

# No Standing News

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

Volume I

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## Tea Parties at the "Palace"

### Will the real Gloria Hopkins-Dean please stand up?

While preparing a report on school board budget issues raised in June by Board Members Ralph Wilkerson, Frank Blum and Jim Burns, the Rolla Daily News printed an attack letter from **Gloria Hopkins-Dean, 18447 CR 8030**. There is no such address on CR 8030, and there is no Gloria Hopkins-Dean listed in all the name and address locators we checked. If there really is a Gloria Hopkins-Dean (who can't remember her own address), will she please contact us?

The RDN makes a big deal about verifying the real identity of letters to the editor, but it appears that their system doesn't work so well. Is a pattern developing here? In 1997, they printed a letter attacking John Park, who was publicly opposing the upcoming April '97 school board levy ballot issue. That letter was from "**Sandra Benton**" who claimed to live at **11173 County Road 3110** (that should be on Country Club Drive). That address was a vacant lot and no record of a Sandra Benton could be found. Is someone writing fake letters to the RDN? In the words of an RDN editorial, if they have something to say, "all we ask is that they have the courage to do so openly." This raises an ugly question.

How many levy support letters printed by the RDN may have been faked? Was the "Spin Room" designed to do more than just slant election facts?

Now that "Gloria Hopkins-Dean" has had her (or his or their) say, this is our report on the school budget controversy. You can check these facts in the school board minutes if you want to pay 20-cents a page and run their new "Open Records" policy gauntlet.

### Tea Parties at the "Palace"

Or: Why the Rolla School Board has been having too much FUN.

**June 21, 2001- 7 days to budget deadline.** The Rolla School Board gave retroactive blanket approval to a list of budget changes that had taken place without board approval sometime (the change items weren't dated) over the previous budget year. Did you catch that - "retroactive approval"? That means after the board approved the budget last June, someone changed the school budget; money was moved around and other spending decisions were made that the board knew nothing about until the end of the fiscal year! The board then post-dated their approval of...whatever? The law says each of those changes should have been approved or disallowed by a board resolution BEFORE any checks were written.\* The board was saying, in

effect, that whatever someone had done with money over the last year without their knowledge or consent was "okey-dokey."

**The "Bosses."** At that same meeting, Superintendents Ewing and Westbrook reported that the budget for next year - due to be approved seven days later on June 30th - was still not ready. The two new board members, **Jim Burns** and **Frank Blum** protested. Surely, they said, they weren't expected to vote on a \$30 million budget if they hadn't seen it first? Burns pointed out that as a military official he had been the boss and responsible for much larger budgets, which involved monthly meetings and constant monitoring. Dana Rapier patiently explained to the newbies that, "We hired these guys (pointing to Ewing and Westbrook) to be 'The Boss.'"

Burns protested, "But WE are THEIR boss and we should have a handle on the budget."

Frank Blum, who also appeared to be confounded to learn that the two Superintendents were "the bosses," said, "Let me understand this. WE don't oversee the budget?"

Stratman, realizing that the picture Rapier had painted wasn't exactly flattering to the most senior board members, tried to clean up her explanation. "NO-O-O-O!" he

shouted. "We approve the budget, they (the bosses) develop it." Frank Blum tried again. He asked them, since they had been to state meetings, how other boards handled the budget process? President Stratman smugly replied, "They wish they were like us." Both Blum and Burns seemed speechless at the reply, as are we all.

In the end, **Board President Randy Stratman** and veteran board members **Annie Bass, Dana Rapier** and **Mindy Kippenberger** reluctantly agreed to a special meeting at 3:30 on June 26th for at least a cursory budget review. (It would be very superficial because they would vote on the whole thing about 40 hours later.) Three of the board members said they couldn't be there until after work, if they came at all. They didn't come at all. We know why they have meetings at times when the working public can't attend, but we wonder why they schedule meetings when even they can't attend? Only Burns, Blum and Wilkerson seemed enthusiastic about finding out what they were going to be voting on the following Thursday. Annie Bass explained that only the new guys really needed to be there - implying that she and the others had total command of every detail of this large and complicated document they had not yet seen?

**June 26, 2001 - two days to the deadline.** Wilkerson, Burns and Blum were the only board members who came to the budget meeting. The two-hour discussion was no substitute for the 5 months of study, detailed examination and priority setting that should have begun in February - but they did try. Assistant Superintendent Westbrook argued against any changes in "the way the present board wants it done." He

defended the telephone book type format, saying that the budget has been presented that way for about 14 years. The three board members asked questions as well as they could, trying to fish out a few answers from hundreds of pages of raw database. It was obvious that it was too late to do anything or learn much of anything before the Thursday morning meeting to approve the budget.

**June 28, 2001- D Day.** At the 7:30 a.m. meeting to rubber stamp the budget, the full board was present and the discussion continued. Wilkerson again explained the detailed requirements of the state school budgeting law and the model budget worksheets. That was when Bass asked him if he wanted to "micromanage" the school system. Westbrook seized on this and asked, in tones of shocked disbelief, if Wilkerson wanted to take spending control out of the hands of administrators and building principals? (What an outrageous idea, that employees should not make all spending decisions.) After more protests from Bass and Westbrook, Board President Stratman postponed further discussion on the format and method of presenting next year's budget to the next meeting. The vote on the current budget was taken and Wilkerson voted no. The others voted yes, and so this unexamined legal document, ordering the expenditure of \$33 million public dollars, was adopted. Wilkerson's vote must have been a shock to them, but why? He simply voted his conscience and his minority vote didn't affect the outcome at all. Why is it such a bad thing for any elected official to vote his ethics instead of voting with the crowd? All three board members, Blum, Wilkerson

and Burns, are now under heavy attack by editorials and letters (from mystery citizens) only because they want to discuss better management tools for budgeting. Their offense? They want to be able to say, with honesty, that they really understand and approve of how the money is being spent. Why does a debate between school board members about the method of exercising their fiduciary responsibility cause such panic and outrage? Does the Prozac-inspired philosophy that the school board speaks with "One Voice" also mean "No Debate Allowed" and "Only Unanimous Votes Permitted"?

**Their Fiscal Policy.** In June 1998, the board adopted a Fiscal Management policy. It says that one of their goals is to: **"Use the best available techniques for budget development and fiscal management."** Ironically, the model budget worksheets Wilkerson wants the board to use are the "best available techniques" and they also happen to be the ones that the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) recommends for all school boards. DESE calls the budget **"one of the most important legal documents in a school district"** and provides model forms designed to give the board maximum information in easy-to-understand format so they will be able to monitor whether departments are meeting their budget targets. If not, they can find out why not. This may be at the root of the panic - the board would have the ability to find out which Principals and departments can't stick to their budget targets. Without the historical comparisons and other information provided by the DESE work sheets, how have they been fulfilling another

promise from the same policy to, **"Evaluate the fiscal management procedures and allocation of resources periodically"**? If they didn't even know that budget adjustments were being made, (and they didn't) how and when have they been doing this evaluation? The county uses the DESE style budgeting format, so does the city, the state, school systems and every well-run private business. In fact, RSMo 67.040 on budget requirements applies to all political subdivisions. Why are Ewing and Westbrook fighting so hard against something even DESE urges all school districts to use? The fact that three board members have to "persuade" Ewing and Westbrook, their employees, tells the whole story.

**Yes, it is a control issue.** The board's default of their duties to the Superintendent is at the heart of the problem. Who really controls our school system, the school board or the people they hire? This board spends far too much of their meeting time passing VOLTS policies, most of which start out the same way - "we delegate all this stuff to the Superintendent." At board meetings they give post-dated approval to payments they had not been told about and they chit chat about "Ends Results." At their illegal St. Louis meeting they decided to schedule even more board meeting time in the future for "brainstorming and visionary issues." What next, channeling?

Check approval is a farce; the budget is approved with only token review and budget change orders are approved retroactively. The district's money hasn't been handled with even minimally legal methods. The one-week budget non-review and

approval, proves that the board has been taking it very easy by "delegating" everything to Ewing but not bothering him with any accountability. The district appears to have been running on autopilot for several years. Fortunately, teachers continued to teach, cooks kept fixing lunches, bus drivers bussed and maintenance staff kept the buildings running even though there was no one really paying attention in the Palace. It is no mystery now why they annually ate into their reserves and had to have more money. Do they need another legal opinion to tell them that they can't discard ALL their constitutional and statutory duties just because they involve time and hard work? Or do they just need an opinion from district voters next April that we want three new board members who are willing to do some serious oversight work?

The board has become rigid and resistant to change. Their meetings are hedged with stuffy rules, administrative detours and policy barriers to keep parents, teachers and citizens from bothering them with any serious problems. When a public board has legal public hearings but claims the public is only allowed to "hear" but not comment, it says they are afraid of public questions and public scrutiny. It's preposterous for people we elect in Littleton, U.S.A. to require their community neighbors to request a formal "audience" that must be pre-screened by the Superintendent and then ban them from speech except at what they call their "Regular" meetings. It's time to end the pretentious nonsense, the "tea party" board meetings and royal audiences and get down to the difficult, but very necessary work of seeing that the district funds are carefully spent. It's time that policy

clichés such as, "Assure communication is two-way, interactive and real-time" and, "Use the best available techniques for budget development and fiscal management" become more than just a public relations smoke screen to disguise an inflexible, stagnant board of education.

**Post Script sticker shock.** At the budget meeting on June 26th, Ewing complained that they still don't have enough money to operate the school system! He said the board deliberately choose to solve only one of many of their financial problems - salaries. He also announced a looming national shortage of Principals (Oh, the humanity of it!) and most of the janitors just quit, so add a National Janitor Shortage to the list of crisis that we may get dunned for next. Brace yourself folks, it seems that WE STILL HAVEN'T GIVEN THEM ENOUGH MONEY!

We suggest they use DESE's budget system and learn the difference between managing money and just spending it.

**DESE's recommended budget worksheets:** Open BUD 201 to see the calendar and information that must be in the budget. Open BUD 202a -202d to see the budget worksheets under discussion.

<[http://www.dese.state.mo.us/divadm/finance/acct\\_manual/actmanu.html](http://www.dese.state.mo.us/divadm/finance/acct_manual/actmanu.html)>

**\* Budget Adjustments, RSMo 67.040:** "After any political subdivision has approved the budget for any year and has approved or adopted the orders, motions, resolutions, or ordinances required to authorize the expenditures proposed in the budget, the political subdivision shall not increase the total amount authorized for expenditure from any fund, unless the

governing body adopts a resolution setting forth the facts and reasons making the increase necessary and approves or adopts an order, motion, resolution or ordinance to authorize the expenditures."

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