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Reporter to chair health board



Mary Thomas

'When I first applied three years ago, I did weigh the fact I'm a journalist. I was at a point where I was looking for something to do in the community.'

By Tom Gavey
The Intelligencer

The election of Mary Thomas as chairman of the local District Health Council has raised concerns in some circles.

Her position as a reporter with Quinte Broadcasting has led to questions about the potential for conflict of interest for a journalist sitting on a public board.

However, Thomas's superiors at Quinte Broadcasting say they have no concerns about the situation.

When the DHC was approved for Hastings and Prince Edward counties just over three years ago, Thomas was one of the first members appointed, as a consumer representative for South Hastings.

When chairman Alan Mathany decided to step down this fall, Thomas was elected to the position.

"When I first applied three years ago I did weigh the fact I'm a journalist. I was at a point where I was looking for something to do in the community," says Thomas.

She adds that because appointments to the DHC are done at the provincial level it was a step removed from the lo-

cal community she covers.

"What I liked about the application process was I didn't have to be somebody's friend," says Thomas. Consumers and health providers join municipal representatives on the council, which is a liaison to the Ministry of Health and makes recommendations on proposed health programs.

She adds that since her appointment she no longer covers the council or Belleville General Hospital, which is often affected by the council's decisions.

Orland French, president of the local branch of the Canadian Association of Journalists and a teaching master in the journalism program at Loyalist College, says it's a situation Thomas should have avoided.

"It's the penalty you pay as a journalist to have to cut yourself off from the community.

Your talents may be welcomed by the community but you also become privy to information that if you pursue your calling as a journalist you would want to pursue."

French adds that if information is leaked, the organization may lose faith in the journalist.

He says the case isn't unusual and some journalists have been able to separate community service and their jobs.

Quinte Broadcasting's general manager Bill Morton says he was consulted before Thomas accepted the position.

"She doesn't cover the council, other reporters do. Since she's part-time I didn't feel we should be dictating what she does with her spare time," he says.

CJBQ news director John Ferguson says that when Thomas was appointed to the council, he and other reporters took over coverage. "We've had no problem at all. She's never breached any confidentiality."

No concerns were raised within the DHC, says executive director Steve Elson, when Thomas' name was put forward as chair. "Mary has been a very active member of the executive committee. She's a very principled person."

Thomas admits she may be under a microscope, at least early in her term.

"I'm a bit like Caesar's wife. I can't just have no conflict, but I have to be seen as having no conflict."

Meetings of the DHC are public and are covered by most area news organizations. Thomas says caucus matters have usually dealt with appointments to the council, which wouldn't be public knowledge at any time.

Thomas, Mary