

The Post-Standard

Bumping heads in Aurora

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By Dave Tobin

Staff writer

When Elizabeth "Lili" (*Lee Lee*) MacCormick has a problem with someone, she likes to talk it out.

But in Aurora, MacCormick feels she and many of Aurora's other 670 residents are getting the silent treatment from multimillionaire businesswoman Pleasant Rowland. So this 74-year-old grandmother and former Habitat for Humanity board member, and a few others, are fighting back in their own way.

For the past month, MacCormick has parked her red 1989 Chevrolet pickup in front of the Aurora Inn, tailgate festooned with anti-Pleasant bumper stickers. Among them: "Aurora was Pleasant before." "Nice village. Shame about the locals." And a longer message: "May your community never be turned into a corporation-run theme park."

The truck sets by the inn's front door, around-the-clock many days, during wedding receptions, banquets, and regular business hours. Some days, up to three similarly adorned vehicles join hers.

Aurora has no parking restrictions on Main Street, so MacCormick's bumper-stickered truck and the others are not illegal, just annoying.

"We've heard that it really irritates them," said MacCormick, who's lived in the village since 1958. "The bumper sticker war is kind of silly, but it's a statement. It seems to be the only way to get their attention. I have written letters, but they're not responded to. Her (Rowland's) attitude is 'The locals don't matter.' It would be lovely to have her actually talk to people, let us know what she has in mind and listen to our concerns. It would make an enormous difference."

What pushed MacCormick over the brink was when Wells College passed management of the Fargo restaurant to the Aurora Foundation, LLC, in early June. Wells gave the boot to Jim Orman, who had owned and operated the business for seven years and said he wanted to continue.

The Aurora Foundation was created by Rowland, a Wells College alumna, to refurbish Wells College's commercial buildings (including the Aurora Inn) and to run businesses in them - the profits, going back to the college.

The Aurora Foundation has no plans to respond to the car messages, said Katie Waller, Rowland's representative in Aurora.

"Obviously, in every community there's a range of opinions," Waller said. "These cars don't represent all the feelings of the community. There's a number of individuals who are very, very happy with the projects we've completed. I'm stopped again and again when I walk around the village. People are very appreciative."

For MacCormick, taking over the Fargo was the last straw. Although she never set foot in the place, she says she appreciated the former independently run Fargo's importance as a shaggy-dog watering hole.

Retired as an art teacher at Emily Howland Elementary School, MacCormick spends her days gardening and caring for her husband, Chalmers, who suffers from Parkinson's disease. She lives half a mile from the Aurora Inn. Her sons, Ethan and Christopher, help shuttle her truck between their mother's house and the inn.

MacCormick made news in 1999, when she hosted a Y2K community peace walk around her backyard labyrinth on New Year's Eve. The last time she publicly protested something, she said, was during the Vietnam War.

"But I wasn't throwing blood on registration sheets," she notes.

MacCormick is a graduate of Wellesley College - still an all-women's school. (Wells College goes co-ed in September). Her husband is a retired Wells College religion professor. One of his first students in 1958 was Pleasant Rowland.

Sitting in the shade of a honey-locust tree near her gardens, in T-shirt, khaki shorts and Birkenstock sandals, Elizabeth MacCormick says she shares Rowland's concern for improving communities. She served seven years on the board of Cayuga County Habitat for Humanity, and served as its volunteer coordinator.

But she and Rowland differ, she says, in the way they relate to people they are trying to help.

"I think it's good for people who are trying to improve the world, to listen to the people whose world they are trying to improve," she said.