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Nat Reade: How Smith College can be a better ‘good neighbor’

By NAT READE

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NORTHAMPTON — When I read Smith College President Kathleen McCartney’s essay in the *Gazette* Nov. 6, I was encouraged by one line: “We pride ourselves on being good neighbors.”

In many ways, this is already the case. Smith’s presence in Northampton allows us to walk through beautiful gardens, attend plays and rub shoulders with the hundreds of smart and interesting faculty, staff and alumnae who live in Northampton. Our city is the vibrant and sophisticated place that it is in large part thanks to Smith.

But a good neighbor, I believe, is also one who makes an effort to understand the problems in their neighborhood and solve them. Northampton’s biggest problem is a lack of revenue.

Because of Proposition 2½ and a huge drop in state funding, Northampton has endured years of painful budget cuts. Our roads are potholed and our teachers typically spend about \$500 each year of their own money on basic supplies — paper, pencils, tissues — because our schools lack sufficient funds.

Meanwhile a very old state law, written in a time when colleges typically struggled to survive and educated local students, requires the rest of us to pay for Smith College’s share of city services.

This means that even senior citizens scraping by on Social Security are subsidizing Smith’s use of the city’s roads, police, ambulance and fire departments.

Yet Smith College reported in fiscal 2015 that it “generated record-level revenues of \$238 million” and that its endowment “continues to be one of the largest among liberal arts colleges, with a market value of \$1.9 billion.” It has spent about \$30 million every year of the past five on construction. While the PTOs in Northampton’s schools have to run cookie-dough fundraisers to buy books, Smith plans to spend \$100 million renovating its library.

The mayor recently proposed a PILOT plan which asks Smith and other nonprofits to contribute one quarter of what would otherwise be their property tax. Many other colleges and universities pay into similar plans. Among other things, it gives nonprofits credit for the value of services they already provide to the city.

In her essay, President McCartney details the good things that Smith does for Northampton, and they are considerable. But they don’t always equal the financial value she claims.

For instance, Smith allows Northampton High School students to take classes at the college. This is a great program that makes our high school one of the most desirable around, and I hope it continues. President McCartney estimates this to be worth nearly \$1 million per year. But the actual cost to Smith is very low, because our students only fill empty spaces in existing classes.

President McCartney mentions that Smith already pays a large tax bill to the city — but that’s because the college is fortunate enough to own a lot of taxable property. She mentions that Smith paid about \$90,000 in PILOT last year — but that is compensation for tax revenue lost when Smith tore down houses to build Ford Hall. She mentions that Smith pays for some of its students to work in our nonprofits — but those students get free training and supervision from those nonprofits.

As I’m sure President McCartney knows, Smith College’s mission statement says that it should teach its students to “fulfill their responsibilities to the local, national, and global communities in which they live.” In other words, Smith should teach its students to be good neighbors.

In today’s economic climate, where a small number of Americans enjoy extreme wealth while many people struggle, it’s important that the most fortunate ask themselves how they can do more. If Smith College truly wants to fulfill its mission and be a good neighbor, it owes it to itself to contribute fairly and willingly to the mayor’s PILOT plan.

Nat Reade lives in Florence and was elected this month to the Northampton School Committee.

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