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School Volunteers Incensed Over Prom Party Incident

BY JOHN VOKET

Acknowledging the problems with the after-prom party that precipitated the resignation of school board member Thomas Gissen this week, most members of the school board as well as other public officials nonetheless recognized his contributions to the school community. Volunteer supporters including members of two local PTAs, however, expressed concern and outrage over news that Mr Gissen and his wife, Lisa, were charged under a relatively new state statute that levies fines against individuals who, in part, fail to make reasonable efforts to halt the possession of alcohol by minors in their dwelling or on their property.



Thomas Gissen resigned from the school board on Wednesday. -Bee file photo

Eight high school students also face charges of illegal possession of alcohol by a minor this week following an after-prom party where police witnessed "an exceptionally large amount of alcohol," in their back yard after responding to a complaint early last Saturday morning.

Mr Gissen tendered his resignation to school board chair Elaine McClure via email late Wednesday afternoon, after he and his wife reported to Newtown Police Headquarters to receive their infractions. While Mr Gissen would not respond to calls from *The Newtown Bee* for direct comment, Joseph Dimyan, a criminal attorney from the Danbury area representing the Gissens, contacted the newspaper on his clients' behalf.

Stating that he would not have Mr Gissen's case tried in the press, Mr Dimyan insisted the former school board member never intended to host a party where drugs and alcohol were involved. Although no drug charges were lodged, police photos of evidence turned up in a search of the scene showed drug paraphernalia.

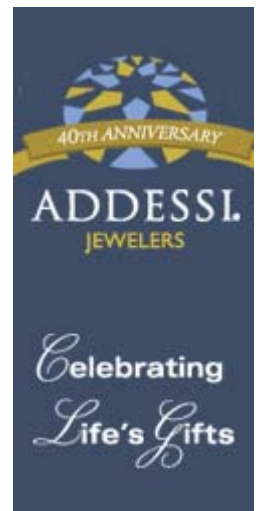
The police stated at press time the investigation is still continuing and further charges may still result.

Mr Dimyan said on behalf of his client that every effort was made to ensure no illegal items including alcohol were brought to the party. When asked why Mr and Mrs Gissen confiscated keys from each guest who drove to the scene, the attorney said his clients wanted to prevent anyone from leaving and coming back with alcohol or drugs.

When pressed about why the Gissens did not simply pull the plug on the party

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Prevention Council



when the number of guests swelled to a number beyond what the two chaperones could reasonably control, the attorney said, "Once the party started, [they] couldn't pull the plug and have 75 kids going home..."

Mr Dimyan said he is an expert in the so-called "house party" statute, noting that he had just hosted a seminar for other attorneys to educate them about the law, and on strategies to defend clients charged under the 2006 legislation.

The incident riled high school PTA co-chair Joan Piscitelli, who said she learned about the party in its planning stages earlier last week and brought the matter to the attention of several high school administrators. In a written statement, she said: "I personally spoke with the building principal Wednesday morning May 2, and made her aware that parents had brought to our attention Tuesday evening May 1 at our post-prom meeting that Teddy Gissen was having a party and alcohol would be allowed. I asked her to make a phone call and she said no.

"The afternoon of Friday, May 4, the day of the prom, I had an in-depth conversation with two of the three assistant principals concerning the same issue alcohol being at the party," Ms Piscitelli wrote. "I again asked for a phone call to be made (to the Gissens). Neither one would make the call."

She concluded saying, "It is very sad for the students to know that administration were aware that there was going to be a party with alcohol and they did nothing. What kind of message does that send to them?"

Similar frustration is voiced in today's newspaper in a letter from Sandy Hook PTA president Kathy Fetchick.

"Part of the Board of Education's responsibility is to ensure the safety of Newtown's children," she wrote. "Not only did he set a poor example for his child, but he put other children in danger too. Tom's actions show a complete and total lack of judgment. He completely undermined the efforts of the PTSA. Parents should be outraged."

Sara Beier, the former chair of the townwide PTA Council wrote in a letter that "an egregious violation of the public trust was committed..."

"In addition to what I believe was a complete lapse in judgment, the Gissens collaterally undermined the efforts of the NHS PTSA," Ms Beier wrote in her letter. "The PTSA works every year to hold a post-prom party as a safe alternative to underage drinking."

Mary Ann Jacob, who also represents the Sandy Hook PTA said she was most upset because the fine Mr Gissen would have to pay was less than the fine levied against eight students who were cited for possession of alcohol.

"It's ironic. Here's a man who helps approve a substance abuse policy [in the school system] and then the police say he put kids in a position to break the rule he was responsible for helping enforce."

When contacted Wednesday, Po Murray, who represents the local education advocacy group WeCAN (We Care About Newtown), said she did not know enough about the incident to comment officially on behalf of her group.

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