



The Weston Historical Society's "Weston Voices" Oral History Project

Presents

A Conversation with George C. Guidera

George Guidera, a Weston native and proud of his career as a "home town lawyer," served as Weston's First Selectman from 1987 to 1999, a record six terms. Earlier in his political career he had also been elected to both houses of the State Legislature.

Guidera knew he wanted to be a lawyer by the time he was ten. His interest in government also started early on: two of his uncles were First Selectmen over the period of a decade, so "politics was always dinner table conversation."

During his tenure he was a strong advocate for the things that made Weston special to him – and the rest of the Town: open space, two-acre zoning, a friendly and cooperative atmosphere, and the spirit of voluntarism.

Guidera was also a prime mover behind the growth of the Historical Society, leading the successful effort to build its museum and archive facility. After living in Weston for seven decades, he moved to nearby Newtown in 2016.

Summing up his role as First Selectman, Guidera said, "Having a vision, being there at the right time, taking a position, and then selling that position to the general public is what goes with the job. At the end of my 12 years, I really felt that most everything that I had wanted to accomplish actually had gotten accomplished."

Mr. Guidera was interviewed by Neil Horner and Arne de Keijzer on June 7, 2017. A video of this interview and this edited and annotated transcript have been placed in the Society's archives and are also available on its website – as is a brief, introductory "Short Takes" video. The Historical Society's "Weston Voices" program is supported by the members and friends of the Society as well as a grant from the Friends of the Weston Senior Activities Center.

George, let's start with your overall perspective on the town. What was Weston like when you were growing up here?

It was vastly different than it is today. Virtually everyone who lived here was either a retired farmer or some type of blue-collar worker. My dad was a bricklayer. There are CEOs of big corporations that now live in houses that were once owned by carpenters, bricklayers, and ordinary kinds of citizens.

This was especially so in the 1940's. Weston began to change in the 1950s. Prices started to go up for real estate. People started to come in from New York in larger numbers, although of course there were New Yorkers coming here as early as the 1920s and 1930s.

My family came here from the Bronx, at first as summer residents. Then, their children liked it so much that they stayed.

Today, the people are different. Virtually everyone has a college education in Weston. But in those days virtually no one had. They were regular people who had grown up here and, in many cases, had been life-long residents of the town.

One thing that stayed the same was the quality of the school system. People think it's good only today but it was then, too. I know. I went through it between 1947 and 1957, when we graduated from ninth grade. [*Weston had no high school then so students went to Staples High School in Westport, which at the time offered just the 10th, 11th, and 12th grades. Comments Guidera on his experience there: "It was a terrific school...and also had a lot of pretty girls." -ed.*]

The major difference between then and now is how much of an impact the schools have had on the cost of government. The school system is a major proposition today compared to what it was when I was growing up.

Of course, the rest of the budget has also increased dramatically. The Board of Selectmen met very infrequently in those days because they basically took care of the roads and that was it. There were no recreation facilities that needed support. There were no ball fields necessary. There was no parks and recreation department. There was no transportation or road crew as we have them today.

It went from being a small, rural town to one that was beginning to look like it was suburban, and that happened from the 1940s into the 1950s. Then in the 1960s it just exploded. Expensive houses started to be built and I think really and truly the locals couldn't afford it anymore. That's why you got the substantial change in the kind of people who started coming into Weston. That's the difference.

When people were trying to select a place to move from, say the Bronx like your family did, what made them want to come specifically to Weston?

Weston was always a very rural town. It had large lots from the beginning and then two-acre zoning. If you wanted to be near more of a commercial area, you probably would have stopped in Westport, but Westport real estate was really more expensive than Weston, and it always has been.

People who didn't feel they needed to be near the supermarket who didn't mind driving three or four miles to get to a store came to Weston. The people who wanted something a little more commercial stayed down in Westport.

I think that was the main reason. As a result, Weston developed pretty differently. Except for the one small shopping center that we still have, Weston hasn't changed in 70 years.

Is that why your parents came here, for the same reasons?

No. My mother was not from New York City. My mother was from the town of Oneonta, New York, which is in upstate. My grandfather, my father's father, had made money in the construction business -- as every Italian does in New York -- and drove his family, my father, his twin brother, my Uncle John, all my aunts, and their slew of kids, who in turn became my aunts and uncles.

They used to come up here during the summertime to visit people that they had known in the Bronx or came to know here, particularly the DiBlanda and Castiglia families. The DiBlandas lived across from the Emmanuel Church; the Castiglias down the end of Wayne's Point Road.

There were other family friends that they knew up here. They came up during the summertime, so my father came up with them. One of the people my father came to know was a person by the name of Clarence "Smitty" Smith, who would have a key role in my parents moving here.

My father had met my mother while he was doing a commercial job for his father and his uncle in Oneonta, New York. He went into a diner. My mother was a waitress in the diner. He fell in love with her. He married her, and he brought her back to the Bronx. *[Adds Guidera later, "My Mother was originally from Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania but grew up in Oneonta, where her father, originally a Pennsylvania coal miner, had moved to take a new job and escape the black lung disease that miners routinely died of in those days. She did not know anyone in Weston until she moved there in 1934, about 4 months after she married my father." - ed.]*

When Clarence Smith learned of my parents' marriage he told my father: "Look, I've got a big house up here. I'm not married. I have no kids. I'm rambling around this big house. Why don't you two come up to Weston, Connecticut?" As soon as my mother got up here, she loved it, right off the bat. You didn't have to ask my father twice to come up. They came up to live here in 1934.

My mother couldn't have children. She hounded my father, left and right, to adopt a child. At first, he resisted. This gentleman that they were living with, Clarence Smith, said, "Why don't you get a good dog, instead?" [laughter] She never let him forget that he said that.

Finally, my father said, "OK."

In those days, in the '40s, the way you got adopted – at least in Connecticut – was that the doctor that delivered you had the right to choose the parents for the child. It is very different today. As a matter of fact, I'm going to tell you a story that will tell you the wisdom of the old system.

My mother went to see a doctor. It was a female doctor, one of only two at Norwalk Hospital at that time. One of them was Dr. Edna Hunkemeir (the other was Dr. Grace Gorham) and she delivered me in July, 1942.

My mother said to her, "If it's a boy, my husband says we'll take the child." But when she went back home she cried and said, "Gee, if it's a little girl, she's got to go in an orphanage. I feel terrible." My father finally said, "Jeez. Whether it's a girl or a boy, go back and tell them you'll take the child."

My mother went back to the doctor and said, "My husband says we'll take the child whether it's a boy or a girl." The doctor said, "I'm sorry. I've already promised the child to another couple who live in New York City. They are going to get it if it's a girl." This is the story my mother told.

Fast forward 25 years later, to 1967. My wife is having our second child, my son George, at Norwalk Hospital. The anesthesiologist is Dr. Hunkemeir. She's tending to my wife. I said to her, "Dr. Hunkemeir, I don't know if you remember me. I'm George Guidera. You delivered me 25 years before."

Without even looking up, she said, "Oh, yes, I remember you." [laughs] I said, "Well, my mother told me this story that if I was a boy, I would go to my parents. If I was a girl, I would go to this other couple in New York City."

She said, "No, that's not true." I said, "What?" She said, "No, I decided to give you to your parents because a boy should grow up in the country, not in the city." I thought that was genius. I thank God that she did that because I wound up with the best parents anybody could have.

My father was short, stocky and dark, very Italian looking. My mother was of Welsh heritage and she was more English looking. If I didn't want to tell anybody that I was adopted, I'd say, "Well, my mother was English/Welsh. They'd say, "Oh, that's why you don't look Italian."

The fact of the matter is that if I had to go and do it all over again and I had my choice, I would have chosen the parents that I got. They were absolutely the best parents in the world. After my dad died when I was 13, my mom really was the world to me at that time. She helped me go through college. She helped me go through law school. She was the best mom anybody could have.

What made them such great parents in your eyes?

My mother wanted to be a wife and a mother and that's it. She didn't aspire to riches. She didn't aspire to having the best job in the world. She had a sixth-grade education. My father had a ninth-grade education. They were just basic, down to earth people. She

loved my father. She was just a good mother. What she wanted to be was the best mother in the world, and she succeeded in that.

Are the reasons you gave for people moving into Weston back then still the same, or are they different now?

I think people still come here for the open space. I think that's important to people. They come here for the rural atmosphere. They also come here for the school system. As I said before, the school system was always great in Weston even when I was a little kid and was being run by people who were really retired farmers. They understood the value of an education. I think that has stayed consistent in Weston for decades and decades.

We had some great teachers in Weston in those days. There was a man by the name of Gilbert Brown - Mr. Brown to us kids - who I had for fifth and sixth grade. He was the best teacher I ever had and I told him so at his farewell dinner, and that's kindergarten through ninth grade, kindergarten through high school, kindergarten through college and kindergarten through law school.

He taught you about life. He had been in World War II and he used to tell a lot of World War II stories. He was just a good, solid person. The school system was absolutely fantastic when I was going there. I think it is today.

There wasn't the push on children in those days to be successful. Success too often today is defined as the kind of job you get or how much money you have in the bank. I have found out--I'm going to be 75 in a month--that that's inaccurate...it's nice to have money, but that isn't the definition of success. The definition of success is being happy with what you have.

For me, I had great parents. I got to live in Weston, Connecticut. I got a life in government and politics that I enjoy. I have a wife I've been married to for 52 years next week. I have four children who love me and I love them and most important of all, I have seven grandchildren that love me and that I love.

Did you know you wanted to become a lawyer by the time you graduated from high school? If so, why?

Yes, I knew. My dad had been a bricklayer for most of his life. Then, when I was about 10 years old, he was getting kind of tired of bricklayer's work in the ice and snow and in the boiling heat of the summer. Once he had a guy up a couple of stories higher on a job in Bridgeport who dropped hot tar on him and a couple of other guys. I think my father just got to the point when he was in his 40s where he said, "That's it. I'm done with this."

Along came the opportunity to become a deputy sheriff in Weston. Every town had at least one, and the bigger towns had three or four. This was when we had the sheriff system in Connecticut, which no longer exists [*The system was disbanded in 2000. -ed.*]. My dad used to spend four days a week in the Bridgeport Courthouse. He was a bailiff and he also transported prisoners to and from jail. He would come home and tell stories about the lawyers over there and it just fascinated me.

I decided probably by the time I was 10 that I was going to be a lawyer. When I was 50, I'm not sure I made the right choice. [laughs] The practice of law can be trying. There's an old saying about lawyers that "the practice of law would be great if it wasn't for the clients." That sometimes feels that way.

How did you meet your wife?

I went to Colgate University in upstate New York, then a men-only college. She was going to nearby Cazenovia Junior College, which was then for women. She was going out with the star of the Colgate football team, and there was this kid in my fraternity house who everybody shunned. I always liked him. I felt sorry for him.

I became a friend of his and tried to be nice to him because he didn't have a lot of friends in the fraternity house. God pays you back for your kindnesses. One night, Linda was at a Colgate hockey game and I saw her there, and when I came back to the fraternity house there was nobody there except me and this other guy.

I said to him, "You know, I really wish I could get a date with that girl, but she's going out with mister star-of-the-football team. Good looking, big, strong, all of that stuff."

He says, "What's her name?" I said, "I don't know. She's going out with this football player."

He says, "you mean Chris Lomas? Well, I have to tell you something. She is my girlfriend's roommate at Cazenovia, and I could call right now and find out if you could get a date."

I said, "Go right ahead." He called up and she said, "I have to look at the composite." (In the old days the fraternity houses all had composites, that is, pictures of everybody in the fraternity house.) So the girls in Cazenovia had all these composites. They'd run and they'd look and they would see what the guy looked like. She called back about ten minutes later and said, "Yeah. Tell him I'll grab a date with him."

One thing led to another. We started dating in the Winter of 1963. The following year, in the spring, I was on the soccer team. I was the starting goalie for four years. I was late getting out to practice one day and I'm down looking at myself tying my shoes, and I see this leg come up on the bench next to me.

I look up and it's this guy Chris Lomas, and I thought, "Oh, I'm going to get hit real..." [laughs] He said to me, "You take good care of her." I said, "I will. No problem." That's how I met Linda.

Did you get married while you were in college, or later?

I got married after my first year in law school. Linda wanted to get married right after I graduated from Colgate. I went to Georgetown and I was quite certain that I was probably the dumbest guy to ever go to Georgetown University Law School. I wanted to see if I liked it, to see if I could do the work. I got through the first year of law school pretty well so we waited until June, 1965 to get married.

Why didn't you stay in Washington when you graduated, or go to New York, or somewhere else to practice law? Why did you end up back in Weston?

I never wanted to go anywhere else. I wanted to practice in Weston, but I didn't think there was an opportunity. Nobody had ever practiced or had an office in Weston. But first I went and got jobs with two different law firms in Westport, but each lasted two or three years. They weren't giving me the kind of work that allowed me to expand and spread my wings. They were giving me work doing title searches. They were doing real estate closings, and that's not what I wanted to do. I wanted to do divorce, criminal cases. I wanted to do something like that.

So I went out on my own with a guy who lived here in Weston. His name was Davis Simmerman. He and I had a practice in Westport. After a while Dave decided that private practice wasn't for him, so he retired.

Then what happened was that the house on the corner of Norfield and Weston roads built in 1830 came onto the market, and I bought that. I think we paid \$200,000 for that house. It was cheap. So I started practicing law there. People would come to me and say, "Can you do a divorce?" "Sure. I do it all the time." But I had never done one....[laughter].

I was also in the General Assembly at that time, and I was chairman of the Judiciary Committee. Being on the Judiciary Committee there was like going back to law school and learning Connecticut law. That is how I learned a lot about divorce and about criminal law tailored specifically to Connecticut. One thing led to another, and again, I made a couple of mistakes here and there, but you learn from those mistakes and I got into private practice doing that kind of thing.

Let's go back once more to the question of why people move to Weston. Do you think we're still on course to attract new population and to grow this town again? Or is there something we have to change?

Yes, I do [think the town will continue to attract people]. Places like Weston are special; you can't find places like this anymore. The problem is not Weston, the problem is Connecticut. Connecticut is a disaster financially. I'm going to say this: Anytime you have one party rule in a state, a town, a county, anyplace, it's bad news for that place.

Why? Because an arrogance builds into the majority party and they think they can just do whatever they want. That has been true with the Democratic Party ruling the State of Connecticut for so many years. It's not good; it would be better if the governor was of one party, the senate the other party, and then give the governor one house out of the two.

Then they would have to work together and compromise together. This is true whether it's Democrats or Republicans. If Republicans had that kind of control, they would be a little bit arrogant also, and it just wouldn't be good. It's best for the people to switch off every once in a while.

I think the problem for Connecticut right now is that the governor is spending money like there is no tomorrow and laughing when GE goes out of the state. Now Aetna is talking about leaving. Whether you're a Republican or a Democrat, you need to understand the importance of keeping business thriving in the state. When I was in the General Assembly in the '70s we were always cognizant of that, both Republicans and Democrats, and we knew that the thriving economy of Connecticut was not due to what the legislature did, but to what the corporations in the state had done.

[GE went public with complaints about Connecticut taxes in June 2015. Additionally, the company cited the lack of a "huge ecosystem around the company" and that "attracting talent there was a bit of a challenge." The company announced a move to Boston in early 2016, enticed by incentives and grants of up to \$120 million as well as \$25 million in property tax relief. Then, despite intensive lobbying efforts by state officials, Aetna announced its departure for New York City in June 2017 with promises of \$24 million in tax breaks. The company was founded in Hartford and had been there for 164 years. -ed.]

If things don't change in Connecticut, it's going to become another West Virginia. There won't be the money for education. Wealthy people will move out. What has allowed Weston to have the school system it has is because it has [one of] the highest per capita incomes in the State of Connecticut. *[According to the 2010 Census data and the 2011-2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, per capita income in Weston stood at \$92,794. In the state as whole it was \$39,430. -ed.]*

It's not because everybody wants to sacrifice every penny they make to give to the school system, it's because people have extra money to spend for that kind of thing. That's why Hartford is a disaster with its school system. People just don't have money in that city anymore.

Will there be a tipping point in our own town when residents will say, "I've had enough?"

I've heard that said in Weston for 50 years. We aren't at that point yet. One of the things that could spell disaster for us is that the state now wants to reduce our grants, and it also wants us to pay for at least a third, and my guess is they ultimately will want us to pay 100 percent, of the teacher's pension fund.

If that happens, then I think people of wealth are going to flee the state in droves. I think it's already beginning. It's going to be a disaster, and it's going to be downhill from there. Remember when we used to laugh about Taxachusetts? Remember when we used to laugh so hard at the State of New York? Now they are both thriving while Connecticut is not, because Connecticut made the same mistake those two states made. Massachusetts and New York reversed themselves and understood, even the Democrats understood, the importance of having a good economy in the state.

Since we're on the topic, tell us a little bit about what got you interested in politics in the first place.

Politics was always dinner table conversation in my house. My uncle, John Guidera, was First Selectman between 1957 and 1961. Then he was followed by my uncle, Paul

Coniglio, between 1961 and 1967. For a period of 10 years I had one uncle or another who was the First Selectman of Weston.

My dad was a staunch Dwight Eisenhower supporter. My father and my grandfather, even though ethnic Italians, were always Republicans. They were very aware of what was going on, and we used to discuss politics and government at the table.

My wife and I were both chairman of the Republican Town Committee in Weston and we discussed government politics with *our* children at the dinner table. Some people say you shouldn't discuss politics. The fact of the matter is, if you want successful government, you have to be good at politics.

That's the system, that's what has been invented since time immemorial. As bad as some people think politics is, I have to tell you, the finest group of human beings that I have ever worked with, ever, in my entire life, were the people that I worked with in the eight years that I was in the General Assembly.

Everybody thinks they're crooks. It's common opinion that these are terrible people. That's not true. It's simply not true. I wish the people in any town you can name were as good as the people I served with in the General Assembly.

It's a lie and it's a myth to say that people in politics are bad people. They care about their state, they care about their town, and they volunteer. The ones who don't volunteer, well... if you want to have good government, you have to have people volunteer, good people volunteering.

Too often people are interested in making money instead of volunteering their services. They don't necessarily want to be First Selectman or Governor of the state, but they help out in little ways in their towns all the time. They make the towns work.

When I was in politics in Weston, you'd look around and about the same hundred people were in everything. They were running the Little League. They were running the Democratic Party, the Republican Party. They were doing dinners for the football team.

It's the same people you see all the time. There's some people born that way. I was one of them. There's some people that are not. If you are not going to volunteer, if you're not going to help out your town, then you really don't count. If you don't vote, you certainly don't count. I get disgusted with people who don't vote. I'd rather lose an election myself by a landslide than see people not vote.

Was there anything that triggered you about law that said, "That's where I want to be" as opposed another profession?

No, I wanted to be a lawyer. I also wanted to be a hometown lawyer. I didn't want to work in New York City or Bridgeport even, places like that. I wanted to come home to my hometown. It wasn't as important to me to be a famous lawyer or a hotshot lawyer -- and there are plenty of lawyers who do want to be that -- as to being involved in the life of the community, have a good practice, and, at the end of the day, have other interests that I could go to.

The guys who have to ride the train going in and out of New York City can't serve on boards or commissions because it's too late by the time they get home. I knew that was the case because I had lots of friends in grade school that had fathers like that. I decided that I didn't want to do that. I wanted to be involved in the affairs of the town.

I'm glad that I did it. It was the right decision for me. If I had just been a lawyer, I probably could have made more money. Life is not just about money.

Going back to your time in state politics, did you ever consider running for governor?

No, but I did run for Congress in 1978. I had the closest race in America of the 435 House seats, but lost. There were 26 towns in the district. I won 22 of them, but didn't win the election. It's an expensive proposition to run for Congress. Today, it's well over a million dollars. If you can't raise the money, you have no shot at winning.

When I ran the race, it was about \$225,000. I put up a lot of the money myself. Came very close. If I had run two years later, in 1980, I would have had the Reagan landslide going with me, and I probably would have won.

I believe God gives you what you need, not what you want sometimes. Toward the end of that campaign I had four kids. The oldest was 12. The youngest was six. I thought to myself, "You know what, you're going to be down in Washington, DC four days a week and you're not going to see these kids for a while." I had some real second thoughts.

You're going to think this is crazy because I lost, but I really did [wonder about having chosen to run]...The last two weeks of that campaign, I thought, "Lord, give me what I need, not what I necessarily want," and I lost. I think that's what the good Lord thought that I needed.

Tell us a bit about the campaign when you were running for First Selectman. Was it quite a bit different than, say, someone who wanted to run for First Selectman today? Was campaigning a lot of name calling then or was it generally clean?

Only once did I have an opponent in running for First Selectman. . I was surprised the other party didn't put an opponent against me when I first ran. So I won that. I had done what I really honestly felt was a pretty good job the first two years I was in office.

That's what gave me the landslide the second time I ran when I did have an opponent. My opponent was a guy I liked, and still do. He's a good guy. His name is Dick Bochinski. Dick was on the Board of Selectmen for many, many years. He's a good guy.

There was this muckraking stringer for the local newspaper after the paper had been sold to the people who own it now. [*Founded in 1970 by Patricia Heifetz, The Weston Forum was sold to the present owner, Hersam Acorn, in 1990. Heifetz also gave an oral history interview to the Weston Historical Society. -ed.*]

He asked the same questions of me as he asked of Dick. One of them was, "Why should you be First Selectman again and not Dick?"

I said, "Actually, I don't think the town could go wrong in picking either one of us. Dick is very confident, very able to run the town." So, I was not going to say anything negative about him because it would have been a lie. This name calling that you see, it's nonsense. Nobody wants to hear it. Nobody believes it. I still feel that he should have been a First Selectman sometime. I hope he still does it one of these days.

How about when you ran for the State Senate. Was that campaign quite a bit different than it would be today?

No, it was pretty tough then, too. I had five towns. I had Darien, New Canaan, Wilton, Weston, Westport, and a section of Fairfield.

Now that was one Republican territory, so it wasn't that difficult to run in that district as a Republican. The only time I really had any fear of losing was in the 1974 election. Nixon had already resigned, and the Republican Party was really not in good shape. I didn't know if even Republicans would vote against Republican candidates. As it turned out, I didn't have a problem.

Of the 36 state senators, the Republicans only elected seven. The Democrats selected 29. We had a very difficult time getting our bills passed and getting anybody to listen to us about what we thought should go on in the General Assembly.

You didn't run for anything for six years after you got out of the state legislature. Why didn't you jump back in the politics? Was there one issue that really got you going?

Being the First Selectman of Weston was something that I had in the back of my mind for some day when I got older. I always thought of it as an old man's game, somebody older than I was. In 1987, when I did run, I was 45 years old. I thought, "I feel fairly young for being the First Selectman of the town."

The way I got to run was my wife was the Chairman of the Republican Town Committee. She came home from a meeting where she learned that Helen Speck, who was First Selectman at the time, wasn't going to run again. She had served two terms, and did a pretty good job. I liked Helen a lot; I still like her.

My wife said, "We have nobody to run under Republican ticket for First Selectman. The committee wants me to ask you if you would run." I said, "Well, see if you can get somebody else."

She came back again, and she said, "No, they want you. If you do it for one term, they'll be happy, and then they'll spend the two years finding somebody else to be the First Selectman." At the end of the first two years, I said, "It's coming time for reelection. So, who's going to run for First Selectman?" She says, "Well, you are." I said, "You didn't do anything to find anybody else, did you?" She said, "No, we didn't."

I enjoyed it. I really did enjoy it, but there comes a point at which it's time to get a life, as they say. That's why I retired myself. Actually, Hal Shupack ran on my record and got elected. [*Shupack, a Democrat, had already been on the Board of Selectman. -ed.*]

Years ago, the Republicans had about half of the registered voters in Weston, and now it's well down from that. What would your advice be to the Republican Town Committee to strengthen that position?

If you look at the northern tier of states, they've gone from Republican areas to Democrat areas over the last fifty, sixty years, something like that. It's obvious that the two coasts of our country are solid Democrat, and the heartland is pretty much Republican. That's why Trump is the president. Then you have a few swing states. Really, these people campaign only in those areas.

Weston is going to continue to be basically Democrat for the reason that it's full of New Yorkers. They grew up in New York City where it's solid Democrat. That's the future.

Now what could happen? It would be something that would have to happen over a very long period of time. Generally speaking, the northern tier of states were more liberal. The southern tier of states were much more conservative. The Republican Party has moved to a conservative stance from where it was originally.

The Democratic Party has moved away from a conservative stance. Let's remember, they were the slave owners, down in the Deep South. They have moved from where they were to being very liberal. That's why we've swapped states at this point. They get the northern tier, the East and West Coast, we get the heartland.

I don't think they're going to see a big change in Weston other than the fact that it will be more consistently Democrat. Although there's a large group of independents in Weston. They can swing an election one way or the other, if you can get them out to vote.

It's currently about one-third, one-third, one-third.

Yeah, that's good. That's great. That's terrific.

What strikes me having lived here for 18 years is that the key issues seem always to remain the same. One that sticks in my mind is the community center. You hear it over and over again, "What we need to make this town more attractive is a community center." It was an issue when you were in office. Why has that not been resolved on a positive basis?

It really did not come up during my term in office. A community center was never seriously discussed. *[The question was based on Weston Forum reporting in 1992. In June that year the Forum quoted Guidera as saying, "If someone can raise the money, the town will provide the land." Reminded of this after the interview, he responded: "That's actually nonsense. I don't remember saying that. If I did, I'd have to say that what I said is nonsense." --ed.]*

Strangely enough, I happen to be a member of the Commission on Aging in Newtown right now where I live. We just voted for a new community center with a new senior center attached to it. A lot of that money was given to Newtown by General Electric as a gift in response for what happened in Newtown with the shootings that occurred up there. *[On December 14, 2012, the 20-year-old Adam Lanza fatally shot twenty children between*

six and seven years old, plus six adult staff members, at the Sandy Hook Elementary School. – ed.]

A community center for Weston has never been a serious proposal, and neither has a [stand-alone] senior center been talked about. I'm going to tell you, though, that if you really want to put a dent in what schools cost you, encourage the seniors to stay in town. They send no children to the school system. They pay their taxes. They do something else important for a community: they create a three-generation community.

There are a lot of people in Weston, certainly were when I was First Selectman, who think that a mom, dad, and the kids are all there is to society. Most of them come here without the grandparents being in the town or even in the area, not even in Connecticut. A community that has three generations has three generations of wisdom to impart.

I know that Newtown is well aware of how important it is to have seniors in the community and they go out of their way to do whatever is necessary. That's why they overwhelmingly voted \$3 million for a brand new senior center. I thought that was very smart and would be very smart on the part of Weston if it could move along those lines.

Why does the town always provide soup to nuts for the school system but when it comes to its senior citizens they can't provide the building and the land? We went through this argument up in Newtown where the school mommies were, to a certain degree, opposed to the senior center. We wrote a lot of letters to the editor and talked about the need for a three-generation community. The people in town finally bought it, but you can't [seem to do that] in Weston.

Whenever you talk about senior tax relief here, for example, the Board of Finance says something stupid like, "Well, if we give more tax reductions to seniors in the community, even those who are in great need for senior citizen tax relief, where are we going to get the money from?" The same damn place you get the money for the school system. You get it from the taxpayers who are left over that are available to pay taxes in the community.

These [older] people pay no taxes. Look around at the town boards and commissions. Almost all of them are staffed by seniors. They volunteer for things. They make charitable organizations work in the town. They're a great asset for the town. If you drive them out of the town it's a huge mistake. Newtown right now is trying to establish the thinking that it's a great place to move to if you're a senior. They're actively trying to promote that. That is a smart thing to do.

Another recurring theme over the years here has been conservation, particularly the preservation of open space.

Putting away open space was probably the issue that I was most involved with over the twelve years that I was First Selectman. We put away over 2,000 acres, including the Devil's Den Preserve, through conservation easements.

Conservation easements were a concept in law that came down out of the General Assembly. We bought the development rights [to a section of the Preserve], which

meant that whoever owned this land could continue to own it. But they [gave up their right to] develop it. What we wanted to do was stop development of the real estate.

Conservation is another way of pulling your costs down in your school system because if you let it go to development and you put a bunch of houses on it, well, we all know that the average household has around 2.1 children. That's how many dollars in the school system?

The more houses, the bigger a town or a city gets, and the more expenses. What does it cost to run New York City? It's a zoo to run New York City. The amount of money necessary there is horrendous. There's one town in Connecticut, Union, that has about 800 people. They have no problem with their taxes. They don't get any arguments about their school system because they pay very little because all the taxpayers can afford to send kids through the school system.

Talk a little bit more about Devil's Den and some of the other conservation lands that you were involved in.

The first one we were involved in was that there was a guy who owned 16 acres inside of the Devil's Den Preserve [thereby limiting access]. It turned out the Nature Conservancy thought it owned all the land in there but he proved in a Superior Court case that he owned it. They were ready to lynch him, but he won in court. [*Formally called the Lucius Pond Ordway Preserve, the Den was created by the Weston resident and philanthropist Katharine Ordway through a series of donations to the Nature Conservancy between 1966 and 1968, beginning with an 1,100-acre purchase from the Bridgeport Hydraulic Company. It is now 1,756 acres. -ed.*]

The question was, were they going to sell off the [entire] Preserve to somebody else [because of this]? That would have been a nightmare for the Town of Weston. The upper one third of the town is shut off in this open space parcel. If you developed 1,600 acres, you'd have every cement truck, tractor trailer truck going up there building houses in that area. It would change the character of Weston completely.

It was to our benefit to keep that as one big nature preserve. The Devil's Den Committee came to the Board of Selectmen. I was in office maybe six months at that point and they said, "We'd like the town of Weston [to buy the property]. We worked out a deal with this guy to buy him out -- I think it was \$800,000, something in that neighborhood -- and if you give us half that money, \$400,000 or so, we could buy him out and he'd go away and we would keep the preserve."

We said, "We don't do that. We don't give town money away to a private party. It's illegal under Connecticut State Law to do that. If one person objects, it's illegal. They said, "Well, in that case, could you lend us \$400,000 and we'll pay it back to you?" We said, "No, we don't want to do that either."

Now, I'll never forget it. The Devil's Den Committee was sitting there with the papers in front of them and they folded them up and they started to stand up and walk out. We said to them, "Wait a minute. Don't go. You have something we want to buy." They said, "Well, what do we have that you want to buy?"

I said, "We want to buy the development rights to your 1,600 acres. You can continue to own it. You can have walking tours. You can do whatever. You run it. We don't want to run it. We don't want to have any part of it. What we want is to prevent you or anybody else in the future from ever developing that land."

They said, "OK." That's how we did the deal.

That led from one thing to another where we did partnerships with the Devil's Den Preserve, and the Devil's Den Committee, where we negotiated good prices on open space parcels. One guy had a subdivision up around the north end of town. I've forgotten the name of the street. He had gotten a subdivision of it. There were 20 something lots in there.

The bank, People Savings Bank, had bought it back. Strangely enough, the lady at People Savings Bank who was in charge of trying to sell this land or subdivide it was a lady that I had worked with in the Connecticut General Assembly. Her name was Dorothea Brennan and she was the Chairman of the Workout Committee.

I went to see her and I said, "Look, there's 20 something lots here. We'd like to buy some of it. She said, "Well look, we need to get our money back." We figured out a way. They ended up getting five lots. We wound up getting 17 or 18, 19 lots, something like that and we bought that for \$200,000. Devil's Den kicked in \$100,000. We kicked in \$100,000. Where can you buy 17 or 18 building lots in Weston for \$100,000 each, \$200,000 between us?

We made a lot of good deals like that, plus there were some people that wound up giving up the excess land, just for free, because they could take a tax break if they had a conservation easement on it. That's how we worked, and how we got all the land that we did.

It was the last chance, and that was back in the '80s. Weston had always talked a good game about how it put away open space. The fact of the matter is that it had never done any of that. That was a total fabrication. What they were talking about was the P&Z regulation that if you did a subdivision they took 10 percent of open space. They were getting chunky stuff. Little, tiny pieces here and there. They were not buying large pieces.

We also got the right, by the way, in the Devil's Den Preserve, to buy it outright from the Preserve for \$600 an acre, flat price, whenever they decided to sell it. But as the town attorney said to me, "Why would we ever want to buy it? We can't do anything with it." I thought, "That's genius." That's how it wound up being that way.

Affordable housing is another one of those issues that keeps coming up. What are your thoughts on it?

I think that the State of Connecticut has created a definition for affordable housing that's like saying that only Delicious apples are apples, that McIntosh apples are not apples. Let me tell you what I mean by that.

There are several hundred affordable rental units in the town, provided by people who happen to have a rental unit next to their house, whether they've created it legally or whether it was a pre-existing, non-conforming one. The State refuses to recognize that as affordable housing. All the state has to do is say, "Anything that is actually rented at or below a certain price is affordable housing." We would have, instantly, over 200 units of affordable housing.

Do you know what the penalty is if you don't have the affordable housing? The State might cut your grants. But they don't send us any grants in the first place.

Long ago, when I was first elected, the State of Connecticut stopped sending aid grants to Weston because it was the wealthiest town in the state. Where's the penalty for Weston to come up with affordable housing? [*According to the US Census Bureau, the estimated median household income in 2015 was \$217,171; state-wide it was \$70,731. -ed.*]

Now, you can say we should have affordable housing that allows people from the outside to come in and be here, and I agree with that. I do agree with that. People that I grew up with couldn't afford to live in Weston today. It would be good to have people of all economic slots living in town. But that has to be something that people have to get together on. I think most people don't go through that because they're worried about what they'll do if their house prices crush.

You have always believed that the preservation of Weston's character is key to its future. How would you define its character?

When anybody talks about character of Weston, they talk about the two acre zoning, they talk about the friendly atmosphere, the cooperative atmosphere, getting together, supporting worthy causes. These have always been a trademark in Weston. That's the character that Weston wants to create.

What kind of leadership is needed to ensure that we keep that character?

A lot of it depends on the First Selectman. I think there have been good and bad selectmen for the Town of Weston. Actually, I shouldn't say bad First Selectmen; there have been good ones and mediocre ones. The ones that have been mediocre do not have a vision for the town.

When you're the First Selectman of a town, you need to know two things. Number one, where does the town come from? Where is it today? Where does it want to go tomorrow? That deals with the character of the town. It's not hard to figure that out. People want two acres only, they want good schools, they want good roads, they want the amenities of ball fields and that sort of thing, which we tried to create when I was First Selectman.

The other thing the First Selectman has to have is have a vision for the town. What do you want to be? A vision should include, for example, something you just mentioned. Should we have a community center? Should we encourage seniors to live in the Town of Weston? Should we have a bigger swimming pool at the middle school? Any of these kinds of things.

What is it that people would like to have in the town? That really is up to the Board of Selectmen to decide how to get that information. Perhaps through a town meeting or something like that. And then discuss whether that makes any sense actually: Whether it's feasible to do it considering the fact that house prices are declining. Considering that people are having a hard time getting jobs. Considering that the economy because of the state legislature is going down the tubes. Can you afford to do that right now?

I've often thought that Weston didn't spend enough on things other than on the school system. There should be some equality between what is given to the other citizens of the community and not just the schoolchildren. Although that's critically important.

Speaking of finances, the *Weston Forum* said in a 1993 editorial, "At this year's ATBM, we should let financiers know that the town is approaching the fine line between the conservative budget and the one that is self-defeating." That's relevant for today, fourteen years later. But can we afford to be the town that we want it to become?

I don't know. Because I have been involved in town government I can tell you that Newtown is taking a very hard look at these kinds of things today. Every town is. Things are being made worse by these reductions in grants and by the requirements by the General Assembly to [have the towns] take over more and more bills that used to be paid exclusively by the state.

I don't know. I think it will all start with a good economy in Connecticut, which is in the hands of the General Assembly. There is just so much more taxing people [before] they say, "That's it, we're leaving." I think we've reached that point in Connecticut. The State taxes are outrageous now and we need to get two-party government in the State of Connecticut and we need to think about reducing some taxes.

Here is another quote from a newspaper editorial, this time about you directly, from 1988. "George is someone who proved many years ago in our State Legislature that he knows how to please his constituents when they should be pleased. He's also willing to go out on a limb as the situation requires."

Yes. I think that's true.

When you're in public office, especially when you're in a representative capacity like a member of the State House of Representatives or State Senator and that sort of thing, there comes a point not too long into your first term that you ask yourself the question, "Am I actually here to do just what my constituents say, or am I here to do what I think is right for my constituents?"

Too much of one or the other is not very good. You do need to vote the heart of your district. By the same token, there are things that come up in your district that you could never imagine you would be asked to vote on them.

I'll give you an example. When I was in the State Senate there was a bill that came before the Republican-controlled General Assembly that stated that if you were gay, you couldn't get a job as a teacher in the State of Connecticut.

We went to the caucus. We discussed it. I said, "I will not vote for this. We're Republicans. We are the party that wants to give jobs to people. Why are we saying a certain class of people can't have a job? What's the matter with you guys?" The leader didn't speak to me and my caucus for two months after that but it was narrowly defeated. The bill didn't go anywhere. When I came back here at the district I thought some of my constituents would take me to task over that. It didn't happen. Instead, it was a pat on the back.

I always did what I thought was right for my constituents. I don't agree with all this fixed spending they're doing in Hartford. I would be much more conservative about the money that they have and the way to spend it. They're throwing money away on dopey programs that are not benefiting the state at all.

That's my opinion. Other legislators see it very differently. I only did what I thought was right in my heart. You know what, if you don't like it, you get a shot at throwing me out in two years at the least. I don't know that I want to be your State Senator if you're going to throw me out over some of the issues that you think you should throw me out over.

Specifically, regarding your terms as First Selectman, we've talked about some of your accomplishments, open space and things like that. What issues didn't get resolved that you were working on or at least the way you had wanted to see them resolved?

There really aren't any. I can't think of anything really off the top of my head that I had a burning desire to work on.

I will say this. I'm disappointed in some of the First Selectmen, both before me and after me. The town has a Town Administrator. That's good. That's a good thing. But at the end of the day the guy the people have the hook on is the First Selectman. We have had too many First Selectmen who let the Town Administrator run the town. That's not good. I always felt that I knew the town as well if not better than the Town Administrator. If I was going to get thrown out of office at some point in the future it would be because I made a mistake, not because he made a mistake and I suffered for it.

A First Selectman should take the reigns. There's a two-year learning curve on being First Selectman, but that's it. If you don't know the job within two years, there's something wrong with you. There have been First Selectmen that will let the Town Administrator run everything, sit back, and let the town be run by someone else... In other words, what they're doing is they're letting the town drift along in a humdrum way, instead of making exciting things happen.

If, honestly, the Board of Selectmen had not [worked out the conservation easement] on the Devil's Den Preserve, you'd now have 1,600 acres of developed land up there. I made a difference in that. The two other selectmen I had the time, John Stripp and Dick Bochinski, went along with it. They made it happen. That's not something that, "Well, it would have turned out the same way anyway." It wouldn't have turned out the same way. It would've turned out very differently.

Having a vision, being there at the right time, taking a position, and then selling that position to the general public is what goes with the job. At the end of my 12 years, I really felt that most everything that I had wanted to accomplish actually had gotten accomplished. I was happy to leave the job at the point.

Well, we can hear people saying, "'Taking the reins' may have been straight forward when you were in office in the '90s, but the job has gotten much more complex."

No, it hasn't.

Inept people, inept First Selectmen, will always tell you that the job is very difficult to perform. Inept people always tell you that.

I had one major advantage over most other people. That is, I was an attorney at law. I practiced law in Weston, had done a lot of closings, had been involved in applications for zoning variances, and that sort of thing, I knew everybody who was on a Town Board or Commission.

I wasn't on any learning curve. We've had First Selectmen in this town who go and sit in their office. They let the Town Administrator do it. They don't have a vision for anything. They don't have an idea about anything. Town government becomes a dull, dreary thing.

Now I'm going to tell you, those people get reelected. You know why they get reelected? They didn't do anything bad. A lot of voters vote that way. They didn't do anything bad. They didn't do anything good either, but they didn't do anything bad either.

Neil: [74:58] Suppose you were asked to become a consultant to help evaluate those running for Selectmen as to their capability. Would you vet them any differently than just keeping the democratic process of voting for who you like?

I actually think that the political process in choosing people for the Board of Selectmen in this town have been pretty good, whether First Selectman or just Selectman.

Dick Bochinski, John Stripp, Harvey Attra, and Hal Shupack were on the Board of Selectmen with me. They were all people who had been on other town boards and commissions. They really cared about the town. They were involved in churches or synagogues in the area. They were involved in all sorts of things. They had kids who went through the school system, and that sort of thing.

It's a good process. I really do think. It doesn't sound like it should be, but it is as good as it can be.

One thing I strongly would oppose is increasing the size of the Board of Selectmen to five or seven members as has been done in some towns. Three is enough. If you have three hardworking guys, gals, or combinations of thereof, you're going to have a good Board of Selectmen.

Before we end, is there something you'd like to talk about that we haven't asked about?

As I mentioned in our pre-interview, I want to talk about the Lyon's Plain corridor and answer the question whether the correct form is Lyon's Plain, Lyon Plains, or Lyons Plains.

Here's the answer: The name of the family was the Lyon family, not the Lyons family. There's one plain not multiple plains So it is the [plain that belonged to the Lyons family], thus Lyon's Plain. That's my take.

The Lyon family lived up on Kellogg Hill. As a matter fact, Kellogg Hill was called Lyon Hill for a long time. They owned virtually the whole plain from Cartbridge to the end of Lyon's Plain. I grew up there. It was the cat's meow to Weston. We were on the east side of town. We didn't have the hubbub of the Town Hall side of town.

In fact, if you take a look at the people who served as First Selectmen in Weston in the 20th Century, you're going to find that about 60 percent of them were from the Lyon's Plain corridor. By the Lyon's Plain corridor, I mean anything east of the East Branch of the Saugatuck River where the river runs down through Cartbridge, in that area.

It was a gorgeous, beautiful place in the summer. We used to ride our bikes up to the top of Kellogg Hill Road. Actually, push our bikes up to the top of Kellogg Hill Road, because it was so steep, and then come down, no hands, that kind of thing. We would gather around the front steps of Emmanuel Church. You know that high staircase that it has in front? And just talk. It'd be summertime. It was a beautiful place to be.

The people over there all knew each other, all pulled together. It was also a street that had a lot of Italian Americans, the DiBlandas, the Castiglias, the Guideras. I had nine cousins and eight aunts and uncles that lived right around me. Also the DeLarmys, the Cognatos, the Ottomanos, and a couple of other families. There were a whole bunch of people on that street. I don't how it wound up that way. I know that when my grandfather first came to Weston, he came to the visit the DeLarmys in town. And the Castilians down in the Westport section. It's like they all wound up over there.

Nobody has ever noticed that before. Nor has anybody ever noticed how many First Selectmen come from the east side of town. The only thing I can think of is the reason we have so many First Selectmen from the east side of town is that they don't trust what's going on over at the Town Hall. [laughter]

They send one of theirs. They do, to keep tabs on the place.

All those city slickers up the hill...

Yes, smart guys with the college educations. We were just the farmers on our side of town. [laughter]

If you've ever talked to people who have lived their lives in the Lyon's Plain corridor, they'll all tell you the same thing: It's heaven, especially in the summer. There's nothing

going on. It's quiet. It's nice. You don't have to worry about traffic, fire sirens, or anything else. It's a delightful place.

The other thing we didn't talk about is your strong support of the Weston Historical Society, first in getting the approvals that allowed us to use the property and, second and critically, your leadership in raising the funds for the museum and archive facility.

When Cleora Coley passed away and left the property to the Historical Society in 1981, the Society came to me to help them get the zoning approvals for the piece of property they had. They didn't comply with anything for a historical society in that district. That was principally because the town had these pie-in-the-sky zoning regulations for what a historical society should look like. We got them to change some of their regulations, but we also got something on the order of 15 different variances to allow them to do it.

I had to go to the Zoning Board of Appeals and Planning & Zoning Commission for a permit, and also to the wetlands commission because some of the property nearby had some wetlands on it. The first time, P&Z turned us down. We went through all three, but the P&Z turned us down. The second time, we went through all three, and the Zoning Board of Appeals turned us down.

Now, the third time, we went through all three, and then the wetlands people voted against us. Finally, I said, "Why don't you three boards all get together and have one meeting together where you can approve this thing?" Some of the neighbors came out in opposition to it.

I'll never forget the turning point in all of this. There were two guys, and they lived closest to the proposed new Historical Society. Two elderly gentlemen that stood up, and the guy said, "We'd like to say something." The chairman said, "Go ahead." [laughs] He said, "We live right next to the Historical Society, and..."

The chairman thought he was going to say, "We're dead-set against it." He didn't say that. What he said was, "It seems to the two of us that we can either have a house that's owned by a private individual that's got a bunch of kids with big racy cars, throwing beer cans on our lawn, or we can have the Historical Society."

Everybody laughed, and that put the end to it. We finally got the approvals for everybody doing it. That took a tremendous amount of time. We did that pro bono, because we wanted to do it.

Later on, the Historical Society wanted to build the Barn Museum, and it was my idea that we asked a bunch of people to put up \$25,000 a piece, and then there was another tier of givers.

If you gave the \$25,000, you got to go to a special dinner with Christopher Plummer and his wife. We did it. We raised enough money to get the thing off the ground and they now have the museum building. It's not fully complete yet, but it's something that they needed. [*Only the mezzanine of the museum building needs to be completed. --ed.*]

One more question for you. You have moved to Newtown. Do you miss Weston?

Yes, but let me be really accurate about that. I really miss my house. That house is full of memories for me. It just went on the market. They changed it completely. It's not the house I lived in.

I don't think my kids or my wife really understand what that place meant to me. Life goes on, and you have to do other things. Right now, I get the pleasure of helping a granddaughter of mine that I live with her and her mother. She is going to be 16 this year. She's a fantastic little girl. I get to be a daddy all over again. I'm really excited. You know what? Boys are nice. Girls are fantastic. [laughter]

George, it's been great. Thank you very, very much.