

The Weston Voices Oral History Project

Presents

A Conversation with



Gayle M. Weinstein
Weston's First Selectman, 2009 - 2015

Interviewed on April 20, 2018
as part of a special First Selectman series
by Arne de Keijzer & Neil Horner

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*A video of this interview plus an introductory
"Quick Takes" video are available in the Society's archives
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Videographer: Richard Frisch



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A Conversation with Gayle M. Weinstein

Gayle Weinstein, the youngest First Selectman ever to serve the town, moved to Weston from New York City with her husband and twin boys in 1995. Increasingly active in school and town affairs, she was elected to the Board of Selectmen in 2007. Two years later she ran and won the race for First Selectman – or, as she preferred to be called, First Selectwoman. As is clear from this interview, she led the town during a difficult and complex time, nationally, regionally, and locally.

Raised in New Jersey, she went to college at Brandeis and then enrolled at SUNY Stony Brook, aiming to get a PhD in Physical Anthropology. She soon realized that there seemed to be no practical future in that specialty, however, and left the graduate program to begin a career as a recruiter for the financial services industry in New York City. It was there she met her husband and started on the path that would lead her to Weston.

Her first political activity here was joining a successful grass roots campaign to prevent the building of high tension electric wires through town. Not particularly politically engaged before then, she learned from this experience that “if you speak up and can make a case for your argument, you can have a positive impact on the community.” After that Ms. Weinstein became a PTO leader, community service volunteer, a board member of the Veteran Affairs Committee and the advocacy chair for Connecticut’s chapter of Hadassah. She also attended the Women’s Campaign School at Yale. Running for First Selectman just seemed “like a natural progression in community service,” she said.

Asked to name the person who most inspired her, Weinstein named Jane Goodall. “Number one, she became my hero when I was in college and studying anthropology. Also because not only did she look at chimps as a community and how they interact, but she was the one who first showed me that you have to care about the greater world and about what you’re doing to impact that world.”

Ms. Weinstein is currently president of the Board of the Center for Sexual Assault Crisis Counseling and Education, based in Stamford, and she also remains a strong and active supporter of the Women’s Campaign School. Asked what advice she might give women contemplating a run for office, she was succinct: “Go for it!”

Gayle Weinstein was interviewed on behalf of the Weston Historical Society’s oral history program on April 20, 2018 by Arne de Keijzer and Neil Horner. This transcript is an edited and annotated of that interview. The video of the full, original interview, plus an additional “Quick Takes” one, is available under the Oral History tab on the Society’s website, WestonHistoricalSociety.org.

Gayle, thank you for joining us and, of course, for your support of the Historical Society, but especially for the talent and energy you have brought to our town both as an elected official and a generous volunteer. Before we find out more about all of that, please tell us something of your background. Let's start with the basics. Where and when were you born?

I was born on October 2nd, 1964 in Brooklyn, New York, and the family moved to New Jersey when I was about 4 years old. I was raised there and then went to college in Boston, at Brandeis University. From there, I went on to enroll in a PhD program at SUNY Stony Brook for Physical Anthropology.

But after getting a master's degree, I realized that there was no future for me in Physical Anthropology, so I took my degree and moved to New York where I became a recruiter for financial services, which was a fantastic job. I did that for about seven years before I had kids.

Looking back at that early part of your life, who had the biggest influence on you?

Growing up, I think that my mother always told us that we should follow our passion and do what we wanted to do. She always felt that if you did not take advantage of that opportunity then you're missing out on the point of life.

She allowed us to explore liberal arts education and to really find what we are passionate about doing. I think that that really has been what has led me down various avenues during my life. I feel like I've taken a lot of left turns, right turns. I ended up in a place that I never thought that I would.

I didn't grow up in a family that was interested in politics. In fact, I distinctly remember asking my mother after one presidential election, "Who did you vote for?" She told me it was none of my business. It wasn't like I thought that I would grow up to be a politician. I think that I just always was outspoken and thought it was important to speak up for what's right.

What inspired you to become politically active Weston?

After my children were born -- and I think this happens with a lot of people -- you start to think a little bit more about the world we live in and the kind of world that we want for our children.

For me, it started when my kids were very little, in preschool. They were going to put high-voltage power lines behind our house. I worked with a group of Westonites and we were able to fight and get the power company to site those lines along the Post Road in Westport instead. In fact, that's where I got to meet former First Selectman Woody Bliss, working on that project.

It was a wonderful experience because it showed that if you speak up and if you can make a case for your argument, you can actually create results that have a positive impact on the community. I think that was really the starting point for me.

Additionally, I was very involved in Hadassah, which is a women's Zionist organization, one of the largest in the country. Through them, I had various leadership roles. I was president of the Westport chapter. I was Organizational Vice President for the state. I was also the Advocacy Chair for the region, which meant that I brought hundreds of women up to Hartford to teach them how to advocate for issues that were important to them.

For some of these women, it was really life-changing. For example, some of these women didn't have access to a checkbook or didn't know how to say to a dry cleaner, "Listen, you ruined my shirt." I feel like that experience of just teaching them to speak up really made a difference.

I think politics was an evolution for me, which is funny because I started out as an evolutionary biologist. [laughs] My life has been one continual evolution in my opinion. It was really stages in my life that went from learning how to speak up in front of the Connecticut Siting Council and working with state legislators [on the power lines issue] to teaching women how to speak up and do the same to being PTO president.

For me, it wasn't that I wanted to get into politics *per se*. For me, it was all about community service. Becoming First Selectman was just a natural step in that progression.

In the end, it's all about giving back to your community in one way or another. That is something that was very important to my husband and I that we modeled to our children, that you don't live in a bubble and that you are extremely fortunate. Therefore, you have an obligation to give back to society. Hopefully, I did model that behavior for my children through my political activism as well as my extensive volunteer work.

We know that the Women's Campaign School here in Connecticut was an important part of your political education.

The Women's Campaign School is a nonpartisan, non-issue-based program whose only mission is to train women to enter the political arena. They also work and train women who want to manage campaigns for women who want to enter the political arena.

Women are underrepresented. Let's face it. It doesn't matter what the industry is, but particularly when it comes to government, if we don't have an equal say in what goes on in this world, we're never going to be truly equal to men. That's why it's so important to me that we work hard to get more women elected.

What's great about the Women's Campaign School is that because of its nonpartisan nature, you get to work with women who have different views about certain issues from you. You get to experience what those views are, collaborate with them to hopefully come to some consensus. That's a skill that I think women truly have. That's why I think we make great politicians.

What are the requirements to get into that school other than being a woman?

The program has become incredibly popular in the past number of years so it has become incredibly competitive to get in. They look for people with experience. They look at people with good recommendations as well as people who have a strong history of being involved in the political process.

It's often said that "Weston is a town that runs on volunteers." Certainly that has been true for you. Do you think that spirit still exists?

It's interesting. Actually, I think that there's been a real change in the level of volunteerism since I moved to town and particularly since my kids were little. My boys are twenty-two-and-a-half right now, and graduating college. I remember when they were in kindergarten and first grade. Every parent wanted to be the room parent. We actually had to have lotteries to be the room parent.

For us, it was our social life. It was how we met other women, how we got to be involved in the community. We made our friends around PTO's and different volunteer activities, whether it was PTO or the community church or whatever your interest was.

I find that now young women seem to get that more from the Internet, which concerns me a little bit. That's where they're making their social connections. It's not so much around the table. It really bothers me when I hear that Hurlbutt Elementary School is struggling to get room parents because to me, and when our kids were little, our kids were the center of the universe. That's what we did.

While I'm glad that the kids are not necessarily the center of the universe and more women are obviously working, which has an impact on volunteerism because their time is a little bit more limited, I do wish people would start to think about how it's important to give to the community.

Returning to the time when you left graduate school and entered the workforce, what was life like for you as a young working woman?

That was a fun time in our lives. Right before I got my job, actually the day before I got the job, was when I met my future husband. We had a great time in New York as two single people for a lot of years, working hard at our jobs, focusing on making money and just having a great time with our friends.

We enjoyed that until we found out we were pregnant with twins. Then we took a look around our apartment in New York and said, "There's no way we want to raise our kids in the city. We really want to raise them in the suburbs where they can go out outside and play." We wanted them to be in a community that was similar to where and how we grew up.

My husband grew up in Milford, CT and then went to high school in Woodbridge, a community that's very similar to Weston, demographically. I grew up in Morganville, a small town in New Jersey which had even less economic development than Weston, if that's possible. We had one general store. We didn't have a whole town center.

Do you ever miss those days of being a professional in New York City? Do you ever think about a second career?

Absolutely not. Everything needs to evolve if you're going to keep living. That change needs to happen. That is with towns as well, by the way. My husband and I are in a great place in our lives right now. We're both retired. We're free to travel. We've made plans to make big trips once a year and take little trips out to California or Florida to see family or spend time up in Vermont which is our second home. We absolutely love it.

Let's say you're at a cocktail party somewhere out of town and a couple of people come up to you and, when they learn where you live, say, "I've never heard of Weston, Connecticut. Why there?" What would be your answer?

I would say that I think Weston is the best small town in Connecticut. It is close to all major amenities. It is a place where you get to know your community and neighbors without having them in your face every two minutes because of the two-acre zoning. It gives the feeling of open space with excellent schools and a nice community feel.

The '60s, '70s, and '80s were very good to Weston for the reasons you just described. People would come here, and they'd feel that. We improved the schools and their facilities. We kept the town growing and expanded the Grand List. But now school enrollment is down and it seems as if we are not attracting residents like we used to. Nor keeping as many as we'd like to keep here. There are "for sale" signs all around town. How can we get back to the years of prosperity and breathe a little easier on the financial side?

First of all, I want to say that everything is cyclic. When we first moved to this town, one of the reasons why we chose Weston over Westport was because we were able to get a house that we can afford on two acres of land. The taxes were not that much higher than Westport at the time. It made financial sense to us.

One of the other reasons is because when we moved here in 1995 the graduating high school class had 103 students. By the time my kids started kindergarten, they had a cohort of 210. That's a huge explosion in 15 years to double the class size. What we're seeing now is, perhaps, a little dip in kindergarten enrollment. We're also seeing a little bit of a spike as they get to middle school. At least, that's my understanding with the enrollment.

Having said that, I agree with you, the enrollment is down considerably from when my kids and their friends were in the school system. You have to address that. I don't think that you can ignore that. It's important to look out to the future. Strategic planning is incredibly important.

That's the one thing I know you're going to ask a question later about [*i.e. strategic planning. -Ed.*]. I regret not having completed the strategic planning for the town because it is so important to answer those kind of questions about what we do.

The Grand List is simply a function of our real estate values. Until we get our real estate values up, that Grand List is not going to rise. Unfortunately, as you know, in Weston with no industry, we rely on property taxes for that Grand List growth.

We're in a sticky situation. I gather that the lower end homes are selling quickly. Young people are being attracted to the town but it's the houses that are over a million and a half that are not selling at all. I know we're going to be due for property re-evaluations soon. They just sent out the notices. It'll be interesting to see how we're truncated in what our home values are and what impact that it'll have on the Grand List.

I also think that you need to consider what Weston is and what Weston isn't. Weston will never be a town that's close to major transportation. If you look at what the Millennials are going for now, they want to be in transit oriented districts. They want to be near restaurants. They want to be near shops. They want to be near where they work.

When my husband and I moved to town in 1995, he had a long commute to the city. We were fine with that because we wanted to give our family that quality of life.

Having said that, I remember being called into preschool because my son, Max, told his teacher that he only gets to see his daddy on weekends. We weren't divorced. With his commute, he was coming home after bedtime. As you can imagine because you know me, that's it. Once bedtime comes, those kids are in bed. He's not waking them for anything. The younger families don't want to do that anymore. They want to spend more time with their kids. The only way they can accomplish that is to be closer to where they work.

It isn't until kids are actually in the school district, I'm finding now, that Millennials are actually thinking, "Huh, I should look at the rankings of the school. I should look and see where these kids are getting into college, or what kind of AP programs they're offering."

I think that's a change that we have to accept. We have to look at other ways that we can perhaps attract people.

One of the biggest problems I see in Weston is that people tend to not like change. That's the one constant that I have seen since I've moved here. There's been a lot of talk, there have been a lot of First Selectmen and I was certainly not the first person to propose changes that might help us diversify our housing stock. When you start having that conversation with people, ultimately, they don't want to change what we have. Until you start making some changes, you're not going to be able to do anything about that Grand List, unfortunately.

The Grand List depends upon, of course, not just on the evaluation of existing properties but also on the available lots upon which to build. We don't seem to have many of those left.

Right. The Planning and Zoning Commission evaluated that as part of a joint project with the Board of Selectmen when I was First Selectman. I think that we were pretty well-saturated. In fact, we hired a consultant to do a white paper on the town and do a

first look at a strategic plan for what we can do for our community to focus, as you had said, on Grand List growth or attracting new people to Weston and what we could do. Essentially, other than less than a hundred lots, we're pretty saturated.

Let's talk about some other changes since you moved here nearly twenty-five years ago. For example, the demographic and political profile of the town.

I'm not sure about demographically, because I think people always tend to move here for the school system and then tend to move out -- and I'm making a big generalization here -- once their kids graduate. That's what we see and what we think.

Although there is obviously a cohort that stays here through retirement and that, along with the State now pushing aging in place, we are seeing more and more seniors staying in town. That's been pretty consistent. In fact, the census change from 2000 to 2010 shows that our population is slightly older. The average age used to be 37. Now, it's 43. We're seeing a slight shift, but I'm not quite sure how that impacts us demographically.

As for Weston's political profile, the change has been very interesting. When I ran for First Selectman, I was the first woman to run for the Board of Selectmen in, I think, 26 years. Prior to that, it was predominantly men, some retired, who essentially ran the town. [*Weinstein is referring to Helen Speck, who served from 1983 to 1987 and was the third woman in Weston's history to hold the post. -Ed.*]

When I ran for public office in 2007, people said, "You're already starting with three strikes against you. You're young, you're a woman, you're Jewish. Let alone the fact that you're a Democrat, you're never going to get elected." In fact, I *did* get elected, first to the Board of Selectmen and then, two years later, as First Selectman.

I do think that there was a shift in politics in accepting other points of view. We've seen a shift most recently from the Republicans controlling everything in town for many, many years to Democrats to the point now where I think it's a little bit more equal going back and forth between Democrats and Republicans.

I don't know whether that mirrors what's going on in the rest of the state because Connecticut made that shift as well, but it seems to me that we're following along with what our neighbors are doing as well.

[While nearly all candidates running for office are nominated by the two parties, the majority of voters in Weston have registered themselves as Unaffiliated in recent years. For reference, the eligible voter rolls in Weston in 2000 showed 2,448 Republicans, 1,723 Democrats, and 2,281 Unaffiliated. A decade later the balance shifted to 2,057 Republicans, 2,319 Democrats, and 2,468 Unaffiliated. At the time of this interview, in April 2018, registered Republicans numbered 1,710, Democrats 2,279, and Unaffiliated 2,319. -Ed.]

When you were campaigning, what were your goals and did you achieve what you wanted to achieve during your tenure?

My goals were always related to making Weston a better place for the entire community. I care deeply about making this a place where whether you're moving here as a young

adult ready to start a family, or a senior citizen enjoying our Senior Center, you should feel that Weston is your home.

That was something that I cared very, very deeply about. I think that we accomplished a lot in terms of building community. I'm very proud of the fact that while I was First Selectman...I'm certainly not taking the credit for this, but while I was First Selectman, we restored the Lachat farm property, which I think has become a true gem.

If you go out there when they have one of their farmers markets, you see what feels like the entire community. I love it. My husband and I went there last summer and he was shocked at the number of people who were out there. Listening to the music, shopping, eating with their kids, grandkids there, no kids, it didn't really matter. It's just a community-centric place.

We've also increased the size of the Senior Center. That's another example where we're looking to create a space where our aging population can feel at home and create a community within the community, as well. We've increased the security at the schools. We put lights on ball fields, all of it aimed towards bringing us together. On that front, I feel I was very successful.

The one area that I feel that I was not successful, and I touched on this before, was getting the town on board to do some serious strategic planning.

We have some facilities that are in an extreme state of disrepair, and you can't keep closing your eyes to that. At some point, you have to bite the bullet and pay for them and get them fixed. We have town employees that are on the school campus. It would be nice to bring them back to this side of town [*i.e. the Town Hall area*] and find some way that they can work more collaboratively together, as well.

Long term, we didn't address the issues regarding the Grand List. Are there incremental changes that we can make to Weston to make it more attractive? We did start by putting a Strategic Planning Committee in place. Unfortunately, that committee has now been dissolved and I'm hoping that the current First Selectman, Chris Spaulding, will take it up again because I think it's an important exercise to do.

You have to ask some difficult questions. Yes, people get ornery, people get cranky when you make suggestions, but if you don't have the conversation, you're never going to be able to move the needle. I think it's a good starting point and I hope it gets back to that.

The strategic plan should be a living document as well. It's got to be revisited at least once a year.

I totally agree. I totally agree, but let's at least start by getting one in place. [laughs]

Is there a way that a strategic plan could dovetail with the official Town Plan of Conservation and Development, which the State mandates from towns every ten years?

Absolutely. I think the Town Plan of Conservation and Development is a great document. I know that after the last Plan, which was in 2010, the Board of Selectmen did try to make sure that we met some of those goals.

But some of the goals were not within our purview to reach, so I think it needs to be a wider discussion. The Strategic Planning Committee that we put in place was actually jointly chaired by a Selectman and the vice-chair of Planning and Zoning, which is the way it has to be because everyone has their own purviews. If you don't get everyone in the room together and get people talking and building consensus about what directions or even let's start with what questions we should ask, then you're not going to be able to create any change.

The Town Plan of Conservation and Development actually encompasses everything. In fact, I learned that they even have the ability to make suggestions as to how we can increase the Grand List and in fact our tax base, which I didn't particularly care for when I was First Selectman.

In the long run, it is at least a start. You need to use it as a living document, and reevaluate it and look at the goals that are set and try to move forward on those goals.

How would you involve the schools in the Strategic Plan? Or would you?

The schools are such a big piece of everything we do in Weston. Not only are they our number one employer, but they take up 82 to 86 percent of the Town budget if you include their operation and capital budgets. So much of our tax dollars are going there that I do think we need to work collaboratively.

I think that there are ways to save money by working with the schools. When I was First Selectman we combined technology, which saved us a lot of money. We were able to eliminate some positions due to retirements and not have to replace those people.

I think a lot of the school districts in surrounding towns combine their finance departments, so it can be done. The key is that you need a willingness on both sides. I'm going to say this on tape: the willingness of the Board of Education has not been there.

When you walked into the office of the First Selectman, did you get any advice from your predecessor, Woody Bliss?

I had served on the Board of Selectmen with Woody Bliss and Glenn Major and the three of us had a very good relationship. Politics didn't really come into play. I knew that, obviously, they had one political slant and I had another, which may have had an impact as to how we viewed budgets or employees, but we really did try to work together.

After I was elected, I met with Woody and I said, "OK, Woody. Now's the time, tell me the dirt. What is it that I really need to know and what am I getting myself into here?"

He said to me, "Well, Gayle, there's a tree that was planted in memory of a young girl who died. Her parents will get very upset if that tree dies." I said, "That's the advice you're giving me?" [laughter]

Ultimately, the job depends on what you want it to be. The job of First Selectman is based on your vision for the town and how you want to accomplish the goals and policies that you were mandated to do.

Some First Selectman may only work a couple hours a day, other people work a lot harder and put more hours into it. Woody and I both got involved on a statewide level with many statewide organizations. We're very involved with our regional transportation organization as well as our statewide coalitions that supported municipalities. We were very active in that.

Essentially, the job is one that you really don't know what you're going to face until you're actually in the job and doing it.

That leads naturally to this question: what were the three most important challenges you faced as First Selectwoman?

I would say budget, budget, budget. The reason I would say that is because the Great Recession of 2008 hit right before I was elected. That changed the dynamics for me all across the board. Up until then, there really was a thought in my mind that people are going to pay what they need to pay in order to support an outstanding school district and to keep the town running and our buildings in a state of good repair.

After that, what I noticed was "not so much." There were people in town who were hurting and you can't just make the assumption that because they lived in a nice house they were OK financially. I had a constant parade of people in my office telling me that they were not OK. I felt it was important to try to create budgets that took the reality of what we were facing into consideration.

For me, it was not just a blip. For me, this had to be the new normal. That really colored how I viewed budgets going forward. Every budget I viewed with such an eagle eye to see where we can reduce costs or save money, so that I felt that I was giving the best services at the lowest possible tax dollar price for our residents.

One area where that clearly had an impact was in the controversy surrounding the upgrading of the public safety complex, a hot debate that has not yet been concluded.

I still think that there's a need to do more for the police department. The building is one huge code violation. It's in a state of disrepair. Unfortunately, because of OSHA requirements, if you start renovating pieces of it you have to bring everything up to code, which it would obviously not be.

But I think you can't look at the police station as a standalone item. That was only one piece of what we were trying to accomplish. Ultimately, the goal was how can we reduce our facilities to save some money and get our buildings in a state of good repair at the same time.

For example?

For example, we have a portable annex on the school campus where we have town and school employees. It has outlived its useful life. Any year now the Board of Education is going to come and tell you that they need to put a new roof on a temporary building, which to me would be a huge waste of money. That building is also not in such great state of repair. I don't want anyone to get the impression that the Board of Education is neglecting it, but when you have a temporary building that's getting old, the linoleum starts cracking and the foundation starts to get a little bit wobbly. You have leaks in the roof. You need to deal with that.

[By abandoning that facility and building a new safety complex by town hall, we could save money by getting] town employees back to this side of the campus. As for the Board of Education, whose budgets have been increasing and the per pupil costs have been increasing even at a faster rate, you have two choices. You can eliminate bodies, because employees are the major cost, or you can try to reduce their overhead and operational costs. We were trying to accomplish that as well.

A third goal that we were trying to accomplish was to try to get some sort of community center. It seemed like that was something that people in the community want. It comes up I would say every five years when people say, "Hey, why don't we have a community center?" Obviously, it's not something that we have the money to just build a standalone community center.

By building a new public safety complex you would have the officers in a new building, which would be energy efficient and provide a greater safety egress for the police cars. You would be providing support for EMS, which needs additional office space and bunk beds so that people can stay there during storms and emergencies.

You would be opening up what is currently the police station to house town employees that are on School Road, thereby freeing up that space. You would also have space to house Parks and Recreation, which is on the Jarvis property across the street.

By freeing up that space you would then have the opportunity to ask, and again this is controversial, do you sell the Jarvis property and put that money into what the cost will be to build a new building and renovate the existing space? Or perhaps keep it or use it for another nonprofit use? An art space or perhaps a dog park or some other kind of facility that might make sense to have over there?

And then the Board of Education [could move out from its present building] into space in the school buildings. Because of declining enrollment, we know that there is empty space in the schools that they could condense and use more efficiently. If you had the Board of Education people move to one of the schools, we would eliminate one whole building. We would save about \$100,000 in operating costs every year going forward.

{Furthermore}, you can get the seniors out of the Elementary School, which has been a source of concern for many of the school parents. Have them take over the school

administration building. Now we have a community center because you don't have the kids there, so it's flex space that you can use whenever you want during the day.

I was looking at that plan and thinking about how we could pay for it. Ultimately, it was that, "How are we going to pay for this grand plan?" that I think was the huge issue.

Another dimension of the puzzle of bringing more people to Weston is the question of what amenities we could offer. What do you think the top three or four or five attractions should be, and that perhaps could be embedded in a strategic plan. Maybe one such might be rail service to Stamford or something?

No, but it could potentially be bus service to the train station or something along those lines, because it's hard to get parking at the train station.

The town of Darien just did a fantastic project through their Parks and Recreation Department where they actually took a look at all the amenities. They had many, many community conversations about what amenities people want. Is it a dog park? Is it a swimming pool? Is it more walking paths?

I think that that's an exercise that we should be doing in Weston before we decide what amenities it is that we want, because I can tell you what's important to me but that doesn't mean that that's necessarily important to you. It has to be a community wide conversation.

Of course, but we'd like to hear your list anyway.

My wish list would be renovating Weston Center to include a few more shops. I think that that's important to try to just increase the space. Maybe rearrange the parking so that when you drive into town it looks like something, as opposed to the current, "Oh, wait. Did I just drive by Weston Center?" which is how most of us see Weston Center right now.

I also think it's a mistake to not allow doctors or sole practitioners, lawyers, people of that nature to have offices in town. Because a lot of people who live in Weston, I think it's about 30 percent, work from home and I can tell you now that I have a retiree husband who works from home, I would love for him to have an office space, so he can leave my house. [laughter]

Seriously, there are plenty of people who want to use office space or want to create an incubator. We did do a good job renovating the library to include rooms that people can reserve, but it would be nice if there was a space where people can pay to have some office space.

I think not having a doctor in town is a mistake. It was an amenity to me when I moved here that Doctor Lieberman was right down the hill. I think it is a mistake not to allow that because of our zoning.

That was one of the reasons people started thinking seriously about buying what we commonly call the Guidera property, on the northeast corner of Norfield and Weston Roads. Do you want to explain a little bit about that?

Sure. It is a house previously owned by former First Selectman George Guidera that came up for sale in 2013. The question to me was that we had a once in a lifetime opportunity here. How often does a property come for sale that is adjacent to town property? It made sense to me for the town to purchase it to use it for a town-related purpose.

The discussion with the community, though, [was dominated by those] who wanted to know what that purpose would be. I think that that's been a real shift [toward the negative] in the town. If I think back to 15 or 20 years ago, when we bought a ton of land to bank the land and use it for either open space or save it for other community purposes, the residents of this town were 100 percent for that.

Now we're seeing a shift where people want to know, what are you going to use the land for, what is its purpose? Ultimately, I tried to make that purchase and the town turned it down at a town meeting. First selectman Nina Daniel, who came after me, tried the same thing. She was turned down as well.

I think that it's the kind of property that I'm not quite sure what the future of it will be. If it is in private hands, it would be nice if there was some sort of community purpose there. An inn with a restaurant would be kind of cool to have in Weston or an arts facility or some other space, but it's not town property. It's private property that someone now owns, so now it's up to them to decide what to do with it.

[The proposal to buy the historic property went before a Town Meeting on June 25, 2013. Ms. Weinstein had negotiated with Fairfield County Bank to reduce the price from \$1,000,000 to \$750,000, but at the Meeting voters reduced the offering price to \$610,000, partially because of the estimated costs of upgrades needed to convert the building to town use. The bank declined the offer. [See "Update: Bank refuses town's offer for Norfield Road Property," The Weston Forum, July 2, 2013. <https://archive.thewestonforum.com/11863/update-bank-refuses-towns-offer-for-norfield-road-property/>].

[Then, in February 2016, with the property still unsold, the Weston Board of Selectmen authorized then First Selectman Nina Daniel to enter into a purchase option agreement to buy the property for \$710,000. The vision then was to buy the property to coincide with the police station renovation. However, town officials were not able to agree on the language drawn up for the purchase and option agreement and it expired on July 1 without an offer being made. [See <https://archive.thewestonforum.com/60468/weston-selectmen-look-to-purchase-guidera-property/>].

[The saga ended in January, 2017 when Weston businessman Jess DiPasquale bought the prominent clapboard home with its green shutters and stone wall for \$609,000 – precisely a \$1,000 less than the town was willing to pay the bank in 2013, which in the meantime had made improvements. [See <https://archive.thewestonforum.com/73848/high-profile-weston-property-has-new-owner/>].

So, for you, this was a clear case of Weston being penny wise but pound foolish.

Yes. I think that you have to look at the long term. I think it's important. That's why we keep going back to strategic planning. That's why strategic planning is so important. Because as the town grows and as it needs more space for its facilities you want to make sure that you have the appropriate space to build out.

Even if we had purchased the Guidera property, which is adjacent to town hall, and sold the Jarvis property, which is across the street, to me it would have been a better use of space, because being adjacent is much better than having a piece of land not adjacent. The Jarvis property, I feel, could have been sold for residential use. It abuts other residences.

[In June 2014, with the house still on the market, Fairfield County Bank, the lien holder, proposed swapping the Guidera House with the town-owned Jarvis Military Academy property across the street. At the time, Weinstein called it "an interesting idea and worth exploring," because the Guidera property was contiguous with a nearly 80-acre block of land currently owned by the town. But on August 5 the bank withdrew the proposal, saying it would stay in Weston center. The announcement put an end to mounting public opposition to the plan, which did not want the town to give up possession of the Jarvis property, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. [See <https://archive.thewestonforum.com/20336/weston-bank-withdraws-offer-land-swap-is-now-a-no-go/> -Ed.]

Besides the issue of the money, was there also a measure of distrust in some ways? Of people not sure what town leaders might do or not do even though they had elected them?

I wouldn't say it's a matter of distrust. I would say it is maybe a question of transparency. Even though I believe that I tried to be fully transparent and I trust that Nina after me tried to be fully transparent with her actions. I think that unless you can kind of pinpoint and say the town needs this property for this specific reason then it's kind of like, "Well, I don't really know what you want to do with it so I'm not comfortable just handing over our money for you to go purchase it."

On to another issue: Charter revision. During your term you appointed a Charter Revision Commission to update the Town Charter. Those revisions were approved by the voters, but a year later a second Charter Revision Commission was formed to improve some language but, controversially, the Commission also re-set the quorum requirement for the ATBM to 130 voters. But there have been many objections. What do you think, should the quorum requirement be reconsidered?

Yes. I think every Annual Town Budget Meeting since we did Charter revision has not reached the quorum and had to be adjourned [and go directly to a Referendum], meaning that we could not discuss the budgets at the Annual Town Budget Meeting, which to me sounds like an oxymoron. Why are you going to have an Annual Town Budget Meeting if you can't discuss [and vote on] the budget? *[At the ATBM voters may accept the budget or lower it; it cannot be increased. -Ed.]*

To me, I think we need to open up the Charter to review that. I think we have to go one way or the other. [That is, having either the ATBM or the Referendum but not both, as is now the case.] I think having the meeting where no one shows up and then you can vote afterwards just really does not make sense.

I'm a little sad because what I love about Weston is when the town comes together. I have such fond memories of twenty two years of Annual Town Budget meetings where you know who's going to stand up and ask what crazy question about what. It gives the community a chance to hear, "Well, gee I didn't think about that" or "I didn't know about that" or "Of course, I support that." I feel like we're missing that.

I know some people say that that happens on the Board of Finance public hearing on the budget. There's a different tone. I'm not so good at my words where I can really explain to you the difference in the feeling, but there's a very different feeling when you're at the Board of Finance public hearing [where you can speak up but don't have a vote] than when you're at the Annual Town Budget Meeting where you actually get to vote. You as a citizen get to decide whether you like that line item in the town budget or not. I miss that. You lose that when you go to a referendum vote.

If you have problem, for example, with the Parks and Recreation budget you can vote it down at the Annual Town Budget Meeting, assuming there was a quorum now. Previous to the quorum you could have stood up and said, "I don't like the Parks and Rec budget." This happened in town history where budgets have been amended because of what happens at the Annual Town Budget Meeting.

I'm kind of sad that we lost that. On the other hand, with the referendum vote we went from having maybe two hundred people who showed up at the ATBM to having one thousand people or more voting on it. The fact that you're now getting participatory government, which is really the basis for our democracy, has to count for something as well. I think you go one way or the other, but this combined system I really feel is not working.

I also think that there was a missed opportunity in the Charter Revision Commission to get to things like term limits for positions. We have people on Boards of Commissions who have been on for 20 some odd years. You need some turnover every now and again. You need fresh ideas. It is not healthy for any Board to have the same people doing the same thing year after year. [*The only current restriction is that one cannot be the chairman of a Board or Commission for more than eight years sequentially, but a person can continue to serve and, theoretically, become chairman again at the next term. -Ed.*]

I also think that those boards need to represent the community as a whole. If you're having the same people on every year you're not getting the fresh blood or the thoughts and feelings of those who are new to town. There are some items like that that I think need to be changed in the Charter.

I do want to thank the people who participated in the Charter Review Commission because I would say it's a labor of love, but in the end it really was just a labor. It was something necessary that I felt that the town needed to do at the time.

Another hot-button issue during your time in office involved the principle of home rule. As much as we would like to be self-sufficient, the town could save money by regionalizing some services. One step toward that was our joining "the COG." Please explain.

A COG stands for Council of Governments. It is a regional organization that now encompasses, I believe, twenty-three municipalities in the southwest region in our territory. Prior to the COGs being established we simply had what was called MPOs, Metropolitan Planning Organizations.

The purpose of the Metropolitan Planning Organization, though, really was to vote on disseminating federal transportation funds in our region, and our region at that time consisted of eight communities. The state passed a law saying that we needed to merge our council of governments and become bigger, which is how we became this humongous COG with many, many municipalities.

Connecticut is very unique in the fact that we're made up of 169 municipalities all of whom feel that they have home rule. They don't want to hear what their neighbor has to say. They feel that they want to assert their independence.

[Connecticut formerly had eight counties, each with its own government structure, but the Legislature abolished those government functions in 1960. While still "on the map", counties now serve as little more than boundaries for the state's judicial and state marshal system. – Ed.]

In some ways I get it. In some ways, I think that it's great. Weston would not be Weston if we merged our school district with Westport, for example. I truly believe that, but there are areas where you can work collaboratively with other town and it'll save money.

I think that's the piece that the resident who's not actively working with the budget every day doesn't seem to understand. It doesn't take away home rule, in my opinion, if you share your communication center or you share your animal control officer, but what it could end up doing is saving the tax payer dollars money.

Unfortunately, I feel the residents don't always get that connection between what it means to work collaboratively and how it can reduce their taxes. It's been an ongoing debate in our town particularly over the communications center for many, many years and I think it will continue into the future.

Events beyond the town's control can also have a major impact. The children gunned down in nearby Newtown, for example, and, of course, 9/11.

My kids were in, I believe, in first grade during 9/11. I was actually in a PTO meeting in Hurlbutt. I was hospitality chair that year. I remember that because I had just finished setting up the goodies. We were about to start our meeting, and someone came running in and said, "The towers were hit." We were like in a [inaudible], "Hey, What are you talking about, the towers were hit?"

My husband worked in New York. A majority of our husbands in that room worked in New York. We felt such a violation. Cell service was very spotty and don't forget back then not all of us had cell phones. It was just becoming popular back then. A lot of us could not reach our spouses.

Of course, the immediate thought was, "We have to grab our kids and get out of this building because what if they come here? We're only 50 minutes from New York. The next explosion could be right around the corner."

I think it was a sad time in Weston because we did lose Weston residents in that horrible, horrible act. My husband and I lost friends. We lost business associates of my husband's. I think we were not unique in Weston. I think every family was essentially feeling the same thing.

It also brought us together as a community. I'm so glad that we continue having the memorial service for 9/11. We had thought a couple years back about, "It's the tenth anniversary, OK, maybe this should be it." We decided, you know what? As long as those who lost friends, family, loved ones we're going to continue on with this tradition. I think out of heartbreak some good came out of it in terms of the community coming together and consoling one another.

I think the same thing happened after Newtown. I was very close with Pat Llodra who was the First Selectwoman in Newtown. Our officers were some of the first responders on the scene there. The day after that horrible, horrible mass shooting I did go to Newtown to check on my friend Mat and to check on our sergeants who were there that day. One of the sergeants walked me out back. We walked behind the firehouse and there's the path right to the school. It is a moment that I will never ever forget.

My kids were still in high school at that time. They were here in Weston and to know that your kids may not be safe is a horrible, horrible feeling, but out of that came our improved firearms ordinance. The effort was actually led by Republican Dennis Tracey on our Board of Selectman, and I was so happy that it was such a bipartisan effort on our part to do something to make the town of Weston safer.

We were one of the first small towns in the country, actually, not even just the State of Connecticut, that actually banned assault weapons and machine guns from our towns. I'm very proud of it. I think it's really one of the greatest accomplishments that our Board did during my tenure.

We did it facing assaults from the NRA. We had death threats. We had residents in town who also made intimidating comments to us.

The three of us sat down, and we said, "At what point do we stop this?" The three of us decided, "You know what? We have to do what we think is right." Out of that came the new firearms ordinance which I was very, very proud of.

Weston was greatly affected by a natural disaster as well: Superstorm Sandy.

Sandy was one of a kind storm here in Weston because it knocked out power for eight or nine days until our last resident actually got power back. Hundreds of trees [were knocked down, damaging houses and closing roads everywhere]. It was just a nightmare trying to get from point A to point B. Out of natural disaster and tragedy, we came together as a community. That's when we first started the Comfort Station which I thought was a great idea. Normally, towns set up a shelter when they have some natural disaster or any situation like that.

We decided to take it one step further and have a place where not only people can sleep, but where people can charge their phones, come together as a community, get something to eat, shower, get potable water. It was set up at the high school, and we worked very collaboratively with the schools, the police, and our emergency management team to get this up and running. I think it became a model that other towns actually adopted because it worked so successfully in Weston.

First and foremost, I think people needed a chance to go to a place every day and just commiserate with their neighbors. Because when you're in the house without power, no TV, no communication, no Internet, you really do feel incredibly isolated. Having that comfort station up and running really gave people that opportunity to do that.

We had high school kids, mostly my kids, [my fellow Selectman] David Miller's kids, outside filling buckets of water up for people and helping them get those buckets to their car so that they could have some potable water at home for showers or drinking.

We also relied heavily on the CodeRED system, our community-wide alert system. It was started when Woody Bliss was First Selectman. During that storm, we used it quite a bit to let residents know what was going on.

What I loved was when people came up to me and thought that I was making personal phone calls to them, that they appreciated the communication, know what's happening. "Gayle, thank you so much for calling me." That's still one of the things that people kid me about now. Whenever a storm happens, they call me up. "I miss your CodeREDs." "Really?" because some people were sick of them, but in general, I think people were very appreciative of the information.

We'd appreciated your reflecting a little bit on your experience as a First Selectwoman/Selectman more generally. For example, do you think you faced any particular challenges because you were a woman in politics in this town?

I like to think the answer to that is "no", but I actually think the answer to that would be "yes". I think that the conversations I've had, for example, with the Board of Education in particular would have had a different tone had I been a man.

I had to fight when I first got into office because people would say to me, "Oh, I didn't realize you were intelligent." Seriously, did you think it's just the looks that got me elected? There were a lot of comments like that, that they were surprised that I could talk about budgets and finances and debt service and items like that, which actually turned out to be what I thought was the part of my job that was the most fun.

I do think that that male-female dichotomy does come into play with things like that, including dealing with Department of Public Works workers.

But I also think that after I was in office for a while and people got to know me and hear me speak that a lot of that did go away. They realized that I was an intelligent, capable person.

And then there is the issue of partisanship. During campaigns, candidates like to say that once people get on these Boards and Commissions no one knows whether you're a Democrat or a Republican, that they operate in a nonpartisan manner. Is that true in practice from your experience?

A couple of things. I think most of the appointed Boards and Commissions in town are nonpartisan and I think people generally work together well. You don't know who are the Republicans and Democrats in positions on the Library Board or the Pedestrian and Bike Committee, for example, and on others where you need to legally have a balance of Democrats and Republicans. I don't think you see that partisanship.

The fact that our Charter requires that there be no more than a bare majority of either party does allow more equal debate, so that one party doesn't necessarily steamroll over the others as I see happens in other towns.

Yet in the campaigns themselves facts sometimes are - shall we say - skewed and the race can seem not just partisan but very personal. So, arguably, both party politics and personality issues do indeed have an impact on the effectiveness of Boards and Commissions.

I ran for office five times. For four of those times, it was obviously political. I did not feel it was personal.

However, the fifth time was very different. Perhaps it was because I ran uncontested two years before that. The Republicans, and it's within their right, and it's what I would do if I was in their place, ran a candidate against me and did whatever they felt they needed to be done to replace me.

I also felt in those two years before that last election, that things were heating up, that things were becoming a little bit more partisan in terms of issues and in terms of attacks, in terms of what people would accept or not accept. I also think that that's what we were seeing on a statewide level. That's what we were seeing on a national level. While I was shocked and disappointed that it had come to Weston, that's what happened.

When I ran for office, I made it very clear that I was here to represent everyone in Weston. I didn't care whether you were a Democrat or Republican. I worked hard to make collaborative efforts.

I will say that it harmed me with my own political party who wanted me to follow their agenda because I would not do that. Perhaps if I was a little bit of a better politician as opposed to First Selectman, perhaps I would have won that fifth race. I refused to play the game. I was always very transparent in what I wanted to do. I was not going to hold

back, and not talk about things that needed to get done in town and have those difficult conversations simply because it might lose the election for me.

Do you miss being First Selectman?

Sometimes I do. Although I have to say, during that big storm that we had recently, I did call up our Emergency Manager, Joe Miceli. I said, [singsong] "I'm on my way to California, ha-ha-ha." It was a lot of work. I don't think that until you're in that seat you realize just how much work it really is.

Because of that amount of work do you think a three-person Board of Selectmen is adequate? Or do we need more people on the Board so more responsibilities can be farmed out?

I think having a larger Board of Selectmen does not eliminate or reduce the responsibilities of the First Selectman, because as the First Selectman, you have to attend Planning and Zoning meetings, community meetings. You have to be the face of Weston. That doesn't go away, whether there's a three-member board or a five-member board.

Gayle, we have covered a lot of ground. Is there anything you would like to say in conclusion?

I just want to say, for the record, that I was so honored to be able to serve on the Board of Selectmen for eight years and as First Selectman for six of them. I truly considered myself a public servant. I think it was a great honor to be able to represent the residents of Weston during that time.

That's a very positive note to end on. Thank you very much.

Thank you.