



Ken Mahony: Andover's problem solver

By Bill Dalton

Ken Mahony looked like a person from the 1950s, and to some extent he was.

In 1982, I met him for the first time. I saw a man in his mid-40s who had a military-style haircut that was almost a '50s flattop. He was a burly fellow with a large head and round face, and he was dressed conservatively in a dark suit and narrow, muted tie. I don't believe I ever saw him attired any other way, except maybe the tie grew a little wider. When I spoke with him, he was quick to get to the point and was as quick with his humor.

Many would say he was often aggressive in his speech; I never thought so. Many felt he was not a consensus-builder. I believe he was one of the best consensus-builders I ever worked with. Few people held neutral views about Mahony, because he was so dynamic. You liked him or you disliked him.

I liked him.

The man I knew was friendly, brilliant and creative, with no hidden agendas. However, he had a weakness, one that could be professionally fatal. That weakness was the occasional absence of a filter between his thoughts and his words that resulted in comments, often meant as humor, that were unseemly or inopportune.

From 1982 to 1990, Mr. Mahony was the town manager in Andover. What was accomplished in those few years was remarkable. He was by nature proactive and would rip into a problem and find a solution. During the first six of the eight years he was in office, I was one of five members of the Board of Selectmen. It is from that perspective that my opinions about him flow.

Some people have great ideas but can't sell or implement them. Other people are good at selling and implementing other's ideas, but can't create their own. Mahony could do it all. He created ideas and plans, sold them, and implemented them like no one else I ever knew.

There will be many who disagree, but I credit Mahony with having a great deal of finesse. If it had been otherwise, the selling and implementation of his ideas would have failed. For certain, the selectmen and others played important roles in selling Mahony's ideas, but it was Mahony who had the finesse to sell the ideas to the leaders whose support was essential.

Although I am amazed at Mahony's creativity and ability to get things accomplished, I don't want you to get the wrong impression. Neither I nor the selectmen with whom I worked were mere spectators or cheerleaders. In fact, there was often intense give and take as Mahony brought us step by step through project ideas and plans. The board questioned him closely and in depth on many issues. Selectman Donn Byrne, who died while in office but served in the productive years between 1981 and 1986, had the most finance experience on the board. He used that experience to ask Mahony sophisticated and difficult questions. Their discussions at board meetings added clarity to Mahony's ideas and helped us predict what questions would be asked by other boards and at Town Meetings.

Mahony was a government professional, and understood the idea of "process." He knew the selectmen could destroy his plans, and he took care to nurture the relationship with the board and gain its unanimous consensus on almost all significant issues. He was good also at gaining the consensus of other boards that were needed to assure approvals at Town Meeting. He often would ask a selectman or two to help. He arranged joint meetings of boards to build consensus. If there are those who believe that Mahony was

uncompromising, that is not the man I worked with. He was a good listener and admitted when he was wrong or when his plans needed improvements.

During his tenure, decades-old problems were solved. The early and mid-1980s were good financial years, and it is a fair question to ask whether the town would have adopted his ideas in bad financial times. The answer is no. There is no doubt the town needed good financial times, but it had such times before, and little was done. The town also needed a confluence of good leadership and creative ideas, and Mahony brought those to Andover at the right time. I doubt if there was any other era in the town's history when so much was accomplished.

His most creative work solved three long-term problems by linking them. The problems were: the lack of a municipal office building, the rundown Town Hall, and the disgraceful Park.

For many years, the town dithered with the Town Hall. The 1946 Tercentennial Book said the Town Hall was a disgrace, a victim of "hokey-pokeism" in town affairs. The book added that a bolt of lightning was the only bright spot in the Town Hall's history, lamenting that it was unfortunate that the damage was confined to the flag pole.

In the late 1950s, the town purchased what is now the parking lot next to Olde Andover Village. It was to be the location of the new municipal building, but the town dithered with the land as well. Years followed years, and the town couldn't find the will to take proactive steps, although in the '60s it reacted to a proposal to tear down the Town Hall by voting against doing so. Meanwhile, the Town Hall languished and stop-gap measures kept the interior functioning. Expanding town departments were put in the Theater Building on Essex Street, the Shawsheen School, and the old Punchard High School.

The Park was under-utilized and quite disgusting. It had vandalized benches, a wreck of a bandstand, and overgrown gravel paths. Worst of all, punks were attracted to the practically abandoned place and hung out every night. A young man was dragged beneath a car there, and he died.

Each problem carried a hefty price tag to fix. Working closely with the selectmen, Mahony developed a single plan for the new municipal office building and upgraded Park. The plan is reality today. The old Punchard buildings were renovated and the municipal offices were consolidated in one place for the first time in many years. The Park, with brick paths, new benches, and a repaired bandstand, was cleaned up to such an extent that it became more popular than at any time in its history. The municipal office

building and Park upgrade plan was so complex that it required an Act of Congress and a longterm leaseback. The preservation of the Old Town Hall came at the tail end of the plan. The building that the town had neglected for several decades became the most beautiful building in the town's center and was added to the Registry of National Historic Landmarks.

These improvements originated in a single creative brain — Ken Mahony's. I will have more about him next week.

Bill Dalton is a former moderator and selectman in Andover. He also served as a commissioner of the Massachusetts Labor Relations Commission for five years and was chairman for two years. He is a graduate of the Kennedy School of Government.