

Opinion



Aggrandizement or Aggravation?

"Self aggrandizement!" With this statement as his theme, Mayor Ron Johnson, in a strongly worded attack, leveled his accusation against both Commissioners Bob Dawson and Jeremy Whatmough.

The mayor was reacting to a pair of e-mails from the two commissioners to the Town Manager requesting information about the reason and the cost of attendance at two hurricane seminars by department heads.

It was the mayor's contention that by requesting information via the public venue rather than by a private conference, the two men were attempting to make themselves look like hawks on spending and to also embarrass the manager.

If this was their intention, they were foiled by the Town Manager who proceeded to put on a demonstration by each of the conference attendees. They outlined their responsibilities in the event of a hurricane and how their attendance at the seminars advanced their knowledge and ability to do their jobs.

There is a double irony in this. The Commission meetings that are already going on too long were made two hours longer because of this presentation. It also gave the Town Manager an opportunity to display the qualities of the organization that he has put together since his ascension to the top spot.

Whether the actions of these two commissioners were the result of an attempt at self-aggrandizement or just another demonstration of the tone deafness that these two have shown in the past, is really not the point. What is the point is that our local paper is always poised to print any story that will demonstrate the publisher's posi-



GreenReport

By Al Green

tion, that government in any form is not an efficient way to manage our affairs. They have to know that stories like this do not make governing any easier.

This is really the problem and the basic source of the discord on the Commission. The others, who before the Mayor's outburst, I was calling the "quiet five," believe that as a general rule, Longboat Key is a well-run and well-managed place. They feel that the people on our staff are doing a good job and that they are being fairly compensated. They feel, almost without exception, that Commissioner Dawson is negative just for the purpose of being so. They do not know how to meet him halfway, as former mayor Jim Brown keeps asking, because they don't know what it is he wants.

Whether our reserve balances are a little large or a little smaller is not a big deal. If you lower them, fine; if not, also fine. On individual projects, commissioners can agree or disagree and the world will still turn. I thought giving \$330,000 to Bay Isles to defray some of their dredging costs was not warranted, Commissioner Dawson thought otherwise. I am sure there will be times when he thinks expenditure is not warranted but this is not any reason to continue an attitude that is tearing the Town apart. Our Finance Director, Terry Sullivan, is one of the most conservative moneyman I have known. He watches the budget like a hawk. He insists on zero-based budgeting on key issues and has guided us successfully for over 20 years. He doesn't deserve the constant carping, especially when this carping comes across as mean spirited.

All of this controversy is having a serious adverse effect on Town affairs. From many anonymous sources, I can tell you that it is beginning to have a detrimental influ-

ence upon employee morale. They work hard and there are some who I have spoken with who are taking these attacks as attacks on them. This is especially unfortunate when the complaints refer to actions that are required by the laws and policies set in place by previous commissions.

It can have other consequences harder to identify. We know how badly our Congress and Senate operate because of the breakdown in personal relationships. This type of breakdown will be felt in our local decisionmaking. As we saw in the last workshop, more than 50% of the time of that meeting was taken up with issues that would have never come before the group if we weren't operating in an adversarial atmosphere.

I wish I could propose a solution because Commissioner Dawson is probably going to be around for quite a while. Since he doesn't drink and seems to frown when others do, I can't even suggest they all go out, let their hair down and kick back a few. Maybe they can remember the old maxim parents always told their daughters: your name should appear in the newspaper only three times: when you're born, when you marry and when you die.

Footnote

Bob Dawson has revealed that he will not be running again. His house is for sale and from the amount of work, brochures et al, it appears this has been on the burner for a while. It is a shame that he wasn't able to employ his talents in a more meaningful way. I believe the major reason for his lack of success is directly attributable to his lack of knowledge of how the Town really operates. The Town Commission is not charged with the everyday operation of the Town or its employees. The only function that the Commission plays is to set policy and direct the Manager to follow their directives. Bob Dawson saw his role as an administrator not a legislator. This was his mistake and his failure.

The Commission Mission

Richard L. Hershatter
Contributing Columnist

*There was a little girl, who had a little curl
Right in the middle of her forehead.
When she was good, she was very, very good,
But when she was bad, she was horrid.
(Henry Wadsworth Longfellow)*

*There is a Commission that has as its mission
The running of Longboat Key.
It often does good, indeed, as it should,
But sometimes it loses its way.
(Richard Lawrence Hershatter)*

In his race for re-election, President "Give'em hell Harry" Truman accused the Republican-dominated 80th Congress of being the "Do nothing Congress."

As a campaign tactic, it worked, and the voting public weighed in on the side of a gutsy chief executive versus a legislature whose record was definitely less than impressive.

No one can ever accuse the Longboat Key Commission, as presently constituted, of being a "do nothing" group.

Whether one agrees with its actions or not (and this column has disagreed with a fair share) the Commissioners have been pro-active in many areas over the past year and are able to demonstrate a history of service to the community with which it is difficult to take issue.

For example, when faced with an unprecedented number of vacancies on the Commission, the remaining members voted expeditiously, albeit not unanimously, to fill their ranks with replacements.

Recognizing the urgent needs of public safety and on the advice of Fire Chief Halas, the Commission implemented the purchase of a red fire engine and, pursuant to a request of Public Works Director Florensa, authorized the purchase of two huge generators, for use during hurricanes.

This Commission also managed to kick-start the long delayed \$20 million dollar beach renourishment project, which is even now under way.

And looking to the future, the Commissioners have, over considerable opposition, authorized the installation of sidewalks on a portion of the west side of Gulf of Mexico Drive and set, as one of its goals, the elimination



of the two-county bifurcation of the island.

There were other actions as well, but suffice it to say, that like the little girl with the little curl, when the Commission was "good, it was very, very good, but when it was bad, it was horrid."

We refer, of course, to the brouhaha over sponsoring the expenses of

town officials to New Orleans and Tampa to attend hurricane seminars.

According to local news reports, the town expended over \$22,500 to send 10 people, including the mayor, to New Orleans in March and six people to Tampa in May, to study hurricanes and their aftermath.

And it appears that some of the Commissioners, notably our "watchdogs," Whatmough and Dawson, were not aware of these trips until well after the fact.

Whether the trips were warranted or not is really not the issue. What is significant is that there was literally no oversight on the part of the Commission prior to the events taking place.

As a policy-making body, it is not sufficient for the Commission to establish budget amounts for travel and education. They also have the duty to pass upon and authorize such excursions in advance of their occurrence.

Otherwise a trip like the one to New Orleans, notable as a pleasure town, can become little more than a "junket." Congress is noted for such perks, with elected representatives traveling to exotic places like Tahiti at taxpayer expense to study the effects of volcano ash on the love life of fireflies, for example.

We do not compare the excesses of Washington to Longboat Key, but it is certainly the legitimate obligation of our local elected officials to determine whether it was necessary to send anyone other than the Town Manager, Fire Chief and Public Works Director to New Orleans, so that these people could report back to the Commission and the community at large.

It is equally legitimate to inquire as to whether it is necessary to send both the Town Manager and his assis-

tant, and whether there is some duplication of talent involved.

Also, who authorized the Mayor, to attend, and why? Under Longboat Key's charter, the Mayor is merely primus inter pares, or "first among equals", so why were the other six commissioners not informed or afforded the same opportunity?

These are all questions the answers to which the community is entitled, and it was perfectly proper for Commissioners Whatmough and Dawson to raise them at the meeting of May 26.

Instead of responding with the requested information, however, the Commission's leadership proceeded to an egregious violation of its own longstanding rules and regulations.

Every Commission meeting begins with and is bound by three pledges:

- (1) We may disagree, but we will be respectful of one another.
- (2) We will direct all comments to issues.
- (3) We will avoid personal attacks.

According to the May 27 issue of the Sarasota Herald Tribune, the Mayor "began the meeting by ripping into" Commissioners Whatmough and Dawson for raising their questions at a public meeting, rather than "in private."

Not only were his comments disrespectful of the two Commissioners, but they failed to address the issues raised and instead degenerated into a vitriolic personal attack on the motivation of the questioners, claiming them to be "political in nature."

It seems that the majority needs to be reminded that Florida law requires that public business be conducted in public.

Commissioners Dawson and Whatmough and the tax-paying public are owed an apology.

As we said at the beginning of this column, the Commission often does good, indeed as it should,

But sometimes it loses its way.

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