

# The Weston Voices Oral History Project

Presents

A Conversation with



**Hal Shupack**

Weston's First Selectman, 1999 – 2001

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

**Sponsored by the Weston Historical Society**

with additional support from the  
Friends of the Weston Senior Activities Center

*A video of this interview plus a bonus "Quick Takes"  
video are available in the Society's archives  
as well as on its website, [WestonHistoricalSociety.org](http://WestonHistoricalSociety.org).  
Copies may be found at the Weston Senior Activities  
Center and the Weston Public Library as well.*

Photo credit: Julie O'Connor  
Videographer: Richard Frisch



## The Weston Voices Oral History Project

### A Conversation with Hal Shupack

*Born and raised in Forest Hills, Queens, of a Ukranian immigrant father and New Jersey-born mother, Hal Shupack grew up a good student and an accomplished athlete. He graduated from American University with a degree in industrial engineering that stood him in good stead when, after the untimely death of his father, he had to assume the reins of the family business, the American Hinge Corporation, in 1961. Shupack expanded the business from making trimmings for lady's handbags to making whole sub-assemblies for manufacturers. Still later he partnered with other firms and started several other new businesses until he retired.*

*When he and his family moved to Weston in 1972, he quickly became involved in a range of volunteer activities: coaching girl's soccer, boy's baseball, helping found Weston Kiwanis, and joining the Democratic Town Committee. His local political career began in 1976 with an appointment to a Charter Revision Commission. After that, Shupack was elected to the Board of Finance, serving eight years.*

*Shupack was elected to the Board of Selectmen in 1993 and served three terms, and then, in 1999, running on a platform of "continuity," he became First Selectman and served one term. Two traumatic events swept over Weston during his time in office: the 9/11 attack and the suicide of the Superintendent of Schools. But there were also positive developments. Shupack cites, among other accomplishments, his leadership in the acquisition of Morehouse Farm Park, the establishment of the Troutbrook Valley Preserve, and the approval of an \$80 million bond issue for the building of a new intermediate school and the updating of existing school facilities.*

*Asked for suggestions on what the town might do to keep making it attractive for newcomers, he emphasized that "Weston needs to be different." One way to do that, he suggests, might be to consider creating a specialized curriculum on the environment and related activities at the high school. He also believes that while fiscal prudence is critical, the town side of the budget often gets short-changed.*

*Shupack continues to be actively involved in the area's community organizations. He has served on the board of the Gillespie Center and Homes with Hope for ten years. He is also on the board of Visiting Nurse & Hospice of Fairfield County, which recently broke ground for a new facility.*

*What follows is the full transcript of his oral history interview, edited for clarity and annotated for context.*

**Welcome, Hal, and thank you for doing this. Let's start at the beginning: Where did you grow up?**

I grew up in New York, in Forest Hills ... and even lived there after I had gotten married because we couldn't find another place to live that was suitable and affordable. My parents were deceased by that time so I bought the house from the estate, the balance of it. That is why we ended up in the house I grew up in. My wife and I lived there for five years.

**How about your father and mother?**

My father came to this country from the Ukraine in 1902 when he was eight years old. He was the oldest of nine children eventually, but he came with a brother and a sister that were younger. My grandfather on the other side came from the Polish side of Russia, which was still Russia at that time.

My grandfather left about the same time, but he went to England. He was in a dance contest in England and met a woman there, and they married. That was his wife, that was my grandmother. That's the family background in terms of my grandparents and my parents.

My mother, of course, always claimed to be a real American because she was born in Hoboken, New Jersey.

**What were some of your favorite memories growing up as a child?**

I was a good student. I was rather quiet, but at the same time, my mother pushed me to excel. I was in special classes and what have you, and went to certain programs, one was great literature, as a child. I was also very athletic. I played every kind of sport I could get my hands on.

**Was there someone who was of particular influence on you as you were growing up?**

It was my mother, because she was there to see to it that I did the right thing and that I participated in every opportunity that was there. From that standpoint, and as far as moving forward and into my political career [when I first came to Weston], I met a gentleman, Bob Siegel, who had been on the Board of Finance for many, many years and was active in the Democratic Town Committee. Bob was my mentor. He was the one who got me my first job with the town, got me involved in the Democratic Town Committee. We became lifelong friends.

**Where did you attend college?**

I graduated from high school just as I was turning 17. I attended American University, but I was only there for my freshman and sophomore years.

My father had passed away when I was a freshman, and things got bad at home [and with the business]. So I went home, helped the family, and did my junior year at NYU [in the 1955-56 academic year].

I didn't tell NYU that I was also studying engineering at night at the Stevens Institute of Technology and got enough credits there. I couldn't graduate from NYU, because I'd only been there for a year-and-a-half. So I went back to American University for six months and graduated from there in January 1957. So, there were three universities in my career but, basically, I got a bachelor of science degree in industrial engineering.

### **Why industrial engineering?**

My father had a manufacturing business [making trimming for lady's handbags.] There were people that said I should go into engineering, and there were people that said I should go into business. Between the two, I figured this is the happy medium. I had looked at other colleges and found that there were different things that appealed to me from different standpoints but I always had an interest in things mechanical. That's the direction that I chose.

### **How did that career evolve? Did you first start one career and then go to another?**

No, no, no. Actually, it's funny because when I was in Kiwanis [in Weston], a lot of the members were corporate people. We have this thing called "Get to Know Your Fellow Kiwanian," and they talk about all these jobs they've had. I never had but one boss in my life, and that was my wife. [laughter]

What really happened is my father passed away and my mother tried to keep the business going so that I could take it over. By the time I got out of the military and took over the company, the company was in bankruptcy. I took it over, made certain changes and guaranteed the creditors 70 cents on the dollar. They gave me five years to rebuild the company and that's what I did.

*[Shupack assumed the reins of the business, American Hinge Corporation, in 1961. One of the first steps he took was to shift the focus of the company from making trimmings for lady's handbags to making precision parts for a wide variety of applications, from hardware to exercise equipment. Successful at that, Shupack then expanded the business to making whole sub-assemblies for manufacturers, including those for the medical field. Still later he partnered with other firms and started new businesses until he retired. -Ed.]*

### **What you do in the military?**

I was one of those six-month wonders. We were all subject to the draft. Rather than get drafted, and since I had to [get into business] and earn a living as fast as possible, I signed up for the National Guard, and went on active duty at Fort Dix. I spent five and a half years in the National Guard reserve altogether.

### **What year was that?**

That was 1957 when I got out of college, January '57. I will say that my mother made me go to graduation. The graduation [ceremony] was very important to her.

I went in right after graduation. It took me a year to actually go on active duty. I had tried to enroll in law school to do it at night. Unfortunately, I missed a whole year, or two years. Because of the starting time when I got back, I missed two full years.

In any case, I did spend a couple of years afterwards, at night, going to law school. Then it got to be too much trying to run a company and doing law school at night. The next thing you know, I went ahead and finished my five and a half years in the reserve.

**How did you meet your wife-to-be, Sheila?**

Well, that's a crazy story. I was a bachelor at that time, 29 years old. I decided to take a trip to the Caribbean. I met a group of young women from Texas. One of them was very, very attractive. We spent the better part of a week together. At that point, she went back to Texas.

So I said to myself, "why am I getting involved with a girl from another religion in Texas? This doesn't make sense." So I cooled it.

[But she was still interested in me.] She had a friend studying in Vienna [who happened to be coming to New York for a visit]. She told this friend, "Why don't you call this guy and let him know I'm still interested?"

This girl blows into town and calls. I said, "OK, but you have to at least meet me for a drink." That was my wife.

**You told us that after you married, you and Sheila moved into your parent's old house. How did you get from there to Weston?**

We moved back to Forest Hills. We lived there for five years. In those five years, we had three children in three and a half of those five years. It came to a point where our oldest child was five years old and ready for school. We decided that it was time to move out of the city and move to the country. We moved to Weston in 1972.

**Were there other towns in the area that you looked at and were very interested in? Why did you chose Weston instead?**

We had found a farm in Ridgefield. When I very, very young my father had made an offer on a farm in Ridgefield, so we knew of Ridgefield. I put in an offer to buy 35 acres of a farm that had 72 acres. The man got insulted because I offered him 10 percent less than he wanted. That deal didn't go through.

We had a friend that I knew from Queens. He was living at that time in Norwalk. He said, "I have a friend that's in the real estate business. Why don't you come up and look at Westport and Weston?" We had driven through Weston to meet him for dinner and what have you, and said, "Gee, this is kind of a nice town." We looked at Weston and of

course, with three kids, we found out about the schools. We liked the country, so we chose Weston.

But there was another thing. When you live in New York City, even though our neighborhood was mixed in terms of religion and culture, the difference was that whenever you wanted to do something, it was that all the country clubs were all restricted -- you were either a Christian, or you were Jewish.

If you were Jewish, you had to be one of the three different types of Judaism. If you were Catholic, it was one, and, if you were Presbyterian, it was another. Since we were a mixed marriage, we would look for a place where we would be welcome, and we found Weston to be that place.

Once we came here, the synagogue called and said, "We have heard you've moved in. We'd like you to come and join us." I said, "We have an unusual situation." They said, "What's unusual?" and I told them that my wife was Christian and I was Jewish. Needless to say, they said, "That's not unusual."

**Does the attractiveness of Weston that prevailed when you moved here still exist, or did the reasons people came here change over the years?**

I don't think the reasons that people move here have changed. People still come from an economic standpoint. If you send a child to school in New York City today it's \$30,000 a year for kindergarten. If you have three kids, it's \$90,000 a year after taxes.

This town is a bargain in terms of that. The schools were excellent. That hasn't changed, and the environment hasn't changed, because we protect it. Almost 20, 25 percent of the town is open space. I think it's a special place. It has always been a special place.

When people ask me about Weston, and they ask, "What is it about Weston," I say, "I always look at it as the difference between a large university and a small university. It's easy to get involved. You can do what you want to do. There's every opportunity here to do it. You don't have to join a thing because everybody in town does."

**So nothing notably changed over the years you lived here?**

Physically, well, sure. Houses were being built. The town started to grow. This town was a sleepy little town at one time. We had 500 residents. At that point, the town was really starting to grow. As you say, it started to get more popular.

The only thing that changed, I think, is not so much in structure, but [the fact that] more and more people came up from the city. More and more people, more concentration of ethnic classes. We had many more Jewish people move up that we didn't have. When I first moved here, there were some, but certainly not to the extent that we have today.

**How about the political profile, did that change?**

The political profile totally changed. When I got elected in 1999 this was a Republican town, and most of the towns in Fairfield County were Republican. I got elected in a

Republican town as a Democrat, but that was primarily because I was a fiscally conservative Democrat. It wasn't just being a Democrat, but I was more towards the center. I had developed a friendship amongst many of the Republicans as well as of Democrats. I don't think we chose friends here because of Republicans and Democrats. That's, again, part of what makes the town.

*[The eligible voter rolls in Weston in 2000 showed 2,448 Republicans, 1,723 Democrats, and 2,281 Unaffiliated. A decade later the profile had 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.]*

**It is no secret that these are difficult times financially for the State and the communities in the State, including ours. Do you think that this pressure will continue?**

I hope not, because that's the pressure that's hurting the town. Our problems here are not just Weston. They're the whole area. We see growth in parts of the country that's unbelievable. Real estate prices in the West Coast and in Boston are out of sight, but that's not happening here, and it's not happening in Fairfield County.

It's not happening because jobs are leaving, and the taxes are such that people are leaving with them. The only way we're going to turn it around is if we get somebody who takes charge of the State and realizes that business is the key to the State growing and prospering. And that affects our town as well.

Weston has a different problem, in the sense that we pay a lot for schools, we have the right schools because we pay a lot, but our mill rate is so much higher than the neighboring towns that people oftentimes choose other towns rather than Weston.

That's something that I see that our present Board of Selectmen are doing something about, and our Board of Finance, certainly, when they reduced the budget this year. That's something we have to continue to do. But there are other things that I think can be done as a town to help our situation.

**If people in town were to be asked about what it would take to return to the days when we were successfully competing with other towns, the answer you are likely to get is that the problems that we have in Weston are the same that every town has in Connecticut. In other words, we're not unique in terms of the problems we have. Would you agree?**

When I was First Selectman we used to meet with all the First Selectmen in Fairfield County, the nine towns including Stamford and Norwalk. We'd get together and talk about our towns. We found that we're all alike in terms of what happens in the town. For example, the ten people in town that might drive you crazy as Selectmen. And the typical kind of people who live in Weston, Darien or New Canaan: a young woman with an SUV with a dog in the car and two kids. It doesn't change.

From that standpoint, we're similar, but if we want to raise our image we need to do different things. We have an abundance of space in the schools. At one time, we had a

German school in the schools. We don't have it anymore. There's no reason we can't do something like that.

I think Weston needs to be different. I think we need to start either a magnet school in some form or a school where we teach language. One of the things I had hoped to do when we acquired the Lachat Farm was to make that, together with Devil's Den, a study in the environment. Now they have graduate students in Devil's Den coming in the summer and doing internships. We have birds and animals that migrate into our town. It's a perfect place to have students do studies in environment.

If we set ourselves aside and said we are a high school that specializes and works with the environment, I think that in itself would make us stand out and make us more interesting to people thinking about coming to the town.

**Let's start talking about your own involvement in town affairs, which began, just as it has for many, with your volunteering.**

When I first got involved, it was [to join] the Democratic Town Committee [DTC]. Then of course once you're on a town political committee, it's an easy way to get involved with some of the town's Boards and Commissions. The first elected one that I was put up for by the DTC was for the Board of Finance. I didn't get it. That was probably around 1974. In 1976, the DTC asked if I would go on a Charter Revision Commission and I did. We worked for a year on the Charter.

That was a wonderful experience. I have never written a constitution. It was an opportunity to work with fellow Westonites, both Republican and Democrat, and hear the arguments from the community on what we should do. We made major changes. That was the Charter Revision that changed the way in which we voted at the town committee.

It also was the Charter revision that we made the [political make-up of the]Boards four-three instead of five-two, which was the state mandate or state statute. [*The Charter specified – and continues to specify -- that no more than a bare majority of any elected Board or Commission shall consist of members of the same political party. The same applies to appointed positions. – Ed.*]

In doing that, the Boards became less political. You only had to change one vote. Before, if you served on a Board and said, "If I'm a minority, I really don't have much to say." That made a huge difference in the government and how it functioned.

Then from there I was elected to the Board of Finance for a term of about eight years. Then, a gentleman who was on the Board got off right before the Annual Town Budget Meeting and I [was appointed to fill out his term]. [Then I ran again at the next election and came back on for another term.] So altogether I was on the Board of Finance for 14 years.

Then, after the Board of Finance, I was appointed to serve as a representative to the Code Committee, which was [charged with overseeing compliance with issues such as]



access for the handicapped and health facilities and what have you for all the schools. We did that for several years.

Then I went on the Board of Selectmen. I was on the Board of Selectmen for six years [1993-1999], working under George Guidera. Then, again, if you're talking about people that had a great influence on me, having never been in that position, I learned a lot from George. He was instrumental in giving me an education on government and how to run a meeting. I did that for six years.

I had the opportunity during that time to be the Board's representative to the Nature Conservancy, so I served on the Nature Conservancy Board. I helped negotiate the acquiring of the Lachat property. One of the other major things we did, and I was involved, again, helping to negotiate the paramedic program.

We were the first town [to adopt one]. Dave Geismar from the EMS and myself negotiated with Norwalk Hospital and the town of Wilton for the paramedic program. That changed the way in which we ran the town in terms of EMS and paramedic. We were the first town in the state of Connecticut to join with another town and have a joint paramedic program. I'm very proud of that.

Then we also negotiated during that time, and again, I was involved, the insurance claim for the firemen and EMS. What happened was that the firemen were getting twenty-five percent of their health insurance paid for by the Town, regardless of what they did [or how much time they spent on duty] in the fire department.

We had "knife and fork" firemen down in Florida, [so even if they were not on regular duty] they were getting their insurance paid for. We had other firemen that never showed up to a fire but maybe went to some meetings. What we said was, we're going to put in a point system.

Based on the point system, you get points for going to meetings, you get points for training and you get points for fighting fires. Based on that, the firemen today can get up to 75 percent of their insurance paid for. That, again, is something that I really felt was a great contribution to the town.

**Turning now to your running for First Selectman, you were quoted in the paper as saying, "I don't expect politics to play a role when I'm in office." How did that work out?**

I don't really call it politics. [laughs] There's no question that when I got elected, my running mate [Rick Saltz] didn't and he lost by, I think, 26 votes.

The way we do it, and I still don't think it's right, but the way we do it is that the running mate goes into a pool with the other two candidates and the one that gets the highest number of votes goes on the Board of Selectmen. Needless to say, I ended up on the Board with two Republicans [*i.e. because Saltz received fewer votes than the two Republicans -Ed.*].

In that case, frankly, it didn't work because they worked together to get what their agenda was and I had my own agenda. There was pull; we didn't always agree. During the time I was on the Board of Selectmen previously, and not First Selectman, that didn't happen. The First Selectmen at the time, George Guidera, was a Republican, and so was the other member of the Board of Selectmen, Harvey Attra. [*Attra died while in office and was replaced by another Republican, Chris Barreca. --Ed.*] But the pattern of voting was different. It varied, two to three, varied from time to time which two and which three. It was different.

I don't think it's always that way but it's easier when the First Selectmen has an agenda and has somebody running with him from the same party, or working with him in the same party.

**What platform did you run on in your successful campaigns for the Board of Finance and the Board of Selectman?**

I think that one of the reasons I got elected was because of my background. Having been in business for myself, I had experience in a lot of different areas. I was equipped to handle the finance side. At the same time, I dealt with insurance and things like that. Of course, we had up to 75 employees at one time so I know what it was like to manage people.

From that standpoint, I came in with skills. There were people that gave me advice. You listen to everybody. I was not a politician. I had never run for office. I did some things in university when I was there but never ran for anything political, and I never really served on a large committee of any kind. It's quite different.

**How did you change -- if you indeed changed it -- the management approach in Weston?**

I was more structured than George was. He was a townie. He had grown up here, knew a lot of people here and was very comfortable in that environment. I was structured in the sense that I educated myself by going to as many Board meetings as I could.

I had been on the Board of Finance so I had that experience beforehand, which was invaluable because I'd been through town budget after town budget. I'd worked with Board of Education. We had a wonderful relationship with the chairman of the Board of Education at that time. We worked closely together and that was very helpful.

I think it was more a case of the experience I had working with people before I got to my role as a Selectmen. I always felt that experience on previous Boards and Commissions was essential. There was a time when a future candidate of the Board asked me to be their campaign manager and I said, "No." They asked me to be their treasurer and I said, "No, you're not ready."

This person chose not to run for First Selectmen but did for the Board and that was right. I like to see people that have been on Boards and Commissions understand how they work, understand how you work with committee members, and then move into greater responsibility.

### **How else would you describe your management style?**

Well, one of the things that I did, first of all, [was to show that] my office was always open. They didn't have to go through a secretary. They didn't have to go through anything. They could come into my office; they were welcome to talk to me openly and frankly.

That helped a lot in working with the employees. It helped where we had a little trouble with the unions. There was no town hall union at that time. We tried to make the environment a warm and comfortable environment. We had a party for everybody's birthday. We had coffee and donuts or whatever in the mornings and tried to make it more homey, and make people feel comfortable to come in and enjoy.

Of course, I was present at a lot of the meetings. I went to every organization, I didn't care whether it was the Women's Club or the Young Women's Club or the Garden Club, I was always there. That was part of my job. I think that that's how you get to know the people, get to know the town, and encourage them. It's easy to get involved.

Which leads me back to volunteerism in this town. One of the things I did, I was one of the founding members of the Kiwanis Club here in Weston. I'd never been a member of a Kiwanis Club or any other social club before. I was the first membership chairman. We got the club immediately up to like 60 members. In doing that, people say, "How do you get involved when it's a new town?" and there, again, that's how you do it.

You come to a town. Sure, you join the church, but part of that are organizations like the Women's Club or the Young Women's Club or the Newcomers Club. Those are people who are reaching out to find out how they're going to fit into the community. That's the best way to do it.

**After you left office, you summed up your term by saying, "More has happened over the last two years while I was First Selectmen than happened in the previous ten." Why?**

Well, you can start with Troutbrook Valley. The opportunity arose where the land was being sold and the golf course community was talking about developing 105 acres with 105 homes in a neighboring town. [*Easton. -Ed.*]

But [to reach it] all of the traffic would come through Weston. We were the sole entrance to the property. We would get no taxes, but more important than that, it would change the town. I worked with a group of First Selectmen. I worked with Paul Newman and the Aspetuck Land Trust in Easton, and the Nature Conservancy.

We were able to put a consortium together to save the 880 acres, 44 of which were in Weston and were owned by the town of Weston. We were able to turn that around and make it a state park. Now it's over 1,000 acres.

That was one of the things. Then we got into 9/11. Well, 9/11 was a crisis. I'd never had to deal with anything like it. All of a sudden, what do we do with the children?

We're at town hall. We see the planes crashing into the towers. We called an emergency meeting. I met with Mike Foster, the chairman of the Board of Education. We called in some of the theologians, some of the ministers and rabbis, and I said, "What do we do?" Do we tell the kids? We don't tell the kids? Do we send them home? Do we not send them home?

Well, if we send them home, are the parents going to be there? We don't know. It was a terrible time. Then, of course, there were a lot of people that worked in the city, they worked nearby. They saw people jumping out of windows. They were struck with shock. We opened all the churches 24 hours. I went from church to church to church. It was a crisis for quite a while. It lasted for several months.

We were fortunate. We did not lose any parents of children then in school. We did lose six adult children of parents who were still living in town. But no Weston school-age child lost a parent in 9/11. We were lucky in that respect.

That was the first.

Then, not too much later, we had the suicide of the Superintendent of Schools, Janet Shaner. There again, I had people of my own Party that had been actively involved in criticizing her. Some of them were my largest financial supporters when I ran for office.

I had to go on television, Channel 12, and tell people what happened and why. It was clear to the Board of Education and myself that we would continue her employment before this happened, when she was being criticized. We decided that it was in the best interest of the town that she continue. *[Shupack is referencing the Fall, 2000 revelation that Shaner had accepted more than \$15,000 in gifts from a contractor whose work she had overseen in her previous position as Superintendent of Schools in West Chester, PA.]*

Lots of people didn't agree, so we had quite a contentious issue. Of course, I felt that it was a lynching because she was being attacked by the newspaper, she was being attacked by letters to the editor, she was being attacked at every meeting. I got to know her quite well. She would call me every Thursday when the newspaper came out in tears and I'd go over to the school and console her.

*[Shupack added another dimension of the controversies swirling around Shaner in his "quick takes" companion interview: "A lot of the people in town had felt that she was trying to get rid of the Director of Pupil Services...because we had 15 percent of the students in special ed, ... [which] put a tremendous burden on the town. One of her responsibilities ... was to do something about it. The parents of special ed children were after her and tried to get rid of her. It was a very difficult time. That's what I think caused the suicide."]*

It was a different time. There were things happening constantly. The other thing that we dealt with was Morehouse Farm Park. There was an opportunity to buy a piece of property from Mrs. Heady who owned the property. Morehouse was her husband. We made an agreement to buy the property and to use it for open space or for schools. We were able to build the athletic fields there and expand the town. *[The Morehouse family has a long history in Weston. For details see the oral histories of Judy Albin and Paul & Elaine Deysenroth. -Ed.]*

The last thing, of course, was the opportunity to build new schools. I was deeply involved with getting the school building project approved, and the \$80 million bond issue approved for the building of the new intermediate school, the athletic fields, and that whole project.

At that point, we had had twenty-six portables on campus. Here was a wealthy town that was trying to attract people. They're not going to come to send kids to school in portables. We decided that it was time to get rid of the portables and build classrooms.

We had the opportunity in doing it that if we built, I think it was, another six classrooms it would cost us no more than about \$100,000 since we were building anyway, so we took the opportunity to do it. Unfortunately, the enrollment started dropping several years later, but [we built the new school because] the forecasts we had were that the enrollment was going to continue to grow.

**But instead, enrollment has continued to decline. So, how would you deal with the competing factors of declining enrollment on the one hand, which means under-utilized space, and with a Board of Education budget that continues to climb on the other?**

Well, the first thing was that when Gayle Weinstein became First Selectmen [in 2009], she authorized me to be part of a committee--Glen Major, myself, and Jim Fitzpatrick--that would be a study committee for the facilities committee for the town.

We looked at all the buildings [in town] and [among them], of course, we concentrated on the schools. We looked at the intermediate school and we knew that there were extra classrooms that they had spread out and used. We knew that we could move certain town facilities in there if we wanted to. We could move them out of the administration building and into there and then use the administration building for other purposes. There were things that could be done.

As I said to you earlier, there are other ways to use the facilities of the school. They're there, the offices are much too large in the intermediate school for the size of the administrative staff. That's another whole issue.

If you look at the schools and you take an objective approach and say, "Well, wait a minute. Do we have to have a three, four, five [Intermediate School] or do we go back to what we had before and take that particular building and do something else with it? Turn the building into a school for languages or some other educational purpose that brings income to the town and at the same time puts the building to greater use."

**Do you believe that there is hope, with some hardcore planning and practical thinking, that there is a way to moderate, modify, perhaps even eliminate, this continuous pressure of rising taxes that we have every year?**

I think that we have to. Houses are not being filled. I mean, there's no question that people sell homes; for one reason or another people have to sell. When they do, those houses get taken up, but what's been driven down is the prices.

We're in a situation where in '07 we reached a high in the value of homes in town, as did everybody else during the recession, and it hasn't come back to where it was before. It's come back a little bit but certainly not to where it was before. People are selling homes.

People in the over a million-dollar range are taking a bigger hit. People under a million dollars are finding that they can find buyers for their homes quite easily because people want to live in this town. It's a matter of finances and how big a bite you can take.

**There is the growing realization that a greater effort should be made to keep people in town on the grounds that an influx of young families would add to school enrollment and thus add yet more pressure on the budget. Is there something we should do to keep our residents here?**

Well, I think the town's special. I believe in the two-acre zoning. I'm not for opening up zoning for multiple dwellings. I'm not for opening up residences. Look, we were going to build housing for affordable housing. Interestingly enough the site we were going to do it on is where we now have the Intermediate School, so thank goodness that didn't happen.

The reason it didn't happen was that even though we said that we would finance it as a town so that we wouldn't have to go to the State for money, the State came back to us and said, "We don't care. The State law says you have to open it up to everybody," and so we didn't do the project.

We have the land. There's no question there's still land available. It's town-owned land. We certainly don't want industry to come in. We don't want office buildings to come in. I think that this town is unique, and I think it should remain unique.

I think two-acre zoning is critical. That's not to say that we shouldn't expand the Weston Center into maybe professional offices in the back or what have you. It's five acres back there but it's privately owned by the owner of the center, but that land exists and that could be housing for professionals.

We have doctors who live in town, but they cannot practice here. We don't have any dentists that practice here. We don't have any psychiatrist or psychologists other than those that work out of their home. There's an opportunity there for professional offices.

**What didn't you accomplish that you had wanted to and couldn't? And why not?**

[laughs] I don't know. One of the other things I did, of course, [was to do something about parking]. We had inadequate parking here at town hall, we had inadequate parking over at the library, we had inadequate parking at the middle school, and we didn't have parking for the school administration building. So I built all those. I had all those done during the time I was in office.

What else would I have wanted to do? I think that there was a need for a community center. I think that's something that we looked at. We had an opportunity to something with the Boys & Girls Club, which is an independent organization.

During the time I was in office, we had a tragedy on the school campus when a young man was killed in an automobile. He was a passenger, not the driver. I think that kind a cooled it, but I think the town still needs it. Parks and Rec thought they could compensate by activities, but it hasn't given the kids a place to hang out, to spend time, and be part of a group. It can be done and I think actually it should be.

**Should we do more for seniors as well?**

Well, I think we're doing a lot. The Senior Center program are excellent. Taking over [a part of Hurlbutt Elementary School] was a great idea. I think it's been well received. I think their activities excel. It's a very valuable part of the community. Do we need to do more? That I don't know. The town has changed. I think we're aging, so I'm not sure, you'd have to look at the demographics of the town to see how many elderly are still in town.

**Given all your experience, what advice would you give to the next First Selectmen ... or any Selectman?**

We have a First Selectmen now that, again, is in sort of the same position I was. Chris Spaulding never served in politics. You learn on the job and that's OK. I think there's no question that the budget is critical. That's the first thing. I think he's doing a decently good job of addressing that.

There's more opportunity to do things with other towns. Consolidate and do some of the services on a more universal basis. Economies of scale. I think we have the facilities, we've developed most of the facilities that we need.

Everybody's different and I hate tell people how to do things, but certainly I'd like to see the union in town hall gone. I don't see a real need for it at this point. Job situations are stable. We've got enough unions at the schools. We've got a union for everything in the schools.

Of course, it's nice to say that the town budget has 80 percent for the schools, but I've always felt that, proportionately, we take more out of the town budget than we do the schools. I'd like to see more done. The library needs more. Parks and Rec needs more. The town in general, the town itself, needs more attention.

**If a Selectman came to you and said, "We've got this bucket of money, please give me one thing that we ought to do at the town level and one thing we ought to do at the school level."**

Well, it doesn't work that way because we can't tell the school what to do. [laughter] The schools are independent, and the schools have their own agenda, and that's good and bad. I think a greater closer working relationship with the schools would help. There's no question that if we work together with the schools, we can get services that can help everybody.

There's things that can be done, there's no question. I think sidewalks are a great idea. I think getting schools closer to the center of town with sidewalks where it's safer is a great idea. It's something that we can do jointly.

There are things that can be done. I'm not involved that closely with the town at this point [*Shupack and his wife recently downsized into a condominium in Westport -Ed.*]. But I try to stay involved where I can. From time to time some of the people that you're talking about come to me and ask me how'd you do things or what to do. I'm always available for that. I only live 10 minutes away.

In terms of specific projects, others know better what might be needed than I do at this point. Look, we had [a lot of ideas brought up]. Somebody wanted a cemetery that we ended up [not doing]...We wanted a center for the arts. That never got built. If we had the opportunity, maybe, we should do it again.

I don't know whether the demographics of the town are now where they were. We're 50/50 children in school or adults without children in school. I don't think we have as many people living here that don't work locally, or work out of their houses. We have many more people working out of their homes.

The nature of businesses today affords the opportunity for people to work out of their homes. That affords other opportunities. I think there's a lot of people in town that maybe would get more involved with the town. I think that for some reason, a lot of people don't know how to get involved or choose not to. It's a shame because town government needs those people.

**Before we close, let's talk a bit more about the great amount of time you've spent volunteering on behalf of community organizations. There is a wide range, starting with the Historical Society.**

I was the Treasurer of the Historical Society for several years. I was involved in the campaign to raise money for the archive facility. We were able to raise the bulk of the money that built the archive. I did that while I was there. I was on the Board of the Historical Society for a number of years. I think it's a great organization, and the town needs something like that.

I'm delighted that they've done something with Lachat Farms, but I feel that in some ways it takes away from the Historical Society. A lot of the things they're doing are very similar to what the Historical Society's doing. I would like to see that more as a single unit than two individual organizations.

Otherwise, I coached when I was here. I coached girls' soccer. I coached boys' baseball. I stayed away from basketball because I played it in college and I was far too competitive coaching it.

Now I am on the board of the Gillespie Center and Homes with Hope. I've enjoyed that for now 10 years. I'm also on their finance committee sub-committee. I'm involved in a lot of other things on the side that they ask me to do or I want to do and I volunteer to do it. That's part of it. The fact is, I just got some furniture for some friends of mine in



Weston that found a home that people were selling. I got those beds for Homes with Hope. It's one of those things that you do when you're involved.

Then, I'm on the board of Visiting Nurse & Hospice of Fairfield County. That's a marvelous opportunity to work with an extremely bright and capable board. It's a very large organization with 220 employees and 100 volunteers. [I'm on the] sub-committee for real estate there. Our lease is up in February and so we had to find a space to either move into, sign a new lease with the landlord, or buy a building. We chose to buy a building. I can tell you today that last Friday I was at the closing. We bought the old Hitchcock Furniture Building on Route Seven. We're going to renovate it and make that our home.

**What question should we have asked you that we haven't yet asked?**

[laughs] Maybe my politics? I don't know if I want to...I've always been open about it. I don't think this is the place for it. Certainly, in the country as it is today and in the state as it is today, politics is very much a part of our lives. I think it's very important that everybody be involved, which is why I've decided to run. That's really why I got involved. I have friends on both sides.

I eat lunch with a group every week who are former Mobil executives. I'm probably in the minority. There's one other Democrat in the group of ten. He's in Florida right now, so I'm the only Democrat. We have a good opportunity to exchange ideas. I think that's the main thing is that people can talk to each other and listen and agree to disagree.

**That brings us to this thought: Have you considered running for higher office?**

No. I enjoyed my time as First Selectman. It gave me a great opportunity to do a lot of things I never would have been able to do. I feel as though I've been able to accomplish a lot of things while I was doing it.

But back to the original question: The thing you *didn't* ask me is why I left office. The answer: I was at the point in my career where it was time to sell my company. One of the things I needed to do was to spend more time to build the company up to sell.

[I also felt that a lot had been done during my time in office.] I felt that I got the schools done. We built the new schools. I got the \$80 million bond issue approved. It was time for me to say, "Got done what I really set out to do."

You also didn't ask me about why I chose to be a Selectman [in the first place].

George Guidera had been a Selectman from 1987-1999 and ran unopposed. Harvey Attra had passed away. He was the other Selectman on the Board at the time when I joined. Chris Baracca then came in as a member of the Board of Selectmen with no experience.

[In that time of uncertainty] I felt that it was critical for somebody who had a knowledge of how the Boards and Commissions worked to continue. I felt that it was important for somebody to continue that was knowledgeable in the way things worked. Continuity

was critical, and that's the reason that I became a First Selectmen, or at least the reason that I chose to run for First Selectmen.

**Hal, thank you very much. This has been most interesting. We appreciate your doing this.**

I'm glad to do it. I hope that in some way it enlightens people as to what's happened in the past. Why we built the town the way we did, why we felt it was so critical to do these things. I hope that in many ways they don't change.

**What stays with us the most after hearing you speak about your experiences and your time with the town is your commitment to volunteerism. If there was one thing that could be done to improve volunteerism, can you think of something, or do we just have to hope that citizens come to the realization that they are the town and they are important to its success.**

I think it's a national issue, too, in the sense that we have two parties. We have had candidates in the past that have run independently. It's not easy, financially, it's not easy. I'm not so sure that it wouldn't hurt to have another party where we had more choice.

Look, we really have three parties [in town]. You have the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, and the Unaffiliated. You can call it what you will. If you want to call them the Independent Party, or you want to call them the Unaffiliated Party, those people are going to vote not being a Democrat or a Republican.

Why not give them an opportunity to be part of the election? That helps. It helps to have volunteerism. In helping volunteerism, what you want to do is make it available and show people that it's easy to get involved. You don't have to be a strong Republican or a strong Democrat in this town to get involved. We need volunteers. There are skills that they can bring that we desperately need.

**Thank you, Hal.**

My pleasure. Thank you.