

By Ford Peterson

The very same week as Dassel is named runner-up in Bloomberg's "[Best place to raise your kids](#)" contest, Meeker County suffers through its second public flogging by [KMSP Fox9 Investigators](#) related to the ongoing abuses at the Dassel Apartments. The December 27, 2010 Dassel Enterprise-Dispatch covers their version of the December 20, 2010 meeting. Amazingly, the perpetrators of the abuses survive the article without even a mention of the controversy playing out at the meeting held at the Dassel Apartments. I was there with my camera and will air the controversy for you via YouTube. The newspaper article's author, Jennifer Kotila, has been acting more like Amy Wilde's Executive Secretary than a news reporter. Her December 27, 2010 article is about the new management at the HRA, who I support whole heartedly. Unfortunately, the old executive management team (the source of all the angst) remains in charge.

In all fairness to the City of Dassel, the Dassel Apartments has been over-run by two county commissioners, Wallace Strand (Chairman) and Amy Wilde (his minion), who are determined to control the Meeker HRA (Housing and Redevelopment Authority) in spite of common law or the best interests of Meeker County. The City of Dassel and the Augustana Assisted Living facility in Dassel simply share a common zip code with the County facility known as the Dassel Apartments. Mike Scanlon, the Mayor of Dassel, was also at the December 20, 2010 HRA meeting to deliver a very clear message to these Commissioners—a major fact that seemed to elude Kotila. Last week the Dispatch had a letter to the editor from Bill Ward, alerting the public to the fact that Augustana has nothing to do with the mismanagement of the Meeker County facility. I must remind readers and Mr. Ward that an Ecumen Executive (Rebecca Warpula) sits on the Meeker HRA board with Wilde and Strand without pay at Ecumen's request! Ecumen is the parent company of Augustana. Another little detail circumvented in Kotila's report.

Kotila also reports that Tischer resigned from the HRA. Anyone in attendance at that meeting when it happened would have clearly understood that she was faced with a clear understanding that this board was about to professionally smear her reputation unless she resigned. She chose resignation. Fox9 news got the story correct. Kotila continues to rely on Amy Wilde as her sole source.

The meeting started promptly at 1:15PM. Commissioner Nistler arrived a few minutes late due to the weather.

At the top of the agenda was an opportunity for public comments. This author, and Dassel Mayor Mike Scanlon asked to speak to the board. I rose to speak to the board on several topics, which ended with a call for Wallace Strand and Amy Wilde to resign from the HRA board. You [can read a transcript of my statement here](#) or watch the 4 minute YouTube clip.

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I expressed my concerns over the HRA Board's treatment of Data Privacy in their possession. The pending lawsuit by Marlys Houk involving the corrupt handling of the recent RFP to replace outgoing Director Tischer is a Data Privacy matter. It was also reported to me by several at the November HRA meeting that Kotila was seen in the HRA office making copies of documents, at times unsupervised, giving rise to yet more Data Privacy concerns. Wilde's amazing public confession that the minutes do not have to be redacted is defacto evidence of her incompetence as a Commissioner. Minutes are public as long as they do not contain confidential information, like the name or address of any resident receiving public assistance. Minutes are available for public viewing only after they have been properly scrubbed of these details through redacting.

Past concerns involving Wilde's abuse of Data Privacy of individuals threatens yet more lawsuits against Meeker County. I called for the Commissioners to discipline Wilde by calling for her resignation from the HRA Board. Apparently Kotila missed that part of the meeting too.

I confronted Wilde about the violation of Data Privacy, as evidenced by Kotila investigating RFP respondents, like Ms. Houk (and Houk's current employer) prior to that information becoming public or even available to the board. Kotila denies being told anything by Wilde. A jury of Houk's peers will very likely be afforded the opportunity to determine the truth. The people of Meeker County will once again pay dearly for Wilde's tuition to the school of hard knocks.

Here is a clip of Wilde asking Kotila after the meeting whether she "told" her any information. The truth is that Kotila appears to have received a letter from the HRA attorney Mary Tijien. Kotila has been unwilling to share her sources. Once the judge gets around to asking Kotila for her sources, I wonder if she will be willing to go to jail over the matter?

[YOUTUBE](#)

Because of comments I received through emails from Wilde, I suspected that Wilde would introduce some sort of "Charges for Copies" policy to penalize me for asking for copies at the same price as she charged Kotila (free). After understanding her strategy, I appealed to the Commissioners to not penalize the people living in the HRA facilities by instituting a charge for copies policy designed specifically to penalize me. True to her selfish strategies of the past, Wilde advocates for and receives a sympathetic ear from the rest of her minions on the HRA Board, who grant Wilde a penal policy designed to penalize only non-HRA residents, allowing a formal exclusion for media outlets deemed "Legal Newspapers." It appears that Fox9 will have to pay for the truth like the rest of Meeker County.

I also reminded the board that Chairman Strand will be deemed to have resigned from the HRA board effective the very moment he receives his election certificate for his tenure as County Commissioner beginning in January 2011. If he intends to serve beyond this meeting, the new batch of County Commissioners will have to reappoint him.

At this point Mike Scanlon, the Mayor of the City of Dassel, rose to speak to the board. The clear and alarming tone was a breath of fresh air. A transcript of [Scanlon's statement can be found here](#). Watch as Mike Scanlon outlines his concerns on YouTube.

[YOUTUBE](#)

At one point, later in the meeting, he was allowed to interrupt the meeting to re-iterate the need for the Board to be engaged in the management of the facility or step down to make way for people who can be actively involved.

Scanlon's points are valid. There were a number of concerns discovered at this month's meeting. Some sort of problem with the June 2009 to June 2010 audit and firing the auditor. The checkbook hasn't been reconciled since 2009 and missing meeting minutes. More data privacy concerns. Voiced concerns about more lawsuits. Fire exits are blocked.

I must remind this and every other county or municipal board member reading this. ALL problems are management problems. Proper management includes the system of checks and balances to ensure that employees are doing their jobs, contracts are being let out equitably, and that only ordinary and necessary services are being provided on the taxpayer's nickel.

The annual audit is a sacred ritual for all private, federal, state, local and charitable administrations. Here we find that the audit process has been let to a firm and a preliminary statement to HUD issued last August. Listen to this short clip outlining the absolute incompetence and lack of active involvement. Listen carefully to Wilde explain that these important reconciliation duties were to be performed by the former Executive Director. Watch as Commissioner Melgaard-Schneider places her face in her hands on discovery of the facts.

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There should NEVER be a major contract let by this county without a proper advertising and vetting of contracts for goods or services. Yet last month we witnessed the letting of the Executive Director position without proper advertising for employees or proper definition of the RFP. Board members were not allowed to view the respondent's bids or even know who responded. Wilde and Strand appeared at the meeting with Strand almost giddy over the fact that they had already signed contracts with Kandiyohi HRA without properly submitting the arrangement to the board for review and approval. The full board was not even allowed to know the names of the respondents or understand the implications of the changes. Some board members were excluded from the discussion completely. This dysfunction gives rise to all sorts of concerns. All of which were either missed or ignored by the local news media.

The annual audit was let without the board even understanding the implications of their actions. The annual reports were issued without their knowledge?

Watch as Mayor Scanlon scolds the board at the end of the meeting. Listen carefully to his admonition for these officers to step down and hand control over to more willing and capable people.

[YOUTUBE](#)

Some discussion ensued about the common wording of language in an annual audit that reads:

“Due to the limited number of office personnel, segregation of the accounting functions necessary to ensure adequate internal accounting control is not possible.”

While some Commissioners interpret this audit language to mean they get a free pass and that the controls are OK. It is really a notice to the board that they need to take additional steps to ensure that these important internal controls are managed and under the proper control. It's a flag that reads things are out of control and watch your step. When you see a road sign that reads “ice on bridge” you do not get to drive as usual. Those in charge need to take steps to insure that the hazardous conditions do not result in a fatal crash.

Management controls and accountability need to be in place to insure that the people's affairs are being run properly, which takes an active involvement of the overseeing board. That may mean actually viewing documents and interviewing contractors. The entire board needs to be actively involved in all the affairs. The burden cannot fall on the one or two doing the heavy lifting—accountability cannot and should not be delegated. The board should not simply take a County employee's word that important controls are functioning properly. Management over-ride of important board controls should be cause for serious discipline and possibly dismissal. And when these important board level controls are being violated by the board itself, then the remaining board needs to take immediate steps to prevent damage to the County's constituents.

When an audit report contains wording that suggests the office is too small to have proper internal controls, this is the auditor placing the burden squarely on the shoulders of the full board. When it is

impossible to have formal internal controls delegated, the board needs to take personal responsibility by taking steps to ensure that funds are being handled properly. The board needs to take responsibility for creating the controls through the use of additional board activities designed to protect the County.

In one clip we witnessed Wilde attempting to place the burden of checkbook reconciliation as having been accepted by outgoing director Tischer. If true, the incompetence of this board's failure to respond is beyond the pale. Wilde saw no issue with the person handling the money and the checks actually performing the reconciliations. Strand immediately tried to shut her up before she did any more admission of board ignorance. In this meeting we witness firing the former auditor without so much as a conversation with him. They immediately instructed the new Executive Director to write the RFP and start collecting bids? No discussion about which firms? No discussion about directly contacting the Auditor they already vetted and hired? Commissioner Nistler describes in detail how the burden had been placed on the board and the board was unable to recognize the threats as a problem.

If there are problems discovered in the HRA's unreconciled checkbook, we don't necessarily have a dishonest employee or contractor. What we have is an incompetent management board. These important management controls need to be routine and systems in place to demonstrate compliance. The board needs to see these controls implemented. The board needs to embrace a zero tolerance for management over-rides of their policy controls. Do it right or "you're FIRED!"

Another example illustrated from the recent board meeting. When is someone providing a service as an employee and when are they a contractor? This basic definition needs to be well understood and embraced by the board before the taxpayer's get hurt. For example, if they walk like an employee and talk like an employee and get paid like an employee, very likely they are an employee. Life continues on autopilot until something goes wrong. When somebody gets hurt or they cause damage to property, lawyers and insurance policies are drawn into the process. The responsibility for damages depends on who bears the responsibility. When the County fails to have its affairs in order, the people of Meeker County will eventually get hurt.

The people deserve better representation. Strand and Wilde need to resign from this HRA board for an ever-lengthening list of reasons. Proper representation needs to be appointed to this HRA—representation without the conflicts of interest inherent in this dysfunctional board.

I hope Mayor Scanlon remains involved with this board until such time as we see the current bunch resign and the County Commissioners re-appoint suitable replacements. The people of Meeker County deserve better. The residents of the Dassel Apartments deserve better. If the local media is unwilling or unable to carry the banner exposing corruption by reporting corruption, then the people need to step-up and demand their business is given the proper care.

The ultimate responsibility for the business affairs of the people resides with the people. If the County officials are unwilling to prosecute corruption, then they need to be replaced at the very next opportunity. Vote them out of office.