

R-3 foe's ethics under scrutiny

A committee that mounted a last-minute direct-mail campaign opposing the Platte County R-3 School District's April 8 bond issue may have committed Missouri Ethics Commission infractions. Also, *The Citizen* has learned that the direct-mail campaign — which consisted of 1,800 postcards urging R-3 patrons to vote against the school district's \$7.95 million bond issue — was funded by a contribution from Andy Stanton. Stanton is a Platte City business owner and an elected official on the Platte City Board of Aldermen.

According to the Platte County Board of Elections, Platte Countians for Tax Relief neglected to meet state-mandated deadlines when filing paperwork regarding the status of its committee and its contributions and expenditures. Board of Elections Commissioners Mary Beth Erickson and Wendy Flanigan filed a complaint with the Missouri Ethics Commission dated April 9 that outlined their concerns.

"There were numerous errors committed (by Platte Countians for Tax Relief)," Flanigan said Tuesday afternoon. "State statute says a continuing committee can't be formed past the 60-days-prior-to-the election deadline. It also says a continuing committee can't be changed to a campaign committee past a deadline 30 days prior to the election."

Flanigan said changing a committee to campaign status is required if a committee plans to participate in an upcoming election.

Platte Countians for Tax Relief filed a statement of continuing committee organization on March 7, past the 60-days-prior-to deadline of Feb. 7. It filed a statement of committee organization changing its status from continuing to campaign on April 7, the day before the election and well past the 30-days-prior-to deadline of March 7. R-3 patrons received the committee's postcards in the mail on April 7.

Flanigan said if the committee had properly filed its status report, the Board would have informed them that it had to file a financial report eight days prior to the election.

"We were not aware of their intention to participate in the April 8 election, so, obviously, they missed the eight-days-before report deadline as well," she said.

According to the Board of Elections complaint sent to the Missouri Ethics Commission, Flanigan contacted Platte Countians for Tax Relief treasurer Fred Geier April 8 and "advised him that several errors had been made by the committee by not disclosing their intent to participate in the April 8, 2008 Election."

On April 11, Geier filed a committee statement of limited activity report at the Board of Elections office in Platte City. The report included a document stating the committee had received a \$500 donation from Stanton on April 7.

On April 14, the Board of Elections received and filed a mailed report detailing Platte Countians for Tax Relief's contributions and expenditures. The report, which Flanigan said should have been filed by no later than March 31 for the April 8 election, outlined committee activity from April 1-30. It stated that money on-hand at the start of the period was \$0 and funds on-hand at the close of the was also \$0. It also detailed two contributions — \$500 contribution from Stanton and a \$68 in-kind donation from Inside Information, Inc., of Smithville. The lone expenditure was \$500 to Inside Information Inc., for the printing and mailing of the 1,800 postcards. The total cost of the printing and mailing was \$568; Inside Information's in-kind donation covered the remainder of the bill. Inside Information's Web site lists Julie Elliott as president of the company and John Elliott as vice president.

Geier was contacted at his home in Parkville last week. At that time he said Platte Countians for Tax Relief opposed the school district's bond issue and said the district was not properly managing its revenues. He could not be reached for comment on the committee's alleged ethics violations.

Stanton, contacted by phone at his business in Platte City on Tuesday, said he stood behind his decision to donate money to Platte Countians for Tax Relief.

“The last two elections, there’s been bond issues,” he said. “Who in their right mind would not agree that we taxpayers are taking a beating from R-3?”

Stanton also said he was “fed up with property taxes” and the school district was “wasteful.”

“They spent millions of dollars for what I feel is a waste of money for a bus barn,” he said in reference to the school district’s recent purchase of the Stiles Building, adjacent to the Platte City Middle School, for \$1.9 million. The district plans to spend an estimated \$2.4 million to renovate the building for administrative, educational and bus fleet maintenance needs.

When contacted by *The Citizen* on Tuesday, a spokesperson for the Missouri Ethics Commission said it could neither confirm nor deny that it had received the Board of Elections complaint or that it was investigating it.

The school district’s bond issue, which will fund new classrooms, a new vocal music room at the high school, renovations to current facilities and parking/playground projects, passed by a 68-32 percent margin at the polls last week.

R-3 Superintendent Dr. Mark Harpst declined to comment on the opposition mailer and said, “We are very appreciative of the continued support we receive from the community.”

Parkville appoints interim city administrator

Like pioneers with a new wagon master, the Parkville Board of Aldermen did not wait long after the April 8 election to begin circling the wagons to protect the citizens and their interests.

While five aldermen were re-elected in unopposed races, Mayor Gerry Richardson presided over his first meeting as mayor. One of his first actions was to show that he planned to fulfill his campaign promises to be fiscally conservative by pulling out the nameplate from his time as interim mayor in 2004. Then it was on to more serious matters.

The Board held a work session prior to the regular meeting to discuss the search for a city administrator to replace Joe Turner, who is leaving after this week for a similar position in Fort Scott, Kan. Towards the beginning of the regular meeting, the Board voted to appoint community development director Sean Ackerson to fill the position on an interim basis. Ackerson will remain in his previous position as well, which he has held for the past four years.

“It will definitely be more work for me in the short term capacity and I’ll have to keep an eye on my time management,” said Ackerson, who said the City may consider hiring a retired city administrator to help out on a temporary basis or consider similar arrangements. He also said he plans to apply for the position in the hopes of becoming the permanent city administrator.

During the work session, the Board also discussed the establishment of a committee to select a search firm to look for a permanent city administrator. Serving on the committee will be Richardson and Aldermen Jim Brooks, Dave McCoy and Deborah Butcher. The process to hire a new city administrator is expected to take several months.

During the regular meeting, the Board also determined to pay a retainer fee for the services of Jeremiah Finnegan, the attorney who represented the City last year in its battle against a rate increase from the Missouri American Water Company. In a class action with other area entities, Finnegan was successful in lowering the amount of the proposed rate increase.

Richardson said he thought paying the \$500 retainer fee was a good decision as the water company has once again proposed a large increase, which the aldermen believed would be in excess of 20 percent.

“We were hoping to not have to revisit this issue again for awhile longer,” Richardson said. “\$500 to keep our options open seems like an easy decision for me.”

Richardson also said he would contact the City of Riverside to see if they would participate this time, although he said it was his understanding that they had already decided not to.

“Riverside did not join us last year for reasons that were unique to them,” he said. “I will contact them because I would like to understand their reasoning.”

Richardson also suggested that a committee be formed to look into a possible smoking ban, similar to those enacted in various municipalities throughout the Kansas City metro area. He asked Alderman Gia McFarlane to look into the formation of such a committee and put some recommendations together on how to move forward. McFarlane accepted the request.

Weston will place bond issue on August ballot

With two new aldermen sworn in prior to the night’s proceedings, the Weston Board of Aldermen wasted no time in getting back to business.

Cliff Harvey took over for Jo Yazel in Ward 1, while Amiah McCaulley claimed the spot vacated by John Collier. The Board then handled a full slate of agenda items, including the determination to move forward with an ordinance to place a bond issue for water improvements on the August ballot.

“We know this is something we have to do and we have decided that at past meetings,” Weston Mayor Cindy Seward said. “It’s time to do this now.”

The bond issue would be to fund approximately \$3 million in improvements to the City’s water system, including a new water tower. The Board approved a motion to place the ordinance on the agenda for next month’s meeting.

The Board also approved a motion to solicit bids for engineering for two projects the City will be undertaking with the help of grants from the Missouri Department of Transportation. The first project is for sidewalk improvements from the West Platte superintendent’s office on Washington Street to Highway 45 and includes improvements to the intersection, while the second project is for sidewalk improvements along Walnut Street. The two grants will total near \$350,000.

In conjunction with those projects, the Board discussed the need to coordinate with the West Platte School District, especially since work on nearby Benner Park funded by a County grant may begin in the next few months. One possibility that was considered was a road that could run from Washington Street across from the car wash to the baseball fields, allowing some traffic to pass without going through the Hwy. 45 intersection.

The Board also approved a bid from Vance Brothers of Kansas City to chip and seal several roads in Weston. The bid was for 30,950 square feet of streets and will cost \$42,401.50 at a cost of \$1.37 per square yard. Public Works Superintendent Mike Large said it would probably be about a month to a month and one half before work could begin, to allow time for necessary prep work and for the ground to dry out properly.

In other business, the Board:

- Discussed having the Weston Planning and Zoning Commission spearhead efforts to develop a capital improvements plan, with the involvement of other City departments.

“I think it is a great way to set money aside for capital improvements instead of pulling it out of our usual budget,” said Alderman Greg Hoffman, who also said that while a capital improvements tax may be needed in the future, at this point the purpose would be just to develop a plan.

“I think we would be remiss in our duties if we don’t pursue a capital improvements plan,” Harvey said. Hoffman said the types of projects that such a plan could include would be things such as public buildings, parks and recreation, street and bridge improvements, stormwater management and more.

- Approved a request from Nolan Taylor to host the second annual Bullfest — a bullriding event — at the same location downtown as last year. This year’s event will be held Sept. 13.
- Heard a report from Weston Chamber of Commerce President Paul Norman, who gave his last report as president. Mary Jo Heidrick will replace Norman, while Corey Weinfurt will be the vice president and Beth McPherson will be the secretary. The changes will be made at the Chamber’s annual dinner April 17. Norman also reported the farmers’ market will begin April 26 at 8 a.m. instead of 7 a.m.
- Heard a complaint from resident Meredith Miller, who said she was concerned about traffic speeding along Walnut Street. She said she was worried about the safety of children in the area, and asked for increased police visibility and signage in the area, including perhaps the use of a digital sign. Weston Police Chief Terry Blanton will look into the issue to see what can be done.
- Approved the spending of approximately \$480 to help pay for hangers to hold banners on light poles. Marilyn Lindahl said some banners would be used to promote the Aug. 1-2 10-mile Trail antique and garden show, and that it is hoped that other banners could be used to sponsor other events. Lindahl said several business owners had already pledged funds to help pay for the banners and that fundraising for the project would continue.
- Accepted the following mayoral appointments: Mark Huffman was re-appointed to the Weston Planning and Zoning Commission for a four-year term; Ray Kirk was re-appointed to a five-year term on the Board of Adjustment; Julie Nelson was re-appointed to a three-year term on the parks board; and Earnest Williams and Pam Goodliff were re-appointed to four-year terms with the Weston Housing Authority. In new appointments, Lona Bozzay was appointed to a 3-year partially expired term that will expire in 2009 on the Weston Architectural Advisory Board, while Merrilee Bozzoli was appointed to a three-year term on the same board that will expire in 2011.
- Determined to burn a large amount of brush that the City has collected in recent months, and to allow a couple more weeks for citizens to drop off brush before the whole is burned.