them to make wise decisions is essential. I can't tell you whether the present Town Clerk does that job, so it is hard for me to determine how to make improvements. Certainly gathering information from every source and providing the information promptly is essential. That's the role to facilitate the decision making process. This position is not really a political job. In politics you have to be endorsed by a party to get on the ballot and there's a lot that's involved in that. Whatever my political affiliations and my own personal political philosophy is, it does not come out in the role of Town Clerk. I can have my own personal opinion, but it really isn't relevant to the Town Clerk position. This is about who is the most qualified person for the job, and who can take this position during into the next five to ten years.

The importance of the clerk is it provides one place in which questions can be asked. As explained in a road map, here's where you need to go, here's what you need to do. It cuts done on everybody's time and level of frustration, when there is one place to access all the information. But again, you have to become more efficient at the workplace to be able to do that. It is a multi-faceted job, which makes it so interesting.

AAA: How important a role does the Town Clerk have in dealing with the responsibilities of the Town Board?

GS: It is very important in terms of setting up the agendas and making sure the public notices of meetings and special hearings get to the public. There are also administrative items that come up during the board meetings that need attention, and it would be helpful for board members to have everything at their fingertips. It is a big job and the Town Board positions are not full-time positions; some hold down full-time jobs, in addition to providing the service to the town, and their time is limited. The role of the Town Clerk is to make the life of the Town Board members easier by being able to address those needs.

AAA: Does the Town Clerk open the door to everything and anything the Town Board may need and does the Town Board expect that?

GS: Anything that is related to an agenda item is certainly there for follow-up. The role is like that of an administrative assistant: to facilitate the job and to make it easier for the Town Board members, by providing information in an efficient manner.

AAA: Should the Town Clerk play a bigger role in making sure the agenda is adhered to, as you say with all the relevant information residents should have access to? But with the meeting itself, should the Town Clerk play a bigger role in running the meeting?

GS: No. Running the meeting is not the Town Clerk's role. It is the Supervisor's role to decide the agenda and how things are discussed. The Town Clerk has a limited role. Prior to televised meetings, written minutes were taken, but do we really need written in the minutes if it is televised? Some information must be kept in a written form, but to what extent? That is up for debate. Maybe a laptop wired to the Town Clerk's office for pertinent information to be available during the meeting is the solution. One of the healthiest things to do is to think "outside the box" and be willing to look at something, instead of just doing it the way it has been done, in the past. What if the minutes were typed rather than handwritten, just like high school and college students do? Think about taking the step because it is faster. Is it possible? Maybe we should be doing the bare minimum in written minutes because it is televised. I don't know the answer, but it is worth looking at.

The people of North Castle are very intelligent. They are very resourceful and have a lot of great ideas, and you have to be open to those ideas. Let's get a dialogue going: what's the best way to use our limited town resources? Do we need such detailed handwritten minutes?

AAA: How do the limited town resources affect the Town Clerk's office?

GS: Looking at the budget for 2010, it was \$400,000. About 95% of that is salaries and benefits. Do we need five people in that office? If it is not possible to reduce the number of employees, are there more productive uses of their time? Are we using our employees most efficiently? If the budget can't be cut, are we making the best use of their time and skills and are we producing for the town? These are essential questions that need to be asked.

AAA: Even though this is not about politics, you have the endorsement of the North Castle Republican Party. Do you anticipate an endorsement from another party?

GS: As a newcomer on the political scene, I don't know how likely it is that I would be endorsed by another political party. But I would like to point out that this is not a political position. In other towns, even in parts of Westchester, it is an appointed position and not an elected one. But there is a great opportunity when it is an elected position. When the clerk's office is an appointed position, you can shuffle people around. You have people who have worked for the town for a long time, people known to the town government, people with whom the town is comfortable. But when there is an election you can recruit from other places and you can find people with fresh new perspectives. Someone with a skill set that transfers, not someone readily been available at the doorstep.

AAA: What would be the advantage if the Town Clerk were appointed rather than elected?

GS: That's what happens in some other towns, but I'm looking from the outside in so it is difficult for me to answer. What is important is to point out is that the Clerk's office is not

a political position; it is a liaison between the government and the community. It should make the job of the Town Board easier and be a welcoming, friendly, open, and transparent place for the community. It would be hard if you had someone that was appointed that the constituents were not happy with.

AAA: If a town employee is campaigning for a position such as Town Clerk, should they be restricted to campaign outside of normal business hours? What if you are Town Clerk and you're seeking reelection, must you campaign outside of regular hours because campaigning is not part of your job?

GS: Two things: First of all, in my campaign I do work outside of my normal hours to gather information, and meet people and speak to people. Generally that's what goes on, most people that campaign don't just do it on a 9 to 5 basis. They work as well. People in the community know me through my volunteer work. I had three or four people come to me and say, "You know, I think you'd be perfect for this Town Clerk position." People have seen me do other things in the community and know that I can transfer my skills and do a good job as Clerk because, they say, "you have a done a good job with x,y and z." But you have a big stage when you are in the Clerk's position, elected or not. Part of it has to be done outside of normal hours. I don't know if the constituents would be happy if someone were taking their time to campaign. Better to do a good job and have that help in your campaign.

AAA: What can you add to the position of Town Clerk?

GS: The way to do it is to get in there, roll up your sleeves and see what can be done. I like a challenge. It is important to have the right skill set and be open to new ideas. And it is equally important to view the town residents as a resource to take advantage of. It is important that the Town Clerk's office be that central place where people can go.

People are so busy in our culture today. While everyone in the office must know how to deal with all the issues, the most efficient way to run the office is to direct questions to a delegated person with the responsibility of the topic at hand, such as the town's voting machines. If someone is handling the same questions on a consistent basis, they are qualified to answer these questions. Then you have accountability with a designated person overseeing specific duties. It increases efficiency and makes people accountable, like a successful standard business model.

AAA: If you could change one thing about our town, what would it be?

GS: You're asking a question that as Town Clerk I wouldn't necessarily deal with. But, I would like to see fewer empty buildings downtown. I would like North Castle to continue to be a place where people walk and shop. I'd like to see that improved. When we see the economy start to pick up, which it has, we will start to improve this and start attracting businesses to come to the town.

Look how buying rose when they increased the tax credit for first time homebuyers. There has been a flurry of activity, and now you have houses moving and owners being able to sell their houses who couldn't before, and real estate brokers earning commissions and attorneys earning fees. Certain industries bounce back first and that spurs other industries. As Town Clerk, I wouldn't necessarily deal with this, but thinking outside the box to improve anything that might work better is worth a shot. Let's be productive, that's how you succeed in business.

AAA: Is there anything that you have learned about yourself during the campaign?

GS: I have learned that this process has two parts: one is a campaign and the political aspect to it, although this is not a political position. Still, I often feel it is too political for a non-political position. The second thing I've learned is the actual role of the job of Town Clerk, and learning how to balance the job and my personal life. I also have learned that sometimes the campaign itself, such as petition signing and learning the intricacies of the election law and how things have to be done, have nothing to do with the job itself.

Finally, I've learned that I can talk to anybody. In my daily life I have always dealt with a variety of people with different interests. People have been very supportive.