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Lee Vandersteel, 77, stalwart Alpine government watchdog

BY JAY LEVIN

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Lee Vandersteel, who discovered Alpine by chance while lost in New Jersey, moved there from Manhattan and became a never-shy public servant in the bucolic borough, died at home last Wednesday. She was 77.

The cause was cancer, said a daughter, Ann Vandersteel.

"I was literally lost in this town," Mrs. Vandersteel once said, recalling the day in 1968 she found herself driving around. "I said, 'I love it and I want to live here.'"

In short order, she and her husband, William, built a home on a parcel adjacent to the Alpine School. Mrs. Vandersteel, a tobacco farmer's daughter from Tennessee with a Columbia University journalism degree, began stirring things up as editor of the Alpine Gazette newsletter.

Running for Borough Council in 1973, Mrs. Vandersteel appeared at a Republican candidates night and belted out her qualifications to the tune of "I'm Just a Girl Who Can't Say No!" Among her positions was opposition to spending public money on amenities not all residents use, such as ball fields.

The insurgent Mrs. Vandersteel defeated the party organization's candidate in the primary and won in the general election. As a minority voice on the all-GOP council, she often was the lone 'no' vote. Frustrated, she stepped down 2 1/2 years into her three-year term, explaining to The Record: "It was like pushing water uphill — not very satisfying."

Mrs. Vandersteel continued putting out the Alpine Gazette and included a column called "Where the Money Goes," listing all bills paid by the borough. She was appointed deputy borough clerk in 1985 while Democrat Kutty Bedrosian was mayor, was promoted to clerk, and then was stripped of the job after a new Republican mayor took office.

She wound up as secretary to the Boards of Health and Adjustment and was banished to a converted closet in Borough Hall because one of her foes on council considered her a snoop and wanted to limit her access to files.

"She thought it was hysterical," Ann Vandersteel said of her mother's reaction to the tiny workspace. "She actually made jokes about it."

Bedrosian said he met Mrs. Vandersteel in the early 1970s. "I bumped into her at town meetings where she expressed concern about taxes and expenses and government," he said. "She was a Republican who was criticizing a solidly Republican government."

Although a Democrat, Bedrosian politically supported Mrs. Vandersteel, and she supported him.

"Lee was very effective in challenging the old boys' club network," he said, adding that her newsletter was a valuable service.

"It was the only way residents could know how money was being spent," he added.

Mrs. Vandersteel stopped doing the newsletter about 15 years ago. She worked as a starter at the Rockleigh Golf Course in recent years. Ann Vandersteel said her mother took seriously the role of borough servant. "Up until her last days, she was very active,



As secretary to Alpine's Boards of Health and Adjustment, Lee Vandersteel was banished to a closet office in Borough Hall.

talking to people about the good of the town," she said.

Mrs. Vandersteel is survived by her husband of 44 years, William, a former Planning Board member; daughters Ann Vandersteel of Tequesta, Fla., and Tina Vandersteel of Cambridge, Mass.; stepchildren Stoddard Vandersteel of San Jose, Calif., Marion Vandersteel of Manhattan and Bill Vandersteel of Austin, Texas; and six grandchildren.

Cremation was held, and a private celebration of her life is planned.

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