

NSN EXPRESS

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A SUMMER OF CIVIC IMPROVEMENTS

The Salem Avenue Project (whatever they were doing) is finally done. This small project started in April and took five months. It only took 13 months to build the Empire State Building. Traffic, meanwhile, was redirected to a detour. Then they dug up the detour so the detour needed a detour. That's the Rolla Way.

The Fate of Buehler Park. In September the council will open the bids for Buehler Park. Buz Harvey and Sean Hogan submitted one bid and Frank Snelson (you remember, the Mayor's office buddy?) submitted the other. That's a secret from their illegal meeting; you aren't supposed to know that yet. What a great improvement to the city: an irreplaceable park sold to gain another joint buried on a tacky commercial strip that produces only a few minimum wage jobs and a few extra dollars a year in sales taxes. Either Snelson or Harvey and Hogan may actually have plans to buy it and build something there, but we wonder. It is equally possible that their bids were just a ploy they cooked up with Morgan to give him an excuse to dredge this up and dump on the council again.

Councilman Kiefer asked at the August 20th meeting where they had advertised for bids. Petersen replied that they just put an ad in the RDN and sent a letter to a few developers. That's the tip off. They aren't out looking real hard for bidders if they only put an ad in the local paper. If the bait works and it draws the bidder they probably have had waiting in the wings, the locals can withdraw their bids; but if the council finds that Snelson or Harvey and Hogan are still the only bidders and this isn't going to be some giant tax bonanza like the Grits & Gravy joint they all adore, then the council should hammer the Mayor and his cronies for

setting them up again. How many times is the council going to let him drag them through this messy and unpopular issue? Why does Morgan keep trolling for bidders? What do Morgan and Harvey want to do with the money from the sale of the park? Why is that question never answered?

This is Betterment? The Chamber is dredging up that old Ed Owsley favorite project, the Community Betterment Award scrapbook. Some public-spirited ladies are once again going to try to get this award that means so little that it doesn't even make the metro papers anymore. Community Betterment is an old post-war marketing gimmick the state initially promoted to attract economic development; it's an illusion, but Rolla never hesitates to buy into illusions. While the girls are busy working on the scrapbook to show how the community has been "bettered," the mayor and council are selling one of it's most used parks. Rolla's version of community betterment.

Suggestions for the "Betterment" Scrapbook. The Rolla Council and Administration, chronically incapable of doing anything about junk cars that litter the streets, weedy lots and derelict houses, are considering getting another codes enforcement employee. Why bother? They only enforce building and zoning codes on a politically selective basis. One would think that being a town in the Ozarks, the city would do everything possible to avoid fulfilling the hillbilly stereotype of the rusty car up on blocks in the yard, but rusting junkers abound on Rolla's streets.

Another photo for their scrapbook would be **Warren Dean's rusty junk** that has decorated Highway 63 for decades. The rusty

furniture junkyard in front of Callen's grocery was finally cleaned up but a **derelict house on Highway 63 (Bishop Avenue) between the Sonic drive-in and Town and Country Bank has been slowly rotting into the ground for at least 10 years.** Despite the pretty planter boxes on corners, downtown business owners let weeds grow up in the cracks and downtown buildings are never renovated by their owners unless the Chamber gets them a grant and pays them to do it. So, no matter how many flowers Acorn plants or how many spiffy new banners hang from the lampposts, at eye level, Rolla still looks like what it is – a trashy, weedy Ozark hill town where landlords, residents and Chamber members violate building, trash and weed ordinances without fear of prosecution by the city. Instead of hanging pretty flags, planting petunias and playing with scrapbooks to create illusions, it couldn't hurt for the ladies to attend council meetings and protest that the city doesn't use its enforcement powers to clean up the town.

The Self-Created Hardship. There is another reason why Rolla doesn't look as clean and well cared for as other towns. It's because the P&Z board thinks their mission is to pander to any commercial interest over homeowners. Anything and anyone with commercial designation is given preference over homeowners trying to maintain their homes and protect their property investment.

Morgan, like Rolla's other real estate mayors, keeps the P&Z board loaded with realtors and pro-business appointments so that commercial people can play the "self-created hardship" game. This is the tactic they use to beat any zoning or code restriction: The businessperson or developer deliberately violates a zoning code. When the neighbors complain, the businessman goes to the zoning board and asks for a waiver, sniveling that he will suffer a hardship or business loss if he has to stop violating the zoning code. The courts call that a **"self-created hardship."** If the purpose of his "self-created hardship" was to force a change in zoning, the business violator will then request a permanent change in the zoning designation to fit his violation! The zoning board and the

council all pretend they don't know the alleged "hardship" was deliberate and they grant a variance, special-use permit or rezoning to the now very satisfied violator. On the rare occasion when that tactic doesn't work, they just threaten to sue the city and the council wimps out for fear of annoying some Chamber member.

Everybody yells about more development and wants to spend city money to get it. But who wants to move to a sign-cluttered, weedy, junk-littered Ozark hill town? Rolla could be clean and beautiful, but one drive around town tells the whole story. If this is a city that can't enforce simple rules like cutting weeds, moving rusty, junk cars out of yards and clearing rotting buildings, it probably isn't safe place to invest your money, your family or your business.

H. Dain reappointed again. One Rolla "betterment" that won't go in the scrapbook is the council's reappointment of H. Dain Ward to the RMU board. The plan to get H. Dain and RCDC a \$125,000-a-year stipend from the council seems to be suffering from a lack of enthusiasm by everyone except the aging RCDC gang. Reappointment to the utility board must have been Ward's consolation prize for not getting \$125,000 a year to play at being the city's economic developer. His consolation is our continuing handicap.

SplashZone Reports. After a token growl or two from the council last summer about getting regular reports on the SplashZone finances and operation, the subject died. Last year the mayor made Kwantes withdraw his initial so-called financial report and helped him fix it. After it was "fixed," it looked as if the pool had cleared a few thousand, but that was only because \$12,000 worth of start-up costs had been removed from the total expenses and put on a back page.

If you're wondering how it is doing cost-wise this year, Michael Klitzing, the new Rec director, plans to give a report at the September meeting, thanks to inquiries by Councilman Kiefer. Reports of the SplashZone and all other recreation business will be

increasingly hard to find now that the Mayor's new "Biznuss" Board has taken over and these things are going to be discussed in their committee meetings instead of council meetings. But if Councilmen like Kiefer stay on the ball, the rest of us might find out too.

Ralph and the elders. Judge Haslag and his constituents showed up this summer to take another run at city money and property for the Senior Center. Having turned down free land offered by the Lions Club, they now want to build their 13,000-square-foot building next to the new Recreation Center in Ber Juan Park. They also wanted the city taxpayers to give them half of the \$80,000 they need to pay Ballard and King to do a feasibility study and a plan for them.

In the first place we can't afford any more Ballard and King plans around here. And in the second, where were Ralph and the elders when the Recreation Center was being planned? The facility they have decided they absolutely must have will cost about a million dollars just to build. When asked some very sensible questions by Councilman Magdits about their budget estimates on operation - how they could afford the overhead for such a large facility and some of those practical details - Haslag stuttered and stammered - they have no clue. Their plan was to have the city pay for a feasibility study, have the city give them the land, get some grants to build it and then have the city pass another sales tax to operate it for them. That's some plan.

The city council was not impressed and we don't blame them. Getting older does not give you license to stick both hands into the city treasury. If Judge Haslag and his group had invested a little time and effort when the Recreation Center was being planned they would have practically been given priority use of the whole building - that's what the voters were misled into thinking it was for - a Senior and community center. But they didn't bother to go to the meetings and lobby for what they needed then, so there's no reason for the city to shell out for their lack of foresight now. As we always say, "Decisions are made by those who show

up." They didn't show up when it counted, so they've been counted out.

The Petersen Prescription. Petersen has pushed a truckload of rezonings through and rewritten Chapter 42 - the whole zoning code. Some of Petersen's recommendations for subdivisions are an improvement; the old ones were so outdated almost anything would be an improvement. But the document still reeks of city hall's historic Do-It-For-the-Developers attitude. Petersen has gone back to getting rid of sidewalks, allowing narrow skimpy roads, and he favors waivers from anything that will cause developers to whine that they're being robbed of their profits.

The battle over sidewalks has been fought before and people have said loud and clear that the additional cost of sidewalks is an insignificant part of the purchase price of a new home but it is a big buying factor. Amenities do count and that one counts big in neighborhood quality and attractiveness. Petersen admits he has met with the developers association to explain his plan. When did he plan to have public meetings to tell the rest of us what all of his rezoning and planning is doing to us?

The Petersen Method. At the August 20th council meeting, local developer Dietzmann tried to rush through the ordinance platting his new subdivision on Blue's Lake. Someone pointed out that Dietzmann had already started the work and Petersen said that was Okey Dokey - regardless of how illogical or illegal it may be. If you are an important developer it's fine to go ahead and build a subdivision before the city passes the ordinance making it legal for you to do it. If you are a lowly homeowner, however, just try building a doghouse in your backyard without first getting a city permit.

The old suspend-the-rules-and-pass-it-tonight didn't go over too well this time. Councilmen J.D. Williams, Barklage and Kiefer protested that they were sliding back into that bad habit and they didn't like it. Petersen didn't get much rubber stamped after that. How very encouraging to see some council members rebel

at having their legislative process being used as if it was a factory assembly line.

Barking Dog Tells the Tale? In July, several Rolla police and animal control officers came to the city council to deal with a one-dog problem. The dog, they said, was vicious and they wanted the council to officially declare that the dog vicious so they could do something about it. They're probably right about the dog, but we found it very queer that a bunch of cops had to come to a council meeting to get twelve totally uninformed people to take a vote that a dog they had never laid eyes on was vicious. All this just to solve a one-dog problem!

The city pays a salary for City Prosecutor Crump to prosecute their ordinance

violations such as junk cars, derelict houses and keeping dangerous dogs. If people with junk cars and rotting buildings get enough \$500 fines, they will reach a point where they will cure the eyesore or get rid of the mean dog or rusting car. Does Rolla, after all these years, not have ordinances adequate to deal with a one-dog problem without the whole council becoming a 12-judge court to decide whether a dog is mean or not, or is it something else? Maybe nobody wants to say out loud that the real problem is our one-dog city prosecutor? Why does the council pay City Prosecutor Crump a salary to prosecute city violations if he can't handle one mean dog, junk cars, rotting buildings and weedy lots?

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