

# Pre-election, Ridgewood council meeting turns ugly

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(Photo: NorthJersey.com)

RIDGEWOOD — For the second time in a row, a Village Council meeting erupted into disputes, with the mayor battling both public speakers and a council colleague, as an increasingly contentious election cycle crosses over the dais.

Mayor Susan Knudsen on Wednesday told resident Rurik Halaby, a perennial detractor, that he has "perpetrated a fraud on the Ridgewood residents," and told resident Hans-Jurgen Lehman, another critic, that he should "be ashamed of yourself," later implying that he was "ethically and morally challenged."

At the previous council meeting, [Knudsen made a speech \(/story/news/bergen/ridgewood/2018/04/19/ridgewood-nj-2018-council-election-knudson-harwin/503060002/\)](#) in which she leveled the same charge against "anyone running for council who purports to be an attorney."

The public jousting comes amid a vitriolic campaign for two council seats in the May 8 election. Knudsen and Deputy Mayor Michael Sedon are running against Alexandra Harwin and Janice Willett for four-year terms.



**Janice Willett and Hans Lehman** (Photo: Photo courtesy of Jeff Voigt)

Lehman took Knudsen's "morally challenged" comments as a jab at Harwin, an attorney.

"If you need to defend yourself against certain claims during an election campaign," Lehman said from the lectern during Wednesday's meeting, "there is a time and a place for that."

"Talk about campaigning on the village's dime," he added.

Village Attorney Matthew Rogers has previously said he would not comment on whether Knudsen's words from the dais could be considered campaign speech, adding, "everyone utilizes the pulpit for a reason."

Lehman recently stirred up strife by personally producing a mailer sent to 5,000 residents. The mailer revived rumors and a laundry list of accusations against Knudsen, including claims of nepotism and conflict of interest regarding her sons on the police and fire department.

On Wednesday night, Halaby brought up a robocall made to village residents by Councilman Ramon Hache, in which he called Lehmann "deceitful." Halaby called for Hache to be censured.

More than once Knudsen interrupted Halaby, who maintained his right to conclude his three minutes of public comment. Rogers twice upheld Lehmann's right to speak, asking him to finish up with "a few more comments," until finally Knudsen and Rogers told him to stop talking.

A verbal altercation between Knudsen and Lehman ended with Knudsen threatening to have him removed by the police.

Rogers was at the center of Wednesday's flare-up. He'd been asked by Knudsen to draft a public statement refuting the claims of nepotism, and rejecting the idea of an anti-nepotism ordinance proposed by Councilman Jeffrey Voigt, although Voigt had opted to strike his proposal from Wednesday's agenda.

## Civil Service rules

Rogers also read a lengthy statement regarding civil service.

Knudsen has said that civil service rules mean she has no influence over police and firefighter hires or setting residency requirements, and Rogers said several state statutes backed up Knudsen.

Both Rogers and Knudsen appeared to maintain that a public safety residency requirement is state-mandated under civil service rules.

"It doesn't get modified by us," Rogers said of the requirement later in the meeting. "We're not allowed to do it."

However, Eugene Lanzoni, legislative liaison to the state Civil Service Commission, said a civil service community has authority to set a residency requirement by ordinance.

"Absolutely," he told NorthJersey.com. The only exception, he said, is if the commission "determines that there aren't enough qualified people for the position in the jurisdiction in question."

Article VIII (<https://ecode360.com/6689240>) of the village code governs the requirements, which were added in 1983 by ordinance.

After hearing the statement on Civil Service rules, Voigt said, "I'm confused, and I think the residents are confused as well," and asked for clarification from the labor attorney.

Knudsen said no one was confused but Voigt.

"I take offense to the condescending attitude that you have up here," Voigt replied.

Knudsen countered, "I really don't care."

When public comment resumed, residents Laure Weber and Jim McCarthy spoke in support of the mayor.

"It's never a good idea to wrestle a pig in the mud," McCarthy said, referring to the turmoil over the mailer, "because you get dirty and the pig likes it."