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But that argument doesn't carry much weight with Don Johnson, a North Haven Middle School history teacher who for the last four months has been on a mission to raise awareness of the dig. Late last year, Johnson started a website called leavetheleathermanalone.com. Since then, a flurry of media reports have brought the issue to a national audience. To date, the website has been visited more than 21,000 times.

Johnson believes the Leather Man was an intensely private, common, man who deserves to be left as such. "If it's a public safety issue, why do you still need the DNA?" he asked. "They have never been able to come up with a reason that people on my side are willing to accept. The scientific research for them trumps any sort of personal privacy issues."

In support of his position, Johnson cites several online polls showing overwhelming opposition to the project. "Eighty percent of the public is not in favor of this," he said. "But the historical society, and (society president) Norman MacDonald, don't consider any online protest valid. They think we're a small group of people instigating something."

When interviewed last fall about the project, MacDonald said the exact date of the dig would be kept a secret. But after what he called "tremendous" interest from the media, he said the society has changed its mind. "We decided we would allow the media to be there with certain restrictions," MacDonald said. "They will not be able to photograph certain areas ... just the whole process of opening a grave and moving it is a very sensitive subject and it's something we want to keep respectful. We don't want the whole operation to turn into a public circus."

MacDonald said that while he respects Johnson's opinion, he doesn't agree with the premise that the Leather Man was a private person.

"He was a very, very, visible public figure. If he wasn't, we wouldn't know about him today," MacDonald said. "If he wanted privacy, he would have been a hermit."

As far as opposition to the project, MacDonald said, he has heard nothing but support. Out of nearly 800 members of the historical society, not one is against it, he said.

"I understand (Johnson) had a lot of feedback, some in favor and some against. You know feedback on the Internet is somewhat anonymous," Mac-Donald said. "While I respect everyone who has answered his website, I'm not sure they know all the background and facts of what we're doing and why." Johnson said he is still contemplating what to do next. He wouldn't rule out the possibility of protesting, calling it a moral dilemma.

"I'm still holding out hope somewhere down there will be someone who says 'Let's do all we need to do, but we don't need that (DNA); let the mystery remain,'" he said. "If not, I don't know how far I will I go. The last thing I want to have happen is for people to turn against the

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(historical society). In general, I think they do incredible work."

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