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Borough, yeshiva officials would like to mend fences

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ROOSEVELT — A recent incident in which paintballs were shot at a local residence may lead to better dialogue between borough residents and members of the local yeshiva.

Two teens were each charged with criminal mischief and harassment on Nov. 28 for shooting about 70 paintballs at a North Rochdale Avenue residence where students who attend the Homestead Lane yeshiva stay.

According to police, Brian Moore, 19, of Roosevelt, and Michael Baniowski, 18, of Monroe, were not charged with hate crimes over the Nov. 19 incident because their actions came as a result of boredom, not anti-Semitism.

At the Borough Council's Dec. 4 meeting, Mayor Beth Battel read a statement regarding the incident. She called Roosevelt "a diverse community with a history and reputation for peaceful, respectful coexistence."

Battel said the council deplors the recent incident at 53 N. Rochdale Ave., which Rabbi Yisroel Eisenberg, of Yeshiva Me'on Hatorah, is currently leasing from owner Paul Brottman for use by the yeshiva students.

"Vandalism is an act against property," Battel said. "This went beyond vandalism to harassment and intimidation [and was] especially abhorrent because the victims were children."

Battel said that she feels the act does not reflect the feelings of the borough and its residents.

"In a democracy, who can protect the public interest but the public itself?" she asked. "I believe we are a town that encourages diversity, acceptance, decency and respect for all.

"I hope you all join with me to pledge to protect freedom and safety of everyone in Roosevelt," she added.

Battel said there is "a genuine disagreement" in town about how the yeshiva's activities may conflict with the borough's zoning laws.

"The discourse and debate that surround that issue are a normal and important freedom protected by our democratic laws and heritage," she said. "But there is never a place for prejudice or violence of any kind to enter into that discourse."

Former Mayor Neil Marko, a yeshiva supporter who was ousted in a February recall election, said he appreciated Battel's comments. However, he said he believes the governing body has some culpability regarding the ugly incident.

"Action and inaction by the Borough Council," he said, "have contributed to the environment that people would even think of doing something like that."

Marko mentioned a recent note from Battel in the town's newsletter regarding the council's authorization to spend \$10,000 on special legal counsel in the constitutional law field to "better position ourselves to protect and defend our town and all of our citizens' constitutional rights."

The borough will spend the money to obtain legal counsel familiar with yeshiva issues.

Marko also brought up the subject of the borough's bulletin board, located in front of the post office. He claimed the council had turned a blind eye to "lies and half-truths" that have been posted on the board regarding the yeshiva.

"We like to think that Roosevelt is a glorious place where people get along," he said.

"[But] that has certainly not been the case for the last 18 months," he added, referring to when the yeshiva first became an issue in town.

Councilman Michael Hamilton said he is opposed to the bulletin board because people can put up whatever they want there. While he does not want to regulate speech, he said there needs to be some oversight if the Borough Council continues to sponsor the board. Otherwise, he said, the council should get rid of it.

Marko said that if the council ignores hate speech, it is a de facto endorsement of such speech.

Councilman Dan Hoffman said the council has not been inactive. He also said allegations of bigoted remarks have come from both pro- and anti-yeshiva factions.

Councilman Bob Silverstein said the council's attorney advised that the council is not allowed to regulate free speech in the community. He said council members were told that if someone finds something offensive on the bulletin board, that individual can take it down, but the council cannot.

However, Marko said the council can set guidelines for postings since it is the council's bulletin board.

Hoffman said the council needs to organize a committee to discuss issues relating to the bulletin board.

Noting that the paintball gun could have been a real gun, Marko asked the council to "tone down the rhetoric" regarding the yeshiva. He alleged that other incidents with yeshiva students occur all the time, such as people "flipping the bird" and making intolerant comments.

"If [you're] not a member of a particular group," Marko said, "[you] don't recognize what is intolerant to them."

While the paintball situation was not the first incident, Marko called it "the most egregious."

Battel said a diversity/tolerance group is being formed in the borough to open lines of communication with people in town whom Marko believes have been offended.

Hamilton said he would like to have a dialogue with Marko, as well as people from the yeshiva and the synagogue.

"We need to sit down and talk about these issues," he said. "Let's not talk at each other all the time. Let's talk together."

Marko agreed that discussions must take place.

Joshua Pruzansky, vice president of Yeshiva Me'on Hatorah, said he thought that having discussions is a great idea, as it is important for the yeshiva, the synagogue and the council to mend fences.

Pruzansky said that discussing issues unrelated to land use could turn around the atmosphere in town.

Hoffman said he thought that land use would still be a topic of discussion at any meeting where diversity is being discussed.

“Land use is really the overriding issue,” he said.

Pruzansky said that land use should be discussed at Planning Board meetings. He also said he would like to have a meeting about building bridges of communication between the yeshiva and the synagogue and other members of the community.

“Let’s face it,” Pruzansky said. “The yeshiva is here to stay in this community. People shouldn’t have thoughts anymore that they will drive us out.”