

# East Greenwich Focuses on Town Transparency

A new organizing group in East Greenwich has taken matters of town transparency into their own hands.

Engaged East Greenwich (EEG), a social-media based movement, has begun a new system of fact-checking the East Greenwich town council. And things have gotten increasingly contentious during the past few months. A group of residents, feeling misled and lied to, launched a Facebook group in an effort to disseminate information and verify claims being made by town officials — to create a Snopes-esque resource.

Renu Englehart, an administrator for the Facebook group and a member of the East Greenwich Zoning Board, is the only elected town official to be working with EEG. She said she has seen the town become more divided than it has ever been; she said the town used to be politically moderate, but she now sees more “hardcore” views being acted on by town officials.

“It’s become so vitriolic in this town,” she said. “People are so polarized.”

In response to various claims made by the town council, a group of residents came together and decided that the town needed an independent forum verifying statements about things such as budget concerns and staffing issues.

The page describes itself as follows: “Engaged EG is a nonpartisan group of citizens from diverse backgrounds, political affiliations and perspectives who share a love of and commitment to East Greenwich. We are working toward transparency in local government.”

Posts on the page include town agendas and meeting reminders, and also include links to documents breaking down the town budget and local taxes.

According to Shareen Knowlton, a member of EEG and an East Greenwich resident for 15 years, the group came together through Facebook, as residents voiced concerns and a desire to “get to the truth.”

At the group’s first meeting, she said, members began to dissect complex town issues and agreed to only put out “simple, verifiable truth.” They wanted, she said, to create “a more accessible way to get engaged.”

Englehart explained that there are two Facebook groups for EEG; the first group is a public one, which disseminates information and is accessible to anyone on Facebook, and the second is a private group, in which administrators and members are able to discuss issues, figure out ways to verify claims and organize.

The group recently put out a survey, Knowlton said, which asked residents to rank issues in town, the issues on which they feel well-informed, and an open-ended question asking respondents to name issues they wanted the group to dissect. At press time, the survey had received about 50 responses, and the group was planning to begin assessing results at its next meeting. Knowlton noted that the sample size

was still small and she would like to see an increased circulation of the survey.

Englehart stated that the group is looking to move to a webpage-based platform, to make it accessible to East Greenwich residents who do not have a Facebook account. For now, the group continues to update the members with information.

*Motif will continue to cover the political contention happening in East Greenwich in the coming weeks.*