

# No Standing News

Since we have no standing, we stand with those left standing

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## Is the Board's Dead Web Site telling us something?

(Some advice for the winners on April 5th)

While preparing the '05 candidate questions for the school board race we went to the Rolla School District web site to get the correct spelling of candidate's names and their e-mail addresses from a list we expected to find there, maybe from the button that said "Board Candidate Information." There is no information about *school board candidates* anywhere on the *school district web site* and especially where it says, "Board Candidate Information." Okay, so we e-mailed the district central office and requested the candidate's addresses. We did this twice but received no reply either time. They do disclose the mailing addresses of current board members on the school web site but even in this age of electronic communication, you won't find their phone numbers or e-mail addresses.

**Peeve One...** Searching through the school web site roused two or nine of our pet peeves. The first is about local government web sites in general. People, if you can't keep them updated, informative and user friendly - take them down! You never know who is looking at your web site and using it to make judgments about our county, town, school and community; judgments you will never have a chance to correct. The Rolla School District web site is everything a web site shouldn't be - it's visually dull, hard to read, the information is years out of date and it's also difficult to navigate. The information it provides about the school board (too much and the wrong kind) has a decidedly pompous tone which reflects the attitude some of them take with the public. Unfortunately, much of the board's "see-how-important-we-are" information is dead wrong. For some reason there is a "Board Dictionary" containing several pages of arcane educational terms which they shouldn't use in public because citizens shouldn't need a dictionary to decode what their elected officials are saying. Some of these definitions are also wrong. "Administrative Order," it says is/are, "Regulations issued by an administrative officer to specify and amplify the provisions of the statutes administered by the agency; properly issued, such administrative rules have the full force of law." That's not true but the 'administrative officer' doing it hopes both you and the board will believe his every utterance has the "full force of law."

The FAQ page must not be FRQ (Frequently Read) because it contains the policy/state law that says no board member, employee or agent of the district can contribute or spend district funds to advocate, support

or oppose any ballot measure or candidate for public office. They've just used public money to print election propaganda about the April levy and used 4,000 children to deliver it. Why they alert us to a law they routinely violate is a mystery.

Can anyone read the board's ethics statement without laughing? It's not really the board's ethics statement; it's one they borrowed from MSBA. What does it say about our school board that they had to *crib* an ethics statement? The board should read it; then burn it. It's full of things they don't care about, many they violate and others they simply don't understand.

One of many slow-loading Adobe documents still has Donna Roberts name on it and she quit about four years ago. If you want to see what's on the next board meeting agenda - sorry, they haven't posted one since January 2004. Still, that's an improvement on all the other district data that hasn't been updated since 2001. Need to see a school board policy? Click the button and you get - not an index of policies - but an e-mail to the office. You can ask for a policy if you know which of their hundreds of policies you need. Several of the links take you directly to the "NOT FOUND" page. The district only has a few hundred students who build web sites for fun. They should let them do this one. If, as certain board members have claimed, "We're the beacon for other schools," this web site says our bulb burned out in 2001.

Would you like to read one of the 14 new MSBA policies the board is going to change or adopt? After all, your kid could get kicked out of school for violating one of them before you knew it was a rule. Well you can't because they don't use computers to communicate really useful information like that. The current batch they will pass at their next meeting are on topics such as, *Teaching About Religion, Programs for Gifted Students, Programs for Homeless Students, Inoculations of Students* and *Public Complaints*" (a How To guide to keep people from doing it). In this age of electronic communications you should be able to click a button and see the text of the policies they're about to make or unmake that may affect your child's education or impact your notions about what they should be doing. You should, but you can't. Unless you knew they were going to do this (but how could you, the last agenda they posted is a year old.) you won't know until it's too late that they're going to inoculate your children against an outbreak of orange hair or throw Darwin out of the curriculum.

If you wanted to go to their next meeting to give your opinion on a policy you feel strongly about you'd find that difficult to do because even the board doesn't know exactly when their meetings start. They say on the first page of every agenda, "It is anticipated that the Closed Session portion of the Board of Education meeting will conclude at 6:00 p.m. The Open Session portion will be held in the Board/Lecture Room (Room 134) of the Administration Building. **Open Session will begin as soon as Closed Session is complete. It is anticipated that Open Session will commence at approximately 6:00 p.m.**" (Emphasis and highlighting, theirs) The time is sort of a moving target. You can just stand around and wait until they've finished their closed door chat about district business and districts lawsuits. Would you like to address the board at their next meeting? The instructions for obtaining "an audience" with their majesties are also found on the first page of the agenda.

The first page of their meeting agenda is where you realize you are entering **The Paranoid Zone** because of **The Paranoid Warning** which tells you - in italics so their fellow paranoiacs won't miss it - that someone in the audience may have a tape recorder. "*Board of Education Meetings are sometimes tape recorded by individuals in the audience without the Board of Education's knowledge. While taping is legal, please be aware that any comments you make and/or sidebar conversations you have may be recorded for their use. The Board of Education does not have access to copies of these tapes.*" Oh horrors! Persons may be *legally* taping a public meeting? Will the madness never stop? By the way, the black thing on the big tripod and all the equipment at the back of the room is for video taping the board meeting which will be televised on **Channel 6**, but if you see any of those surreptitious tapers do run and tell the teacher.

There's an overdone slogan on the district home page. It chirps, "We are challenged, we are determined, we are successful, we are supported, we are engaged, we are equipped"...blah, blah, blah. They only got the first one right.

**...and Peeve Two.** Our other pet peeve is the communications blockade that management sets up to isolate board members. All Superintendents know boards keep best when locked in a soundproof box. The blockade protects elected board members from direct contact with the people who elect them. This is management's version of the 'Star' treatment; the first step in grooming board members to depend on them for every little thing. Most board members are suckers for the 'Star' treatment because it makes them feel s-o-o-o special. Upon election, phone numbers and e-mail addresses of board members become a secret. You may send an e-mail to a school board member but be aware it will be read by administration first. We understand why the Secret Service screens the President's mail but do school board members get that many death threats?

Listen, if you don't want to be bothered by the people who pay the millions of dollars you're spending - don't ask to be elected to *their* public office. Answering questions, quarterbacking their problems, explaining why you voted the way you did, being pestered by people you don't

like, having your dinner interrupted, getting calls on weekends - that's all part of your new job. Not talking to people who aren't part of your hand-picked circle of friends is a big mistake. Strangers will tell you things your best friend won't; things that might save you from looking foolish in public, things that might tip you off that everything isn't quite as perfect as all those executive reports say they are. Being in public service means you SERVE the public. For pity's sake, grow up and don't hide behind the administrator's skirts. Put your phone number and your e-mail address out there where all those people you made election promises to can find it. If the Superintendent has to read your mail first and tell you how to answer your constituent's questions you should find yourself a new hobby.

**The Invisible Parent.** At the beginning of the school board meeting on January 27<sup>th</sup>, **Steve French** took an opportunity parents rarely use to ask the school board why his son's grade card was withheld because of an unpaid fee in an Art class. He pointed out that it is unconstitutional to charge fees for credit courses in a public school system and he asked why they were doing it. Unaccustomed to answering questions from the public, the board squirmed but didn't answer. French gave the board a list of his questions and he may get answers but the rest of us will never hear what they are. Parents don't bring the frequent violations of board policy to the board, they let themselves be diverted into management's bureaucratic maze where, by careful design, all complaints go to die. When frustration finally reaches the breaking point they either give up or get a lawyer and sue. The complaint policy is designed to make sure problems are never discussed in public; instead, they breed lawsuits and then they can be discussed behind closed doors. Instead of playing their game, French committed a management felony in the first degree.

There were two interesting things about this incident. The first is that a parent actually asked his elected officials to answer for what they were doing - that is just not done here. The second was that not one word of this got into the RDN coverage of the meeting. Instead, the front page story of that school board meeting had a giant 5x6 inch portrait of John Petersen suitable for framing. John was there to ask for another giveaway of school tax money. In the 'news' report of all the other business of the meeting even the new student representative (who like a real board member now has his own executive swivel chair and engraved name plate) was quoted - but not French, the invisible parent.

Administration, with the board's "We don't ask; you don't tell" consent, has been slipping in illegal fees for credit courses for years. It simply isn't possible they don't know that charging fees for credit courses is illegal - even MSBA has warned them not to do it. They do it because they're insensitive to the hardship their cumulative 'fees' have on many parents who struggle to keep up with the rising cost of "free" public education. They do it simply because a Steve French has never confronted them about it before.

Was the newspaper blackout due to the fact that this particular parent is also a candidate for the school board? If that is relevant to the issue he raised, that's a judgment for readers and voters to make, not reporters or editors. Candidate

or coincidence, French's question was legitimate and parents deserve to know the answer. The question of the fees however, is now overshadowed by the issue of Big Brother deciding what 'news' is good for us to know and what isn't. This is the second time in three months they have censored someone who told the board they were doing something illegal. In the previous case, to make that parent invisible they spiked the story of the entire board meeting. The First Amendment is a dangerous tool in the hands of the public; that's why the school board goes to such lengths to keep handcuffs on them.

**Dirty school survey.** Before every school tax vote the board and administration crank up the propaganda machine that conditions their captive audience – parents and teachers - to run in panic to their polling places. It started this time, as it has before, with the annual School Survey paid for with district funds. Parents and staff are asked their opinions of things that are supposed to relate to education. However, if there is a board tax issue on the next ballot a few loaded questions are slipped in to begin their disinformation campaign. First, parents and teachers were asked where they get their news about school; from newspaper, radio, school newsletters, etc. That's to find out where to place their campaign advertising. Then came the loaded questions: **Question 18: "Are you aware that our school will lose 60.1 cents from our levy which currently equals \$3.2 million in August 2006?"** (Yes: 1666, No: 1440) Bad grammar and misplaced modifier aside, the hot button words "will lose" and "\$3.2 million" are planted to instill in the reader anything from unease to anxiety. Of course they didn't admit or explain that they have known for 18 years that the levy would sunset in 2006 and simply failed to plan for it. The answers might have been different had the question asked, "Are you aware that we have been spending \$3.2 million a year on overhead and administrative salaries in violation of the voters express authorization for use of the 18-year temporary levy?" If your alarm buttons weren't pushed in question #18, they drove the point in with the next one. **"Question 19: Are you aware of the impact this loss of levy will have on the district?"** (Yes: 1209, No: 1880) This question told them how dire the electoral threats need to be. The first campaign flyers were passed out by the school board to 4000 children to take home last week. Similar half-truths and distortions will be mailed to parent and employee lists by the so-called independent citizen's tax campaign committee. **"Question 20: Are you concerned about this issue?"** (Yes: 2611, No: 401) Notice the technique is already working. In the first question 1,440 respondents said they weren't aware of the issue. By the time they answered the last question, 1,039 people who knew nothing seconds ago are now 'concerned.' The first two questions have already instilled 'awareness' and 'concern' so they can go on to the next step and move the dial from 'concern' to irrational panic by threatening to fire 77 teachers.

Amazing what they can accomplish when they have millions to spend and absolutely no scruples about breaking campaign finance laws that forbid the board from using

taxpayer's own money to squeeze more tax money out of taxpayers.

**Were we wrong?** We may have been wrong about the meeting between the mayor, council and the RMU board last October. Apparently some council members didn't just go over there to be lectured on water pipes. **Councilmen Sibley, Wiggins and Kiefer** made a point at the February 22<sup>nd</sup> council meeting of saying they want another meeting with RMU and this time they want a discussion of more substance. It seems they wanted to talk about RMU's new meter fees, RMU's service attitude, the need for public hearings before rate increases and other things they feel need improvement in that arrogant city department. This looks dangerously like elected officials doing what they are elected to do – addressing real issues that concern their constituents, and which might improve once part of government accountability. We are impressed that they seized the initiative. If council initiative catches on who knows where this kind of thing might lead?

We were curious about the outcome but didn't really expect to hear anything had really happened. Random spurts of council initiative have been quelled before, but at the March 7, council meeting Wiggins called a point of order on Morgan to keep him from ending the meeting without hearing their report on the meeting. We would like to have heard more and also heard some council discussion about it but Mayor Morgan clearly didn't want to hear anything at all. He was in a hurry to close the meeting to talk about all their new lawsuits. Still, it's a start.

**Ken has a Big Idea.** Rolla's Director of Parks and the cemetery, **Ken Kwantes**, hasn't given a report to the council since he lost his bid to be director of the Recreation Center but Ken must have been struck by inspiration. He popped up at the February 22<sup>nd</sup> council meeting with a **Ten-year Park Expenditure Plan** for Rolla's parks costing a total of \$1,475,000. The council has all but the million dollar part but by happy coincidence that's just what Guffey says he can get for Buehler Park. The council didn't seem to recall asking for a 10-year plan and wondered why it didn't have any relationship to the new \$40,000 Park Study they paid for last year? Ken replied, "Ah, um, well, ah..." The Kwantes 10-year Park Plan included two important expenditures. The first in 2007 to **"Purchase Forest Service Property– Bridge School Road"** for **\$300,000**, the second item in 2009, for a mere **\$200,000** is to **"Develop Forest Service Property – Bridge School Road,"** both expenditures for the greater glory of the Rolla Chamber of Decorators.

At the council meeting just two weeks before, **Buz Harvey** humbly denied that the Chamber wanted the city to buy and develop the 9.5 acres for them. When Harvey was before the council, humbly denying that he was speaking for the Chamber he said, "In [his] humble opinion, it wasn't necessary" for the city to buy and develop the land for the Chamber – however desirable it may be. Was the ink dry on Ken's 10-year Park Plan when Humble Harvey said it wasn't necessary for the council to sell Buehler Park and spend another \$500,000 to make them happy?

**Buehler Park awarded to land speculators.** In closed session at the same council meeting the council in an 8-3 vote (**Sibley, J.D. Williams** and **Jepson**, against) reversed their previous position on letting a developer get an option on Buehler Park to use it for commercial speculation. Bidders were: **Jack Dietzmann, Kevin Guffey** (American Realty) and **Brad Thessing** (Thessing Commercial Properties). Guffey was selected as the "Preferred Developer" and he offered a "restaurant district" proposal and a "sort of" purchase price of \$1,000,000. That's not really an offer to buy the property so the council hasn't voted to sell it yet. Staff will now negotiate a "contingency contract" for them to vote on.

An "option to speculate" was exactly what Morgan and Butz wanted from the beginning – any deal at all as long as they got the park closer to the chopping block. This "option to engage in land speculation" with a public park was what the council, led by Harry Keifer, voted that they absolutely would not tolerate. "Either put \$900,000 on the table or don't waste our time" Harry and the majority of the council said. All that is necessary to melt any firm resolve by the city council is for Butz and Morgan to get them behind closed doors where the public can't hear so Butz can do some of that tongue dancing he does so well.

It might not matter because on March 3, 2005, a lawsuit was filed by the **Great Rivers Environmental Law Center** on behalf of **Citizens for the Preservation of Buehler Park**. Take a breather Guffey; this is going to take awhile.

**Warren Dean also sues city.** Is it a bird? Is it a plane? No, it's a subpoena blizzard! Two lawsuits in eight days, that's some kind of a record. Warren Dean filed two suits; one on behalf of himself and his wife and one for their corporation. This is probably only the first round in Dean's TIF battle but Warren and all the rest of us who own property and thought we had the right to keep it may have help from the U.S. Supreme Court. The Supreme Court heard oral argument two weeks ago in *Kelo v. New London*, a Connecticut property rights case challenging the widespread practice of local government using eminent domain to take private land and give it to a developer for his private profit with a tax kick-back for the municipal government. If the Supreme Court rules against the practice that allows cities to gin up a flimsy excuse like "blight" to seize private property and hand it to private developers then TIF is dead. The Kelo decision will be handed down sometime in June. This will be a year of interesting lawsuits.

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