

# VALLEY NEWS

## In Grafton County, Debut of Tea Party Activist Is Tense but Civil

By JOHN P. GREGG

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**NORTH HAVERHILL** — Accompanied by his Shiba Inu, a once-skittish dog rescued from neglect, Omer Ahern Jr. drove from his home in Plymouth, N.H., yesterday morning to Grafton County Courthouse, where he was sworn in as one of three county commissioners.

Then, after a short drive across the county

complex in North Haverhill, the Republican lawyer and Tea Party activist tucked his rubbers and hat in a corner of the commissioners' conference room and got down to real business.

Hanover Democrat Michael Cryans, the veteran chairman of the commission, had barely opened the first meeting of the three commissioners when Ahern interjected with a point of order, requesting that they start with the Pledge of Allegiance.

"Any veterans in the room?" Ahern said, asking Jeri Martino, a Navy veteran and now the county's administrative assistant, to lead the pledge.

Then, as the commissioners sought to organize their ranks, Ahern said he would like to nominate longtime Commissioner Ray Burton, a Bath Republican, to be the chairman.

Burton, a savvy centrist who has served as a county commissioner for 20 years and also happens to be the longest-serving Executive

Councilor in New Hampshire history, demurred, saying he preferred to be clerk, a job that entails overseeing the bills that come in to the county.

"Omer, I believe that Mike should continue as our chairman. Yes, I know, Republicans won, but on balance political affiliation doesn't have that much to do with this end of the table, I've observed over the years," Burton said.

Undeterred, Ahern, who defeated Holder-ness Democrat Martha Richards in November, tried plan B.

"I move that Omer C. Ahern Jr. be named chairman of this board of commissioners, and that will be my first motion, and nominations do not need to be seconded, according to *Roberts Rules of Order*," Ahern said.

With little discussion, Ahern voted yes, Burton and Cryans no. Motion defeated.

Burton then nominated Cryans, now in his

# Tea Party Activist Joins Grafton Commission

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eight term, to be chairman.

"I vote no," Ahern said loudly, and quickly. But he was outnumbered, and Cryans was re-elected chairman.

Comity soon reigned, however briefly, as Burton was unanimously re-elected as clerk and Ahern made vice chairman of the board.

Ahern also won some small victories. At his request, commissioners delayed reappointing the county's eight department heads until next week so Ahern can review their personnel files, and he signaled that some may face more scrutiny.

They delayed action on a request to add the town of Piermont to the county's dispatch service on Feb. 1 after Ahern said the proposed written agreement didn't include dollar figures. The county typically bills towns based on utilization. And he proposed to hear from an expert from University of New Hampshire on biodiesel for heating and transportation, a marked departure from the wood-chip plant that Richards hoped to see built in North Haverhill.

But in discussing the fiscal year 2012 county budget, which commissioners will propose and Grafton County lawmakers must approve by July, it was clear that Ahern's ambitions to cut away at the county budget will meet with deep skepticism from his two colleagues.

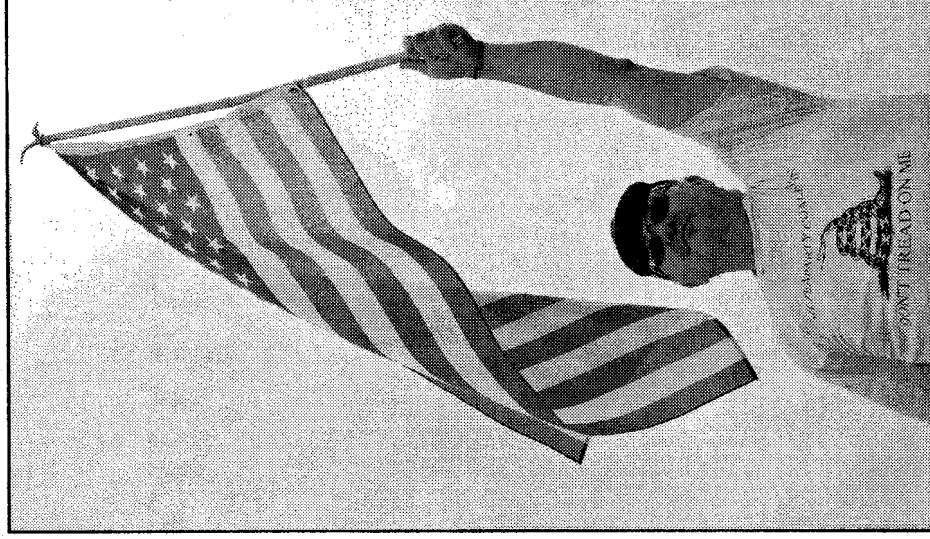
"Times are tight for a lot of people. People are losing their homes to foreclosure, and people are having a hard time paying their property taxes," said Ahern, who moved that the three commissioners take an immediate, and voluntary, 10 percent cut in their pay.

"I think we can set a new direction," he said. "It cannot be business as usual. We need to make some significant changes."

Burton said elected officials' salaries are set, in accordance with state law, by the county delegation.

"We put in a fair amount of time here in the campus and at other meetings we are required to go to, and I think I earn my keep at the current salary," Burton said.

And Cryans noted the county had just weathered a lawsuit over setting of elected officials' pay, and that county commissioners' pay has been level-funded for at least six years.



**Omer Ahern Jr., of Plymouth, N.H., waves the flag at a Tea party rally last May. VALLEY NEWS**

Ahern's motion was defeated, 2-1, and he then requested that his salary be reduced by 10 percent.

In a later discussion about the budget, the range of opinion was made clear again.

"We need to use the word 'reduce' in our county budget, not start out with 'level fund,'" said Ahern, who added that he is concerned about "top-heavy management" and retirement costs, among other areas.

Burton said he would like to see a level-funded budget, if possible, while Cryans said the county has tried to keep the tax impact in hand, but that the county faces some major challenges ahead.

Insurance premiums are predicted to increase by about 20 percent, some \$1.4 million in federal medical assistance to the county is expiring, and the county also faces an \$875,000 principal payment for the bond on a new county jail now under construction. About 19 new Corrections employees are also expected to be in the budget request because of the new jail.

After the three-hour meeting, which included a 20-minute nonpublic session, Cryans said, "I think the new commissioner has his own point of view. Hopefully, when we get into this further he'll realize that certain things are mandated. We have to do certain things.

"Can we find things we can possibly reduce?" Cryans added. "Yes, but they are going to be quickly offset by some of the major increases we are going to see that are just beyond our control."

For his part, Ahern is no stranger to county government. He grew up in Unity at the Sullivan County complex, where his parents ran the county nursing home and jail, and he himself served as a Sullivan County commissioner from 1989 to 1992. Ahern later served one term as a state representative from Sanbornton before moving back to his native Plymouth.

He said he sought a new chairman for Grafton County because "I felt it was time for different leadership," but also said he looked forward to working with both Cryans and Burton.

Ahern's efforts won the praise of Sugar Hill resident Harold Brown, a Republican-turned-independent and vocal critic of past commissioners' actions.

"This was one of the best meetings we've ever had as far as direction and as far as representation. It's really good," said Brown.

During the meeting itself, Brown applauded the move to start each meeting with the Pledge of Allegiance, but also told Ahern there was a problem with the meeting room's American flag, which had a gold fringe.

"I'm delighted, but perhaps you want to change your flag," Brown said. "That's a military flag, not a civilian flag, and we are not under military rule."

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