

Who's Running the Show?

Written by Kathleen McCarthy
Thursday, 10 November 2011 11:00

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To my amazement, nearly every time I mention the new SECC911, I find residents have no idea that we have consolidated multiple jurisdictions' emergency dispatching and law-enforcement record-keeping into a single new building and operation. What a shame. Especially because the Scott Emergency Communications Center (SECC) is now the county's second-largest budget item, and is funded using a newly established "no cap" taxing authority. This means taxpayers can be endlessly tapped for any and all of the SECC's funding needs without consent from our elected county and city representatives.

Thanks to emergency-management legislation called "28E" passed by the Iowa legislature and signed into law by former Governor Chet Culver, our local governments ceded authority for a critical component of public-safety services to an independent, unelected board that is answerable to no one, least of all the people who pay for it. The SECC is a classic example of government run amok.

Eldridge resident Diane Holst, a civic hero by any standard, has followed the SECC from its inception. She is so far ahead of the game in terms of knowledge, and connecting the dots, that she shames the supervisors, and even staff, with her inquiries, often evidenced by their inability to competently respond.

Scott County is lucky to have Ms. Holst. Because if you think your elected representatives are managing the business of the county, think again. The vast majority of the elected leaders are clueless about the details of how the taxpayers' money is being spent. This is evidenced by merely attending any board meeting. County staff is more than happy to perpetuate this arrangement, because it leaves them free to spend tax dollars with impunity. It certainly

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explains why the staff nearly always gets a pass on incomplete, vague explanations when Ms. Holst presents common-sense, relevant questions.

The institutional laziness, incompetence, and never-saw-a-new-taxing-authority-I-didn't-love/let-me-rubber-stamp-that-budget mentality of our elected supervisors is embarrassing at best, infuriating at worst. In the October 13 SECC Board meeting, County Board and SECC Board Chair Tom Sunderbruch could not contain his rudeness toward Ms. Holst when she voiced her concerns over safety issues. She suggested that an apology to our law enforcement was in order from the SECC Board for their previous dismissive attitudes with regard to the rank-and-file's concerns about the new SECC system – concerns that are absolutely founded, as this issue's cover story illustrates. "If you read the open-meetings law of Iowa," Sunderbruch stated, "we don't have to allow you to speak. So unless you have something new to say, we've heard enough."

Technically, Sunderbruch is correct. And therein lies part of the problem. The only time the public is mandated an opportunity to address these supposed stewards of our tax dollars is during a public hearing for such items as bonding for debt to pay for no-bid contracts for radios costing taxpayers millions. Sunderbruch's reaction to Holst's well-documented concerns exposes his inferior understanding of the issues that have plagued the SECC – an unacceptable demeanor from such a leader, considering the magnitude of SECC.

Bettendorf Alderwoman and mayoral candidate Patricia Melinee expressed her concerns in 2007 over the loss of city jurisdiction over dispatching if the county controls the funds. Her concerns were dismissed by most as "overwrought," when she should be commended for proactive problem-solving. And then-Davenport Alderman Keith Meyer, in an attempt to engage the split Bettendorf council (which voted 4-3 to join SECC) in a dialogue prior to a vote, was called "out of order" by then-County Board Chair Jim Hancock, and the vote was rushed through.

Does one size fit all? Is consolidation of government services among multiple jurisdictions efficient? In theory, perhaps. But the SECC is a newly created government entity, different from any other in Scott County and dangerously unaccountable to the taxpayers, therefore highly susceptible to ballooning out of control relative to expenses and/or scope of services.

Consider that, before it opened its doors, the project was sold to the taxpayers as a cost savings of nearly \$5 million over 20 years, with a \$2-million, 6,000-square-foot building. That's

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how it was advertised. But that's not what taxpayers got. The project exploded into a \$7.3-million, 27,500-square-foot building, with equipment, radios, and software ratcheting up the price tag to \$28 million, just for starters.

The study used to justify the project to the public is now being heralded by the administrators as "flawed," and merely "a guideline." Never mind those terms were referred to in the intergovernmental agreement as governing the project, via a commissioned study that specified the SECC. This is a typical bureaucratic ploy, and only works when the public isn't paying attention and sworn elected officers shirk their duties.

Scott County residents have no one to blame but themselves. We have behaved like absentee landlords and/or managers when all of this went down. And clearly employees do not respect what management does not inspect.

If you want to engage and begin inspecting what your SECC government is doing, start by going to [YouTube.com/ScottIFATV](https://www.youtube.com/ScottIFATV) and watch the SECC videos posted there. And you can contact the SECC board members by going to [SECC911.org/secc/secc_board.php](http://secc911.org/secc/secc_board.php)

. Lastly, the SECC Board meets at 5:30 p.m. the third Thursday of every month on the first floor of the county building. The next meeting is November 17.

It can be argued that the biggest contributing factor to America's decline is the virtual collapse of public oversight of our own governments, which has led to government employees at every level – whether local, state, or federal – into behaving like they are the bosses of us and not the other way around.

Unaccountability on the part of our public servants is the root problem plaguing our nation, and civic disengagement is 110-percent responsible. We are fast becoming impotent as a citizenry, allowing rule-making to supersede common law, and doing nothing while our local, state, and federal public servants usurp our liberties under dozens of false pretenses, but most especially under the guise of safety and/or security.

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Meanwhile, already entrenched bureaucracies grow ever larger, taking more and more control unto themselves over individuals' use and enjoyment of private property, combining services and creating multiple or intergovernmental jurisdictions of administrative structure that use rule-making to insulate and protect their so-called public-sector fiefdoms – fiefdoms we the people pay for but have no say in.

If not for your own future, then do your children/grandchildren a favor and attend your local county and city meetings on a more regular basis. City-council meetings can be viewed at home on cable TV. Listen, learn, and engage. No resident gets a pass on civic participation these days. There is no excuse for doing nothing, anymore.