

Guest Commentary

Sheriff Seeks To Clear The Air On The Jeff Perry Appointment

By SHERIFF JAMES CUMMINGS

Editor's note: Sheriff James Cummings submitted this guest commentary earlier this month but it did not run in The Sandwich Enterprise. Last week, the Enterprise printed a letter critical of the commentary and of Mr. Perry appointment as a special county sheriff. The commentary appears this week to provide both sides of the argument.

It's time to straighten the record on why and how I decided to appoint Jeff Perry as my new special sheriff. There have been dueling responses since I appointed Jeff late last month. One, which you're likely familiar with, came wrapped in a storm of media criticism. It was inspired by many of the same suspects who rode a decent and honorable man off the rails in his run for Congress.

The other response you'd have no way of knowing about. It sits on a shelf in Jeff's office. This, too, is a blizzard, though of a much different kind. But there it sits, two stacks of e-mails. The first are the favorable ones, checking in at close to three inches. (Incidentally, a standard ream of 500 sheets is an inch thinner.) Beside it is stack two, the negative "pile"—three lonesome e-mails.

Jeff Perry didn't develop this kind of following overnight or by letting constituents down. Nor did he come closer to the Potomac than the state's other GOP candidates by ducking tough assignments. Or by watching—timidly and ineptly—from the sidelines. There's only one way a state legislator from Sandwich carries Cape Cod by 5,000-plus votes and that's by amassing a track record of proven, demonstrable results.

It stems from leadership and from the kind of experience and education that enable you to lead. Jeff has both, so unless this is Alice in Wonderland, his background (legislative, legal, political, teaching, and law enforcement) should count in his favor.

For the better part of eight years, Jeff has worked with me to make the Cape a better and a safer place. During those phone calls, those group meetings, those one-on-ones in my office, I've found someone with shared values and a shared vision of public service.

Jeff Perry has a work ethic that is unrivaled in Barnstable County. He has brains, common sense, and the tenacity to stay the course when it matters most. Compassionate, resourceful, and thoughtful are other qualities that come to mind.

Readers who've had the good fortune to observe people like Jeff in action know exactly what I'm talking about. As more get to know him and see what he can do, we'll take great satisfaction watching those favorable e-mails multiply.

As I told one newspaper, this isn't a job you advertise for. You look for someone who's a good fit and who'll work with you on a common agenda. That's how I hit upon Jeff Perry.

Truth be told, I offered him the job a year or so ago when he announced he was not running for reelection in Sandwich. His commitment to term limits had ruled out that option. Instead, as I mentioned, Jeff ran for Congress. When he lost, I asked him again, and this time he accepted.

Does Jeff Perry have higher aspirations? At the age of 47, I hope so. If he does, the best way to get there will be by being effective in this assignment. No one gets a better job by botching his or her last one. Surely not at this level, when government service is so thoroughly scrutinized.

And while we're on this subject, readers need to recall that I don't appoint the next sheriff. That's not my call. To sit in this particular corner office, you need at least one more vote than your opponent in a duly constituted election. And if there is an interregnum, not that I'm predicting or expecting one, it's the governor who will appoint the interim sheriff. Not me.

You see, as Senator Scott Brown once famously said in a situation that applies equally here, "it's the people's seat." So it is with Bay State sheriffs.

And there's something else people need to keep in mind, especially those whose political ground may be to the left of Jeff's. Or to the left of mine for that matter. This is not so much a partisan political job as it is a law enforcement position. And no one understands that better than Jeff Perry.

Sheriffs and special sheriffs don't vote on bills like they do on Beacon Hill. They don't chart a liberal or conservative course, because they don't allocate federal budgets—like congressmen do on Capitol Hill.

Sheriffs and special sheriffs run a house of correction and jail, supervise a fair-sized labor force (in our case

about 325), help local police solve crimes, and oversee emergency dispatch and other programs to protect the public. The job requires not a political slant but a knack for inspiring people, for getting them to see the value in what you're trying to accomplish.

Jeff has amply displayed these qualities. And like all true leaders he will surely follow the celebrated advice of Mark Twain: "Do what is right. It will gratify most people and astonish the rest."

James Cummings of Falmouth is the Barnstable County Sheriff.