

RJB 18- Hard Times In Saugus

846 Broadway-Lot #49  
Saugus, Mass. 01906  
April 21, 1974

Mr. Richard H. Nolte  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
535 Fifth Avenue  
New York, N.Y. 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:



On July 13th the residents of the Saugus Mobile Park received certified letters informing them that the owners of the park, Jimmy DeCotis, Mary Roberto, and Fanny Tavano, intended to raise the rent from \$72.20 to \$85.

Within a week a group of residents, led by Mary Stack and Gussie Frost, met with the town's board of selectmen. The women explained that this proposed increase followed by less than eight months an increase of \$8, and that it would impose an economic hardship on a number of residents, especially widows and pensioners. Only selectman John Buchierre seemed moved by what they said.

The next day, through Mary Stack, Buchierre invited residents to the Caroline Nursing Home, which he manages, promising some exciting news. About fifty people attended the meeting. Welcoming everyone, Buchierre talked on

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in the most general terms about democracy and citizen's rights before saying, "I've introduced a motion at the board of selectmen's meeting to begin an investigation of the claims surrounding the park owners' intended increase. The owners have agreed not to increase the rent during the investigation, no matter whether it takes two, three or four months. So I'm pleased to announce that for the time being you'll continue to pay \$72.20.

Everyone was so excited that Buchierre had to repeat the last remark several times. Then people began applauding. After that Buchierre could do no wrong. He promised to look into a series of problems, and suggested that we form an organization to represent us. Thrusting his right hand into the air, his fingers still carrying the day's dirt, he dramatically asserted, "Like a finger, alone you have no strength. But together you can be strong like a fist."

Less than a week later residents carrying folding chairs under their arms converged on a corner of the park. A table had been set up in front, and Mary Stack, who brought her own gavel, chaired the proceedings. She announced that sixty of the seventy-one coaches were represented at the meeting. Mary then said, "I'd like to begin this evening by introducing to those of you who don't know him, Selectman John Buchierre." John, who was in the back said, "I'll be over in a minute," and began walking across one of the lawns. The man next to me leaned over and said, "Maybe we should tell him we have bathrooms in our mobile homes and he doesn't have to go on the lawn."

Buchierre came to the table amid warm applause. He began by saying, "I hate to admit this, but I've never been in this park before. And I want to say I'm impressed. You people have nothing to excuse yourselves for living here. There's only one way you should hold your head and that's high. I can tell from walking in the park that you're a fine bunch of people."

Buchierre then proceeded to repeat most of what he had said the other night, including that we would continue to pay \$72.20. He again talked about democracy, and somehow got around to mentioning the fact that he had attended the late President Kennedy's wedding.

Everyone was flushed with our apparant success. Could it all be this easy? Had we really stopped the increase? In the next two hours we decided to form an association, elect officers, and file for a state charter. Two of the early leaders, Mary Stack and Gussie Frost, were elected President and Treasurer. Fred Hatch and I were elected Vice-Presidents, and Connie Pelosi was elected Secretary.

The mosquitos were beginning to make sitting in the open uncomfortable, so the new organization quickly turned its attention to dues. Someone suggested a \$4 initiation fee, but several people complained that that was too high, and it was agreed that there should be a \$1 initiation fee, and \$1 monthly dues.

Within the month we were chartered by the state as the 846 Association, and had enrolled all but one of the seventy-one coaches in the organization. We had drawn up a set of by-laws, and were, so we said, going to study problems such as landscaping, sewerage, traffic speeds, park entrance illumination, and the high price of electricity.

Although we cared about all these other issues, our main concern was the rent. We soon discovered that John Buchierre was willing to champion our cause, but he wanted things done his way. He encouraged us to invite the selectmen to the park, but everything had to be read to him, and if he

didn't like it a letter had to be redrafted until he approved. This caused some immediate tension but people were fairly content, as long as he was helping us with the rent, to do things his way.

During the next four months we met once a month. We had moved our meetings from the park to the DAV(Disabled American Veterans) Hall. Although we discussed several issues, the important news was always delivered by Buchierre at the beginning of the meetings. He would announce that the investigation was continuing and that we should again pay \$72.20.

The calm which surrounded the rent issue was rudely broken by a hand delivered note on January 13th, which stated that beginning with February the rent would be \$96. That day my phone didn't stop ringing.

All we could do was call an emergency meeting to discuss the letter. People were relieved to see Buchierre at the meeting. Although no one could conclusively prove the notice not legal, several different people said the notice wasn't. Court clerks, friends who were lawyers, constables were cited as authority. I was worried because I couldn't find anything in the State statutes which required the letter be sent by registered mail or personally signed.

John Buchierre was on the spot. He was asked about the investigation and the landlord's promise not to increase the rent while the investigation was being conducted. John said the notices were a surprise to him, and he felt they were being used by the landlords to frighten us.

If that was their purpose, they had their proposed impact. People were scared. A new rumor began circulating that the landlords wanted to get the rent up to \$100 before the summer. The meeting went round and round. Finally after three hours of aggravated discussion it was collectively decided that everyone would pay \$72.20 and that John Buchierre would try to get the landlords to agree to meet with the officers to discuss the rent.

This notice was soon followed by the posting of a sign at the entrance of the park advertising the land for lease. Even though most people agreed that the landlords didn't intend to lease or sell the land, the presence of the sign had an unsettling influence. In the following week a few women required medication from doctors to calm jangled nerves.

The strain was showing everywhere. Personality clashes between the officers got worse and worse. From the beginning there had been tension between Mary Stack and Gussie Frost. Both women were under medical treatment. Mary for a heart condition and Gussie for high blood pressure. Each accused the other of being this or that, each didn't like the other's style, and each had cliques in the park backing their respective positions. The conflict between the two of them threatened to surface on several occasions. Mary tried to get Gussie to resign. Cooler heads interceded and the women patched up their differences.

More and more rumors began spreading. We heard that the owners of the park were using us as pawns in a long-standing battle with town officials. It seems the park has a high tax assessment. In the last four years the land's assessment has risen from \$205,000 to \$385,000 and the annual tax bill has risen from \$4,000 to \$17,000. The owners have been engaged in a two year legal battle over the increased assessment. They have refused to pay half of their yearly tax bill, and now have a case pending in the state tax court of appeal.

Rumors suggested that DeCotis and the other owners were trying to put pressure on the board of assessors to lower the assessment by threatening dramatic rent increases. They hoped, so it was claimed, that the residents would bring pressure on town officials. We also heard that the park owners wanted us out, that there were plans afoot to turn this park and the adjoining eighteen acres of land into a new shopping center. All of a sudden the rent question has exploded and we are now faced by the potential threat of losing our homesites.

We actually met with one of the owners, Jimmy DeCotis, twice in the next month. Both meetings were frustrating, because the officers had practically no chance to talk. Both encounters were dominated by DeCotis and Buchierre, old school boy friends, hollering at each other over conflicting claims and allegations.

DeCotis claimed he wasn't making a profit on the land, and that a rent increase was therefore necessary. He kept demanding the \$96 unless the board of assessors was willing to halve the assessment on the land.

When Buchierre asked if he would settle on \$85 until the issue was resolved, DeCotis said no. Looking at us he said, "I'm not a bad guy, everyone knows that, but I'm not going to absorb the cost. If I pay more then the residents are going to pay more."

Buchierre pressed DeCotis, and finally DeCotis exploded, "Don't ask me not to get this rent, John. When you came and asked me to hold off on the increase we did. You promised it would all be taken care of after the election, and nothing has been taken care of. Now I won't settle for \$85, I want \$96."

The meeting accomplished little, but we did learn some things that hadn't been clear before. Buchierre who had hoped to be elected by a wide margin, and possibly become chairman of the board of selectman had won reelection by the slimmest of margin. Robert Morehouse, who had been head of the board of assessors and a personal enemy of DeCotis', was removed after the election and a new man, Dennis Shurtleff, replaced him. We were led to believe that Shurtleff could be prevailed upon to dramatically reduce the assessment, but he didn't. When a meeting with the selectmen and assessors was finally arranged, Shurtleff was only willing to reduce the assessment by \$25,000.

While all these things were occurring a new notice arrived. On March 14th our checks for February were returned and we received the following letter.

You are hereby notified to quit and deliver up at the end of the next month of your tenancy, beginning after this notice the premises now held by you as our tenant, namely: Lot #49 Saugus Mobile Park, 846 Broadway, Saugus, Mass. 01906

The reason for this termination of your tenancy is nonpayment of rent. By notice dated January 12, 1974 you were notified that effective February 15, 1974, your rent would be \$90.00 per month and that including the town tax of \$6.00 per month the total monthly payment would be \$96.00. Your check for \$72.20, dated February 15, 1974 for the rental month of February 15-March 15 is returned herewith.

You have fifteen days from the date of mailing of this notice in which to pay the correct amount of rent in order to avoid evictions.

The letter was signed by John McNiff, attorney for the landlords. Confusion again spread through the park. One of the angriest people was Joe Carroll. When I asked him what he was going to do, he said, "Hell, I'm sending in the \$72.20 and not a god damn cent more. Maybe," he said, "I'll send some of the stuff the dogs leave in the back yard, maybe that's what I'll do."

Almost everyone from the park came to the next emergency meeting. Our confidence as a group had faded, and several people were plainly scared. For the first time people talked about paying the increase. "Maybe if we pay," said one woman, "they won't sell the land or ask for more money."

However most people wanted to stick with paying the \$72.20, especially if we had a lawyer who could assure us that the notice to pay \$96 wasn't legal. Before the meeting the officers had talked to a lawyer. His office was very modest, and at first the other officers had seemed dismayed by the unpainted, uncarpeted office. With the association's approval we ended up hiring Stever Keogh as legal counsel.

He came to the next meeting and reported on our legal position, which he thought was very strong. In his opinion the owners' original notice for \$96 was illegal. A week later he had to report that the lawyers representing DeCotis and the other park owners were unwilling to negotiate.

At this same meeting a new bombshell was dropped. Pat Hatch, who had recently been elected to replace Connie Pelosi who had resigned as secretary, read a scathing indictment of Mary Stack, accusing her of running a one-man organization, of keeping the other officers in the dark, of seeking publicity (articles had appeared in the Boston Globe and Lynn Item) after the organization had decided on no publicity. It was all in the open now. Gussie Frost, had privately threatened to resign, accusing Mary of the same things. This week she wasn't able to attend the meeting because she was a nervous wreck and the doctor had placed her in the hospital for a couple of days.

As soon as Pat finished her statement many people rushed to Mary's defense. People spoke emotionally, criticizing each other on very personal levels. For nearly an hour the argument raged on. Just as the organization appeared to be falling apart Charlie Neal got up, "Excuse me, but you people argue too damn much. We've avoided paying any increase for six months. When you people feel like talking about the rent and what we're going to do about it I'll come again. But I'm not going to sit around and listen to this bullshit." With that he left, but his remarks somehow snapped everyone out of their fighting and people began making new pledges to work together. It sounded good, but the personal rifts go very deep, and unfortunately these differences will not be patched up easily.

Mary Stack had believed in John Buchierre. She had believed in him so much that she was an organizer in his reelection campaign. He was reelected by less than seven votes and it is clear that without the support he had gained in this park he would have been defeated.

Mary Stack now believes that John Buchierre used her, that he wasn't sincere about helping the park residents. She is very bitter. Just a day earlier she had talked with me about the communications problems with

some of the other officers, especially Gussie. She told me it wasn't her fault. She said, "Sometimes I didn't tell people everything, but that wasn't my doing. I was working under orders from John Buchierre. He told me," she claimed "that either we did things his way or he wouldn't help us. Now I know I was wrong, but I thought we were lost without him. So I did what he told me. When he told me not to say something I wouldn't. So sometimes I'd tell Gussie I couldn't tell her something till a meeting. I know she blames me but it wasn't my fault." Mary didn't defend herself at the meeting, because she said she wasn't feeling well, but she said at the appropriate time she would speak up in her own defense.

Buchierre arranged another meeting for the officers, the town manager, and the board of assessors. The meeting didn't accomplish much but there was a promise made by DeCotis to Robert Hagopian, the town manager, that until the matter of the assessment was straightened out nothing would be done as to eviction. This was comforting to the residents until March's rent was returned with the following letter.

Your check recently received is returned herewith.  
Unless payment is received in an amount in accordance with written notice dated March 11, 1974, eviction proceedings will be commenced, and costs added to what is due.

The letter was again signed by John McNiff as attorney for the park owners. People began asking what did any promise mean? Several people started talking about paying the increased rent. I heard over and over 'it isn't worth the aggravation,' and 'we can't win.' All of a sudden a rumor began circulating in the park that more than 30 units had already begun paying the \$96. If this was true the organization was through, so the officers decided to take a door to door survey to get an exact count as to who was paying what. 58 units were paying \$72.20. Thirteen coaches were paying the \$96. Not as many people had sent in \$96 as was feared, but if the organization's solidarity deteriorates any more then we are in a hopeless situation.

So now, nearly eight months after the rent struggle began, the problem still hasn't been solved. The organization has lost much of its strength because of internal conflicts. No one knows who to believe. Some people still have faith in John Buchierre. Others believe he used us to insure his own reelection, and now has abandoned us. Jimmy DeCotis makes one promise and then does something else. Do we have a strong legal position? If we are forced to go to court and win, what will the owners do? Will they sell the land, leaving us victors over rent but without homesteads. The park is confused and tense. No one knows what to make of the political battle between the town and the park owners. The park owners claim the assessment is much too high and a result of a personal vendetta. The board of assessors claims the assessment could have been abated by as much as 35% if the owners had filed necessary legal papers. Are the park owners the enemy, is the town trying to get rid of the park, by assessing the park at its highest land use value?

Whatever the answers are, the problem is the people must continue to live in a tense and unhealthy situation. The future is clouded. The 846 Association has remarkably held together, but as time passes fear and pessimism have begun to erode the organization's confidence.

Mary Hicks said to me, "To tell you the truth, I'm scared. If my Bill were still alive I wouldn't worry so much, because I'd have him. But after you've been with a person for thirty years, and then you're

alone, it just isn't the same. We lived in this park for four years. We put a lot of work in our mobile home. I wouldn't know what to do if I couldn't stay here for the rest of my life."

Richard J. Bagg

Received in New York on April 26, 1974.