

Dear Meeker County Commissioner Benoit

By Ford Peterson

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Dear Mr. Benoit,

First, let me congratulate you on your recent election to the Meeker County Board of Commissioners. The citizens of the third district gave you their vote of confidence. Your campaign promise to work diligently to govern the business affairs of the people of Meeker County with the honor, integrity, and openness, made the difference. Providing assurance to your honesty was the cornerstone of your campaign. The people responded, to a large degree, by your reputation in all your business affairs—public and private. The people of the third district celebrate your election with high expectations.

A County Commissioner plays an important role in local government. Elected officials are, in all business matters, supervised by this County's Board of Commissioners. No elected official can perform their important function without access to the 'purse strings.' You, and the other four Commissioners, jointly hold the purse strings. This important supervisory role is the citizen's last hope for regulating elected officials and county employees. That burden now falls on the shoulders of you and your peers.

Second, your first board meeting was January 4, 2011. After reading accounts of the meeting in the local papers, I am somewhat struck by the sudden urgency to demand answers to your innocent "Like" posting on Facebook involving the word "corruption," which now appears to have been deleted. The offensive issue was actually a link to an article on my blog whose title included the word Corruption. Apparently, Mr. Swenson read that, took it personally, and was offended. Mr. Swenson (and the other offendees) are 'thin skinned' when it comes to salty rhetoric. If the link to my article has caused you some embarrassment, or disgrace, please accept my apology for whatever role I may have played in this.

Finally, since the Commissioners brought it up, and the local papers were good enough to cast a very bright light on it, this becomes the perfect opportunity to outline my recent findings from investigations into some of Meeker County's activities. I have spent hundreds of dollars of my own money and countless hours of my time to collect information on activities just to be able to understand what is going on. The fact that these otherwise simple tasks require herculean effort is in-and-of-itself somewhat alarming. Citizens asking questions of elected officials and public boards should be welcomed. Why must we pay to get answers? The face of good government has changed. My information requests continue to trickle in. In my aforementioned article, I used the word corruption in the title. This appears to be more onerous than vulgar slang in the ears of Mr. Swenson.

'Corruption' is the noun form of the adjective 'corrupt.'

1. Marked by immorality and perversion; depraved.
2. Venal; dishonest: *a corrupt mayor*.
3. Containing errors or alterations, as a text: *a corrupt translation*.

My references to 'corruption' have always related to #2 and #3. I have no reason to accuse anybody of being depraved or perverse, to suggest otherwise is simply corrupt in-and-of-itself.

During your campaign for Wilde's seat, you walked headlong into a buzz saw when you went to the Dassel Apartment to introduce yourself and listen to your constituents-to-be. In disbelief, you could not believe your ears. Something was horribly wrong. You asked Senator Newman and me to come down and visit with the residents of the Dassel Apartments to understand the issues and offer advice on

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correcting the malformation of the HRA board and other issues. We were all dumbfounded and shocked at what we were hearing first hand from victims and witnesses to an apparent assault and battery in October 2009—all at the hands of the current HRA Commissioners, the former County Commissioner Wilde and current Commissioner Strand, and later learned it was under the direction of County Attorney Stephanie Beckman. Discovering that the ensuing investigation never included interviews of victims or witnesses left us all in disbelief. Government had failed us. Something had gone horribly wrong. People at the apartments are frightened that our police ignore their calls for help. Sheriff Jeff Norlin continues to refuse to talk with them over coffee and cookies. You and Newman got a free pass on the grounds you were too busy campaigning, leaving me to try to figure out this mess. That meeting ended with the realization that the only recourse was to go public. I started blogging about it.

What ensued was an investigation on the part of a self-appointed committee of concerned citizens to get to the bottom of this apparent corruption and abortion of justice—and I include you in that ad-hoc committee because you remain a diligent observer of what transpired. I thank you for that involvement and your promise to continue to serve the people of Meeker County with open and honest integrity.

At some point along the way, Trish VanPilsum from KMSP TV Fox 9 News got involved. It turns out that numerous people had contacted her independently. She saw one of my blogs on the subject, and weighed in with Emmy Award winning skills, talented photojournalists, and a passion for exposing corruption. Not only had our elected officials failed us, the media had also failed the people of Meeker County. I have long believed that the best way to root out corruption is using the best antiseptic against corruption--fresh air and sunshine. If publicity leaves politicians and guilty parties floating helplessly in the wake of the ensuing fallout, then so be it.

I wonder if Commissioner Swenson would consider lying on the part of elected officials to be a legitimate excuse for using the word “corruption?” Lying is most certainly dishonest, which falls under definition #2. Our Sheriff Jeff Norlin lied to Roger Werner and me privately that there were signed statements saying nothing happened in October 2009. Then he denied saying it to the Fox9 reporter when she went looking for the evidence he did not have. County Attorney Stephanie Beckman openly lied to the Dassel-Enterprise, the Litchfield Independent Review, and KMSP TV Fox 9 reporter VanPilsum.

In a letter, dated October 8, 2010, addressed to the media outlets above, Stephanie Beckman represents:

There never were any communications via e-mail between the Meeker County Attorney’s Office and HRA Commissioners Strand and Wilde via e-mail so, there are no documents to provide.

Reference page 2 of InvestigationReport.pdf at www.mnpatriots.com

We later uncovered many emails exposing Ms. Beckman’s lie. See pages 6, 22, 23, 24, 41, 45, 46, 47, 51, 68, 191, 192, 193, 194, 196 of the investigative report for more information.

Then Beckman claims she does not advise the Commissioners on HRA matters, yet in the police reports we find testimony to the Wright County investigator that indeed Beckman was involved, and Amy Wilde confesses it to the detective investigating another case related to the abuse.

So, our County Attorney, um, I said, boy, she says, well, maybe – maybe you should just talk to the people. Find out where are they getting this from.

From page 151 of the investigative report.

Would Swenson call this a form of ‘corruption?’ I would. I would call them lies with the willful intent to cover-up the truth. This is the poster child of what you need to fight against as Commissioner.

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Then there is the social services nurse who witnessed and reported the abuse through channels. Apparently, by the time it gets to Social Services Director Clark Gustafson, there is no investigation by police. Certainly, this is corruption.

My investigation has turned up troubling County meeting abuses. I was shocked when I attended my first meeting of the HRA and found people shouting, no... make that screaming at each other. Regular meeting attendees tell me it is common for the meetings to result in screaming hissy fits by Chairman Strand. I bought a camera and now show up at all the meetings. Cameras do not lie. The temperature in the room dropped 20 degrees! Why are there no public cameras in all County meeting rooms? I find that Wilde resigned from the HRA for health reasons. The County Commissioners never properly reappointed her HRA seat—yet she serves as Commissioner to this day. I would call that corruption.

I would call the MN State Legislature finding the office of County Commissioner and HRA Commissioner to be incompatible offices due to conflicts of interest. Finding not one but two County Commissioners on that HRA board is an error in elections. Left uncorrected after repeatedly pointing it out, I would no longer call them election errors, I would call it corruption.

When the HRA board chastises its Executive Director for rightfully refusing to co-sign checks to attorneys specifically named by HUD as being ineligible to receive them, I would call that corruption.

When HUD officers from St. Paul personally explain that the HRA Board is malformed and that conflicts of interest are present, nothing happens. When the commissioners thumb their nose at federal officials, and the respected law firm Dolan and Besser resign over the matter for ethical reasons, can this be anything other than some form of corruption?

When RFP activities illustrate blatant data privacy violations, excluding numerous bidders from the process through the hubris of Chairman Strand, can this be anything other than corruption?

When three of the five HRA Commissioners meet in private unscheduled meetings (outright illegal [Section 13 violations](#)) to sign contracts, excluding the other commissioners, this is in violation of meeting laws. Yet we see no fines levied. Can this be anything other than corruption?

When citizens watch the meetings and then witness the meeting minutes of the previous meeting falsified, resulting in protests from the board and the Executive Director, can a citizen witness this and not conclude that the board is corrupt? Can falsified minutes be anything other than corruption?

When citizens watch the HRA board's audit committees completely fail to understand the implications of the decisions they have made with respect to the annual audit, there is no sense of good government. Quite the contrary, we can witness the willful destruction of the accountant's reputation. Damage to reputations is meaningless to these Commissioners. Their actions expose the county to lawsuits.

The cause of all this angst is the Meeker County EDA. There is an apparent need to take-over the HRA. Evidence of this comes from several sources, including the testimony of the Commissioners involved in the police investigation. What is their private agenda? Speculation swirls around levy authority and the lack of levy authority regarding the EDA's housing. It turns out that Meeker County never sought authorization to own housing yet we have 76 units of poorly managed housing. Can this be anything other than evidence of corruption?

Then we find that someone who is not a real estate broker is managing the EDA's housing, which until 1/1/2009 was illegal. It only became legal then when the EDA hired the MCDC charity's employee without the approval of the County Commissioners or following proper hiring practices. No responsible

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housing investor would surrender management to anything but a broker. In fact, unless you are a government, attempting to manage real estate as a non-broker is illegal. Yet we find Meeker exploits a loophole to the people's peril. Can this be anything other than corruption?

The County pays no property tax on the properties it owns. Instead, they pay something called a 'pilot payment' to reimburse the community for the County's allocated portion of the services provided by the community. The worst neighbor in any town is the County itself. The people effectively subsidize rents. The so-called 'pilot payments' to the communities served by these projects are a fraction of what citizens would pay. The county itself can impose the amount of the pilot payment without input from the community. The Dassel HRA pays about \$2,400/year. Any other neighbor would pay 10 times that! I will say that makes Meeker County the worst neighbor in the City of Dassel—and the only neighbor that gets to determine its own property tax. Countywide the HRA and EDA's pilot payment to the various townships and cities is annually about \$100,000 below what any other neighbor would pay. I would call that corruption.

One of the documents I requested and paid for is the Insurance Declaration for the property held by the EDA. Did you know that the EDA goes all the way to Luverne, MN to find insurance? Really? Luverne, MN? There are no brokers in Meeker? We find that McLeod County had to sue the same contractor that built our townhomes over financial matters. I believe this broker is a crony of that contractor. Then I find that the EDA has never issued an RFP on insurance—ever! Really? This County sends tens of thousands of dollars, year-after-year, to its good-old-boy cronies in Luverne, MN for what appears to be overpriced insurance! As if it is not hard enough to make a living in Meeker County without having the County send its business to Luverne, MN. Really? I would say that no RFP has the appearance of corruption—no maybe it is just plain stupid! Perhaps Swenson likes the word stupid better than corruption.

Why are there no public cameras in meeting rooms? Most city council, school board, and other county's maintain a system of cameras to make public meetings public. Cameras serve to educate the public and encourage a proper decorum from citizen and politician alike. Cameras allow documentation of the happenings in Meeker County. An observer can only speculate as to why there are no cameras. What is clear to me from my respectful attendance at recent meetings is that boards consider public attendance to be a nuisance. Spoon-feeding facts to the people is far more efficient. An informed electorate may take exception to what is happening.

When I read the audit report and see all sorts of warnings to the people about abuses in departments, like Sheriff Dept. procurements, EDA money handling, etc., I to question whether there are proper RFP procedures enforced. Requests for Proposals (RFP) and Requests for Bids (RFB) are the cornerstone of good government. The appearance of cronyism, nepotism, or tampering with the process of procurement gives rise to the appearance of corruption.

The Commissioners need to direct every administrator and director in this county to review their procurements to determine: 1) Are the people going outside Meeker to procure the service? 2) Has this procurement been subject to a thorough review (including invitations to bid) within the last 3 years? 3) Is there a preference for local residents and businesses? 4) Are there businesses in the neighborhood providing these services? If so, does the County actually compete with those businesses? 5) Are there activities performed by the county that could be performed by non-county workers? Volunteers?

It is hard enough to make a living in Meeker without having to compete with the government. Offering opportunity to the public and bringing it in-house only when options are exhausted. Words are powerful, and the word corruption has strong connotation. So does the word stupid. Figuring out the difference between stupidity and corruption should not have to wait until November 2012 elections.