

# Coventry councilman blasts school board over Vietnam memorial

By Robert D. Muirhead

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COVENTRY — Members of the Town Council engaged in heated, emotional discussions over the proposed statewide Vietnam Veterans Memorial during their meeting Monday night.

Council member Thomas Pope introduced the discussion in a speech that lambasted the Superintendent of Schools and the Board of Education for denying the committee in charge of the memorial project the ability to place the proposed memorial by the pond in front of Capt. Nathan Hale Middle School.

Pope quoted a letter from the superintendent to the committee as saying, "War memorials should not be built on school grounds."

Pope questioned why a school could be named after a national hero, or a school auditorium could be named "veteran's auditorium," but a war memorial could not be built on school grounds.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is not a memorial to war," said Pope. "It is not a question of political correctness, but of what is right," he said.

"I believe we as the Town Council have an obligation to do what is right."

Pope moved that the Town Council ask Superintendent Donna Bernard, or "whoever was in charge over there," to reconsider allowing a statewide Vietnam memorial in front of Capt. Nathan Hale Middle School. If they refused, Pope's movement committed to building the memorial on town property.

Pope's remarks drew enthusiastic

applause from the attending audience, who numbered at least 10 members of the 4th District American Legion Riders and Jean Risley, who first proposed the statewide memorial.

Risley, whose brother Army Spc. Robert Tillquist was killed in 1964 during the Vietnam war, first thought of the memorial when students from the middle school approached her for a project on the war.

According to Risley, the students told her that there were 612 Connecticut Vietnam veterans killed, but the state does not have a single memorial to honor them. Plans to create the memorial in town have been moving forward, with Clark and Riley Memorials of Manchester agreeing to build the memorial at cost — an estimated \$28,000.

Risley has already begun raising the necessary funds.

The location by Nathan Hale Middle School was selected by Risley and the committee in charge

of the project, but was rejected by the school system, which owns the property.

Council member Elizabeth A. Woolf said she felt that Pope's words condemning the actions of the school system were dangerous and divisive.

"We have no idea what went into this decision" on the school system's behalf, said Woolf. "I think we're jumping to conclusions by saying they're dishonoring our fallen," she said.

Woolf said that approving Pope's motion would feel like saying, "If you don't agree with us, you don't honor our war-fallen."

Council member Don Scussel said that Pope's speech was moving and well delivered.

"However," he said, "if there was ever a motion I wish would be withdrawn, it would be the one under discussion now."

Scussel said he wanted to work as a group, with Risley, area veterans, and the council to find the best location in town.

"This is a decision that should be made by discussion and reason," said Scussel. "It is not a decision that should be made by decree."

Jean Risley spoke on behalf of the Veterans, saying honoring them was the most important aspect of the project.

"Of what I've heard from veterans, I want it on Veteran's Memorial Green with the other memorials," said Risley.

Others voiced their final support for placing the memorial on the green, not the school grounds, which would allow the memorial to be viewed on the town's Memorial Day parade route. The location had been previously rejected.

Council member William J. Zenko said that since the Memorial Green recognized the contributions of the French army during the revolution, why should it not also recognize the veterans of Vietnam?

Pope withdrew his motion, and the council unanimously approved pursuing a location on the green.

Tree of Love

