

## Des Moines Register Story a Parrot Job

Written by Kathleen McCarthy  
Tuesday, 30 January 2001 18:00

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The January 27, 2001, Des Moines Register article on both Davenport's and Cedar Rapids' decision to censor "Public with Business" is a great example of how the media can misguide the public. The reporter gave no context for any of the pertinent aspects of the story. The fact that both cities made a decision to censor their citizens in the very same week is worth investigating, in and of itself. Criticism of citizens for speaking out and offering their opinions, suggestions, and thoughts as they relate to city business as "grandstanding" is indicative of the council's opinion of public input and should be considered next November at the polls, but should not go unchallenged as justification for removing such input from television broadcast. How many incidences of "detracting from the goal of getting community feedback" actually occurred? What is the definition of "community feedback"—information that is benign and non-controversial? How do the comments made by citizens such as Niky Bowles violate any rules of conduct or fall outside the scope of city business? These are the questions that should have been addressed by the reporter. If the Register goes to the trouble of examining our cities for a story about public censorship, it shouldn't be lazy. Investigate the rationale, don't just parrot it.

The reporter for the *Register* neglected to explain that the reason citizen Bowles was dressed in work clothes (overalls and a straw hat complete with pitchfork) was to emphasize her protest over the city's unwillingness to change her zoning from agricultural to commercial. And if the reporter had bothered to review the tape, it would have revealed many of the councilmen grinning in amusement over her action, including Mayor Yerington, who now holds the incident up as one of his primary excuses for implementing the censorship policy. (This is the very claim the public has made since the censorship was invoked, that its purpose was to silence a single individual that the council objected to at the expense of the rest of the community's residents.)

Thankfully, the Mayor appears to be rethinking his position on the council's censorship policy. I believe he is learning the sad truth that certain devious city and business leaders have been orchestrating the politics surrounding this highly controversial subject to pierce his once invincible armor of popularity with the people of Davenport. There are already rumors of Alderman Sherwood considering running for mayor, and Alderman Caldwell has announced that he is running for alderman-at-large. These are politically motivated maneuvers that could

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potentially undermine Yerington's position. I still maintain that there has been no greater advocate for the people of Davenport and for open government than Phil Yerington. He has been called "the people's mayor" for good reason. But the mayor, councilmen, and city staff have been united under the umbrella of disdain for Niky Bowles and her continuous efforts to expose the city's dirty laundry. Most leaders would have gotten hip by now. She isn't going away, and she is smart enough to find the hidden heaps.

Furthermore, no one is under any illusions about her self-serving purpose—to get her zoning, sell her property, and move to a sunnier climate. So the savvy thing to do, as long as it is in keeping with citywide goals and parameters, would be to help the lady along and wish her bon voyage. But this council is too angry and views such cooperation as somehow giving in. Their egos are clearly in the way of what is best for the community. There are so many restrictions on the zoning Bowles is requesting that there is no logical reason for denying it to her.

Unfortunately, the problem has reached epidemic proportions when it causes the censorship of an entire city. The community needs to insist on getting this situation resolved and behind us. Resolution requires leadership skills, which means action (versus reaction) without emotion, constructive business rationale, and the ability to overcome egos against the maelstrom of contempt evident in Bowles countenance. Bowles also needs to check her own anger at the door and proceed under the same attitude of amicably resolving the situation. She has taken the first step by re-applying for commercial zoning through the Planning & Zoning Commission, which comes up in early February. Let's demand that our councilmen and city staff behave like businessmen rather than schoolyard children.

### **City Department Heads Deserve Performance Evaluations**

On a more rare, but positive note, my congratulations to the *QC Times*, Tom Saul in particular, for the important and comprehensive report on the lack of reviews over the past decade for most of our Davenport city department heads. This could very well be one of the most important stories of the year, not to mention at the root of some of the more serious dysfunctions within city hall.

Not only is the lack of reviews important in terms of accountability and for achieving performance standards and goals, but also for rewarding those who outperform or exceed expectations. It works both ways. Certainly Ms. Runge's insistence on annual reviews speaks well for her own confidence in her ability to do her job (further evidenced by her departure to a higher-paying position in Des Moines, an occasion to congratulate her on, but also to lament our own substantial loss), as well as provides inspiration as to why reviews are so important. Otherwise, one gets the sense that the fox is watching the hen house. Imagine your own place of employment or business. By not providing a means of accountability, how are performance standards even established, let alone met? How can innovation occur? How can new technologies be appropriately implemented? How can departmental needs be properly assessed in terms of manpower, equipment, and funding? How are goals of the department set and how are they communicated throughout? How does one department head interact and perform in terms of the team? How can crossovers in terms of duties, tasks, and efficiencies by doing things differently be identified? How can the current, established protocol be improved

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upon? The list is endless for synchronizing operations, and for taxpayers to achieve the most bang for their buck.

Today's feature story about the storm-water-management permit application is a good example of lack of communication and the resulting waste that can occur. Taxpayers paid approximately \$300,000 to submit this application nearly a decade ago, and for what? It isn't even being considered because the Iowa State Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has determined that Davenport used the wrong census information. Why was this not communicated to us? Why did the city not follow up on the application sooner? Why did we use the wrong census? Can an argument be made for our current application to be considered instead of having to resubmit and repeat the whole process? It seems the DNR disagrees with our position as a Phase I applicant. How could this be misinterpreted in the first place? Why wasn't our city notified of the discrepancy by the DNR? In fact, Davenport was told in 1997 that the application would be reviewed "soon, " with no mention of a problem with census information. Who should be accountable for this serious problem, because now Davenport is frighteningly behind the curve with respect to the federal mandate for a storm water management system to be implemented by 2008? The permit application has languished at the state and now it appears we will have to resubmit an entirely new application—at what cost this time?

This is just one situation that should emphasize the necessity for oversight of department heads within the structure and hierarchy of our local government. The number-one priority of hired consultant Sy Murray should be to help the council identify performance criteria and to establish a non-negotiable, annual evaluation process so that we can attract highly qualified professionals, can-do people (which we may already have, but we have no way of determining such) who will help Davenport become a top-tier city in Iowa. This is critical if we want to reach such a lofty, but eminently achievable goal.