

NSN EXPRESS

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A No Standing News Special Edition / Fast reading for busy people

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NSN Express – School Board still shops-till-they-drop, MAPP testing Olympics and the demise of both local political parties.

The 100-year flood that happens here every 5 years, struck again last Friday. Basements filled up, cars and propane tanks floated away, sewage backed up into the streets and the power did what it always does – it failed. We only mention what all you damp people know because a few days before the flood we read in the paper that the "Me" generation had formed another one of those elite town improvement committees. They polled themselves and concluded that the improvements Rolla needed most were Red Lobsters, nightclubs and stores with designer clothes. That was only 2.8 inches of rain folks; can you think of some civic improvement we need more than boutiques and fine dining?

No, let's not "move on" until we get some answers. The school board election is over, the faces remain the same but things have changed. Elections can shake up the status quo no matter who wins. In this election several questions were raised and now the lucky winners, **Rapier, Strassner and Bass** must answer. Some will be answered by the state audit but the one big question they ducked during the campaign is this: Is it either legal or ethical to force parents to subsidize our "free" public tax-supported schools with long lists of school supplies and fees simply because board members choose to spend our tax money on more trendy new stuff? *Budgeting is about choices and power is about who makes the choices.* The board has defaulted their budget responsibilities for years and the choices have really been made by **Ewing, Westbrook** and the '**Admin Team.**' Because they chose to spend the money dabbling in educational fads and building a large and well-paid administrative infrastructure, parents have been stuck with an ever-growing shopping list of school supplies and incessant notes from school through the year to pay for other fees and expenses. The winners, Bass, Rapier and Strassner didn't answer the question – they just pretended they didn't understand it.

The day after her reelection Bass spoke to us through her personal representative, *"If we are given a list of things that are negative, I would gladly openly discuss it one by one."* **Kay Hegler** already asked one 'negative thing' at the board meeting on March 12th. They didn't "gladly openly discuss it" with her then or since, so we ask the question again. We want to see on the agenda every cost and fee demanded of parents and we want to hear board members justify each "openly one by one." Not merely excused with facile opinions based upon their own personal ability to pay, but reasons based on equity – equal access to all educational opportunities for every student, including the majority of Rolla students whose parents don't have unlimited ability to shell out. It's bad enough that education 'adjusts' everything based on income and lowers academic expectations for low-income students – who decided that parental income determines I.Q.? But when our own board promotes a class system in our public schools - that's offensive.

The "Slate" promised better communication; let's see if they will deliver or if they will try to crawl back into the cocoon they have been hiding in for the last seven years; the sheltered little world Ewing and MSBA created for them where visions and mission statements, "ends and means" lists and feel-good awards protected them from dealing with real school issues.

Their first performance. The only failing the "Slate" did admit to was that their communications with the public suck – all else they claimed, was perfection. At the April 11th board meeting they had their first opportunity to communicate with the public but they ducked that one too. Someone wants girl's golf at a cost of \$6,000 for six students. During the discussion the board realized that the Co-curricular sports policy was a big problem. The board decided to revisit this flawed policy so **Jim Burns**, quite logically saw this as an opportunity to discuss it with the public. **President**

Bass and Pres. Elect Rapier came unglued at the idea of uncontrolled confrontation with just anyone who might ask who-knows-what kind of questions. They proclaimed that a small marketing focus group would be used instead because it was the 'only way' to handle this. Not just any focus group mind you, they are resurrecting the handpicked focus group that created the messed up policy in the first place. The "right" people you see will not ask awkward questions and will come to the "right" conclusions; a bad decision-but a really safe one.

Doc flunks policy revision 101. Board member **Frank Blum** had volunteered to reword some of the unwieldy, wordy, redundant and contradictory policies (another problem denied while campaigning). When he presented his work, President Bass, in rapid fire, rattled off 30 other corrections Blum must have missed. Without asking for a vote of agreement with her personal preferences, she ordered them all included in the next reading. (They don't use Robert's Rules of Order much; it's mostly Robert's Random Muddling Along.) It must have been a valuable learning experience for Dr. Blum but he won't get a chance to retest. When making her committee assignments, Bass pointedly didn't put him back on the policy committee.

Encumbering the grass seed. Dep. Super. Westbrook had the board "encumber" about a half-million for Maintenance for the next budget, a document the board hadn't seen even in draft form. This "encumbering" trick is how administration gets chunks of the next budget approved in a vacuum, then when the board finally sees the whole thing - in it's traditionally incomprehensible form - if they lose their heads and attempt to make any changes they won't be able to change much because they've already pre-approved most of it. One of the urgent items in the maintenance budget was \$10,000 for grass seed for the new Sports Complex, the one that wasn't going to cost a dime because the city would pay for everything. With that much seed you could replant an 18-hole golf course.

MAPP test retraction. In his debut as the new \$90,000 curriculum director, Jerry Giger made some vague admissions that our MAPP scores aren't good but he doesn't have a clue why they're bad. What? Haven't we always been told that our academic scores are great? Well, if they haven't been good before surely they will be great this time. MAPP testing was preceded last

week by tips for parents to begin the training regime for MAPP Olympics. They were advised to detox their tots before game time from sodas with aspartame because it causes hyperactivity and bad behavior. (That explains why the schools have both soda machines and Ritalin dispensaries.) Parents were to stand at the ready with kiwi fruits and other delicacies to hydrate their brains ten minutes before class. Wafting aromatherapy scents; lemon, peppermint and sage preferred, under their noses was also recommended to enhance performance. Candy and bottled water were provided during the tests. If they do test better and bail out the frantic grown-ups, they will be rewarded with high-fat pizza parties and win gifts and appliances. (Nothing wrong with our values is there?). Giger explained: *"Performance on the MAPP test is very important because it can have an impact on state appropriations."* Fancy that, we thought it had something to do with education. **Question:** If such silly tactics do make a significant difference in the MAPP test scores - does that tell us something about the MAPP test or does it tell us there's gold for grown-ups in training and teaching to the MAPP test?

More Strategic Incoherence: Instead of putting up temporarily in one or more of the school buildings while they made some reasonable arrangements to lease office space for a year or two, the school board, with their usual flaccid leadership left everything up to Super's Ewing and Westbrook who rushed ahead with the purchase of the First Christian Church on 704 N. Main Street. This wasn't a knee-jerk decision; the purchase was already on the table several weeks before the fire. With the fire as an excuse the deal was settled on March 16, before the ashes cooled. Westbrook explained on April 11th that the lawyers weren't through making changes to the contract (the check for \$369,708 had been approved with the other bills only minutes before) but he wanted the board to approve the contract so he could have the closing on April 22nd. **The board voted unanimous approval of whatever would be in the contract when the lawyers had finished making the changes they wanted.** Jim Burns then protested that he didn't want to approve any more contracts again unless they all could see a copy first! Think of the implications of a board that votes on legal documents they aren't allowed to see first.

Sam's never ending contract. After the church contract fiasco they moved right along to commit the

architect debacle. **Sam Winn** has been the school architect without benefit of a comparative bidding process since before Truman School was built. Westbrook explained he had already called up Good Ole Sam and hired him to start work remodeling the church. He also explained that while on this job Sam was giving them a great volume discount deal on other work. (There are others we haven't been told about?) Sam has been in continuous employment by the district for over 25 years, how can he tell when his volume discount begins and ends? Leonard didn't explain why there wasn't a feasibility study of the church before they bought it or at least an estimate of what it will cost to renovate it. They could have asked board member **Dana Rapier** what's wrong with the building. If anyone should know about the asbestos, mould, bad roof, bad HVAC, lead paint and plumbing it's a member of the church. Leonard didn't explain why Sam won't do the remodeling cost estimates until *after* the closing. Leonard also didn't explain why it isn't a good idea to issue new RFP's for architects at least once every quarter century or two in case someone out there might have a new and better design idea. Leonard didn't have to explain because our board members wouldn't think of asking such rude questions.

The Phelps County Commissioners, owners of the world's largest steel gazebo, could tell Leonard that cheaper isn't necessarily better and sooner is better than later.

Obituaries: The **Phelps County Republican Party** passed away on March 26, 2002 at 5:00 p.m. Visitation will be held during the August primary at your local precinct. Few mourners are expected to attend.

On the Critical List: At 5:00 p.m. March 26, 2002 the **Phelps County Democratic Party** lapsed deeper into a self-inflicted coma. After a long battle with chronic complacency they failed to stimulate interest in replacements for some of the deadwood they have in office. Like the late Phelps County Republican Party, they too are survived by almost no one under the age of 50.

Two major political parties, whose only excuse for their existence and their many legislated privileges, is to provide candidates for public office to give voters a choice, laid down and played dead this year in our local races. One made no effort to encourage better quality primary challengers to maintain their political dominance (or support their runoff candidate) and the

other just made no effort - period. The only flickering vital signs left are the annual notices that they are having a party in honor of whichever dead president they use as a mascot. Both Lincoln and Jefferson would be disgusted if they knew that rebellion against the establishment (how 'negative' was that?) and fighting for moral values has been reduced to table decorations at annual dinners.

While dining, both groups no doubt bemoan the apathy of voters without admitting that political strength starts at the grassroots and their grass no longer has local roots. Younger voters (that's anyone under 50) don't vote because they see no connection between their lives and the big money machines that buy state and national candidates. Those under 30 weren't taught in school what government is about. These days the difference between the two parties is as hard to find as a pimple on a gnat's ass. What passes for modern governance now is a baffling menu of slippery, shifting public/private partnerships, focus groups and task force reports that opportunists use for career building. These elusive quasi-governmental groups are perpetually fueled by grants doled out by whichever party is in power. Public indifference to the big picture always oozes out and infects the little pictures. Although our April school, city and hospital races are non-partisan; they show the same disease. Each year fewer file for office and fewer vote and it's NOT because everyone is so satisfied. Of the dozen nonpartisan seats this April there were only three real races, the school board, one city ward and city prosecutor. Tacky plastic car flags don't mean you're a patriot, they only mean you're a Wal-mart shopper.

The 'Positive' virtue of cutting corners. "Build it and they will come" is a line from a movie; it's not how things work in real life. Three more 'positive and progressive' community improvements are showing the inevitable effects of unrealistic "visioning" combined with poor planning. The "Fight Crime for a Dime" jail construction has been halted for suspected engineering and structural defects. High winds and rains cause the steel to vibrate like a Hyatt Hotel walkway. It's suspected that the foundation is weak, the foundation may be weak because it's sitting in a mucky swamp, the foundation was poured in a swamp because somebody didn't do soil tests before they bought the land. Could all this be because the county commissioners didn't do competitive bidding to find out if there was someone out there who actually knew how to build a jail?

Government daycare at Hy-Point has problems trying to put children on the site of an old lagoon and getting donations for a so-called public facility that in reality only Hy Point employees will use. The council is now huddling in closed sessions to either buy some more land to give away to RCDC so the MRPC can have a some non-toxic land or they're discussing their losses on the off-again Waco landfill - or both.

The WaCo Gang has backed out again because they can't get their hands on all the money. While Jay Nixon's daddy and his cronies have been toying with the Phelps County Landfill Board and the City of Rolla, the bills for "exploring the idea of..." have exceeded \$200,000 and they still have nothing to show for it except proof that giving a regional "Super-corporation" unlimited governmental powers is a very expensive, very bad idea. It's time for the city and the county to officially vote an end to this costly dumpster diving and put our money and time to better, if less glamorous, uses.

The Gump Methodology. In the early stages of these projects the relentlessly optimistic Rollaworld boosters shouted down anyone who tried to raise any practical objections. It was 'negative' they wailed, to dare question our community leaders; 'anti-progressive' to suggest these projects hadn't been well planned. So

corners were cut and figures manipulated to keep up the fiction that anything that gets the Big Hype, however ill conceived and poorly executed, will magically produce the big economic development boost. As Forrest Gump put it, "Stupid is as stupid does."

Comic relief. Portable signs irritate **Councilperson Jepson**. Among the abandoned cars, the windrows of trash, derelict buildings and weedy lots in town, only one thing pokes Councilperson Judy in the eye – portable signs. Look up, Judy! The rusty, faded Modern Cleaners sign hanging over Pine Street and its hundreds of ugly stepsisters buried in a hairnet of wires draped over Pine Street take the ugly prize. Clean them all up and tell RMU to get rid of their ugly wires. Downtown might not be any more prosperous but it would look a lot cleaner.

While Jepson may be myopic when it comes to ugly, in the beautification stakes she is still miles ahead of **Councilperson Wiggins** who thinks we should all volunteer to pick up trash at Hy Point for owners, **Dain Ward** and the **RCDC owners**. Illegally buy them land, illegally give them cash, illegally have city workers work on their business premises AND volunteer to go pick up their trash? No thanks.

Have I therefore become your enemy by telling you the truth?

Galatians 4:16

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