

The Ledger editorial page

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EDITORIALS

LEDGER OPINIONS

[LAKELAND POLICE SCANDALS]

The \$350-Per-Hour Cat

Today is Sunshine Sunday, the start of Sunshine Week. That's sunshine in the sense

of open government.

Part 1 of 2

Anyone who wants a lesson in government in the sunshine should study the city operations of Lakeland, particularly the Police Department.

Sunshine searchers would not find the halls of Lakeland government to be a font of forthrightness or clarity, despite a number of willing workers and police officers.

Examples that exist have been overwhelmed during the past 15 months by a devious darkness meant to obscure illegal and inappropriate practices, and a slew of scandals — sexual violations, incompetence, rich spending and much more.

When it comes to government in the sunshine, there is no place in Florida where so many shades are drawn, doors are slammed and record books are closed as in Lakeland.

MOUSE

In January 2013, The Ledger found requests for public records made of the Police Department delayed, ignored or partially delivered.

In an interview, then-Police Chief Lisa Womack said her department liked to play a “cat-and-mouse” game with public records requested by news organizations.

The State Attorney's Office confirmed the city's insolence when it sent three undercover investigators to the Police Department to request records.

The recordkeepers were uncooperative. The records the investigators received were incomplete.

The poor response was used as an example by a Polk County grand jury convened by the State Attorney's Office. It was described in an investigative report called a presentment, which was produced by the grand jury Feb. 14, 2013.

Ten months would pass before the presentment would see the light of public distribution.

During that time, the city of Lakeland set a budget of \$225,000 to pay the legal fees of employees and officials connected to the grand jury's inquiry.

Nearly all of the \$225,000 was spent to protect the seal of secrecy that the employees' lawyers had convinced Circuit Court Chief Judge William Bruce Smith to put on the presentment.

Only after a three-judge panel of the 2nd District Court of Appeal in Lakeland unanimously overturned Smith's order to seal the presentment did it become public Dec. 13.

The presentment detailed the undercover visits to Lakeland, and the incomplete public records received. As the presentment said, “There is no reason to believe that any other citizen walking into LPD to request records would have a different experience.”

SPIN

Controlling access to public records is one way to put a lid on the truth of city matters.

Paying a public relations firm to tell officials what to say about city developments is another way to control public records — determining content in advance of it being recorded.

That's what City Manager Doug Thomas did by hiring — with the aid of City Attorney Tim McCausland — the Tampa PR firm of Tucker/Hall. The firm charges as much as \$350 per hour. It has charged the city \$129,425 so far and is still under contract.

Thomas hired Tucker/Hall in expectation that police crime analyst Sue Eberle would sue the city over a sex scandal that involved her. Ten on-duty police officers committed sexual acts, and more than 20 officers took part in total.

Since setting terms in a July 16 letter that limited the PR work to a potential Eberle lawsuit, the firm's work has spread to other matters, including the grand jury presentment and speechwriting for Thomas.

Thomas sought approval for hiring Tucker/Hall in a closed procedure — private, individual meetings with city commissioners and the mayor.

Florida's Government-in-the-Sunshine Law prohibits the making of board decisions by gathering approval from members one-by-one.

Thomas did not bring up the approval request in a meeting of the full City Commission.

Fifteen months after its cat-and-mouse game began, not one lumen has lighted important parts of Lakeland's city government.



NICK ANDERSON | HOUSTON CHRONICLE

VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

READER OPINIONS

Money Isn't the Only Source of Problems that Plague Lakeland

Many of the scandals over the past year have involved money. Most of the amounts are significant.

But there is a larger issue overlaying the Lakeland city government. The words integrity, responsibility, transparency and accountability come to mind. The knee-jerk reaction is to clean house. However, mass firings and recall elections are not feasible.

A common problem is the balance between elected officials and administrators. The purpose of nonelected administrators is to ensure continuity, and remove politics and favoritism from government.

The fallacy is that long-serving administrators begin to look upon elected officials as interlopers who are passing through and need only to be appeased during their terms of office.

The situation in Lakeland's government is an example of this phenomenon. Former Police Chief Lisa Womack thumbed her nose with the “cat and mouse” comment. City Manager Doug Thomas refused a request from the mayor to fire Womack.

City Attorney Tim McCausland ignored his responsibility to keep the City Commission informed of costs the city was incurring. Former Mayor Gow Fields led the effort to cover up the grand jury presentment, to the detriment and expense of the residents.

The City Commission is not without blame. The comments that Mr. Thomas might have mentioned the PR contract demonstrate a lack of fiduciary action from our elected officials. Part of the reason for the lapses on the part of the commission are the two holdouts that the administrators can count on to do nothing.

The money is spent, so what is left to do? Limited-but-decisive action by terminating Mr. Thomas and Mr. McCausland, making the \$25,000 cap written law and hiring as police chief Markennis Calhoun of the Polk County Sheriff's Office. All future meetings should be open to the public and the media.

Let's get all of the skeletons out of the closet so we can move forward.

H. HJORTH HARVILLE
Lakeland

Bill Bair

Thank you for Suzie Schottelkotte's apt tribute to Bill Bair [“Former Award-Winning Ledger Staff Writer Dies at 65,” March 10]. I'm sure I speak for many readers by bemoaning his loss.

Additional memories I recall are Bill's first-person columns about the blue-tarp days during and after the 2004 hurricane season. That was when he noted Lake Wales was the “X” of Hurricanes Charley and Frances, and became an “asterisk” when Jeanne came through. I've quoted him many times since.

Bill was our managing editor at the Daily Highlander in the mid-1970s, and I'm sure his wonderfully compiled Bicentennial Edition remains at the Depot Museum.

Besides mentoring several young reporters, he taught me the darkroom long before we ever dreamed of digital photography. He sent me out to capture Mimi Hardman dressed as Betsy Ross, raising flags at the local schools. He arranged for me to interview A.C. Nydegger, the once-surveyor who laid out the town in 1911 and vividly described the days when Lake Wales was a turpentine camp.

Bill always reminded us the lake itself is Lake Wales, named for an earlier surveyor but a moniker considered too mournful by the developing land company that established Lake Wales.

Bill was young, too, then, but he and Martha fed us picnics (and bourbon)

like we were their own ducklings. I especially remember that over July Fourth fireworks.

The whole-house fan in my 1980s-built house is fashioned after the one in his earlier version that didn't have air conditioning at the time but sucked in the evening coolness from under the shade trees.

We last crossed paths over picnic baskets on the grass at an Imperial Symphony Orchestra concert at Bok Tower Gardens, Bill sporting his winning grin and warm greeting.

We take some of these blessings for granted. Polk has lost one of our dearest treasures.

MARCIA FORD
Bartow

Solution to Traffic Problem

We have seen a real problem lately on Lakeland Hills Boulevard. The traffic seems to back up all the way beyond Griffin Road on the southbound side.

The Lakeland Police Department has at least five cars blocking, directing and holding traffic, all going into Joker Marchant Stadium for the ballgames.

We were going to Watson Clinic and missed an appointment. They were holding up the traffic so a couple of people could walk a half block and cross, rather than wait until there was a group and then stop the traffic.

While we sat there, anyone with some smarts could see what the problem was. When the traffic is trying to get into the parking lot, there is a big delay while people pay the staff for the parking and the traffic backs up onto the street.

Why not just let the vehicles in to park. When they leave at a much slower rate, that is when they should collect the fee. No loss of money, fewer traffic jams and everyone is going to be much calmer.

JOHN ENGEL
Polk City

Leash Your Dog at Parks

I am annoyed at what seems to be an epidemic of individuals walking their dogs without a leash.

I am a dog owner. When I take my dog for a walk around a nearby lake, I have come in contact on each occasion with unleashed dogs.

Owners should take into consideration the people around them. I don't know their dogs, and every animal, including my own, has an unpredictable nature. I leash my dog to not only keep him safe, but others as well.

There are individuals with a natural fear of dogs because of previous encounters. It would be disrespectful of me to think that my dog wanting to be off a leash is more important than their right to enjoy a public park or lake.

If you want your dog off a leash, go to a dog park.

ALLISON SERLETIC
Lake Wales

WRITE TO US

The Ledger welcomes letters for publication in the Voice of the People Column. Only original letters written directly to The Ledger will be considered, and preference is given to discussion of contemporary issues. Volume precludes acknowledgment or return of unpublished letters. All letters are subject to editing for clarity, length, taste and libel. Letters should be signed and contain the writer's full name, address and telephone number. Anonymity is granted only under unusual circumstances. Letters should be kept to 300 words or less, and brevity is encouraged.

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COLUMNIST OPINIONS



Dana Milbank

THE WASHINGTON POST

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Youth Not Backing Obama This Time

The day before the Iowa caucuses in 2008, I wrote about the massive crowds of young people at Barack Obama rallies, noting that his candidacy would collapse “if they don't show up.”

The next night, after Obama's victory celebration in Des Moines, Obama strategist Steve Hildebrand spotted me in a crowd. “The kids showed up!” he said fiercely.

They did. But where are they now?

An army of 15 million voters younger than 30 swept Obama past Hillary Clinton and John McCain, and to the presidency in 2008. More than 12 million helped him return in 2012. But now his presidency is on the line — and the Obama youths are abandoning him in his hour of need.

The administration announced last week that just 1.08 million people ages 18 to 34 had signed up for Obamacare by the end of February — 25 percent of total enrollees. If the proportion doesn't improve significantly, the result likely will likely be fatal for the Affordable Care Act.

The administration had said it needed 40 percent of registrants in the exchanges to be young adults — about 2.7 million of the expected 7 million total. Overall enrollment is also below target. But the alarming shortcoming is the number of young participants, which would make the insured population older and sicker,

Young voters, after playing a big role in the Obama campaign, became little more than an email list.

and the program too expensive.

This past week saw the release of Obama's sit-down with comedian Zach Galifianakis of “Hangover” fame to encourage young people to join the Obama-care exchanges.

It was good comedy (the host, in the White House Diplomatic Reception Room, rolled up his sleeve to show Obama his “spider bites”) and it had the desired result: The White House reported a boost in traffic to HealthCare.gov.

Yet the fact that Obama sought Galifianakis' help was an indication of how much the president's standing has slipped among young Americans.

What went wrong? The president and his aides failed to keep his youth movement engaged. But part of the problem also is the inability of the millennial generation to remain attached to a cause. The generation that brought Obama to power is connected online but has no loyalty to institutions.

In 2008, “the level of innovation and engagement in the election, especially the primaries, was amazing, but then the level of engaging them during the administration was extremely disappointing,” says Peter Levine, a Tufts University professor who specializes in youth civic involvement. “He had a potential army for legislative success and implementation, but the Obama administration did not do that. At a critical moment in the first term, they did not turn to them. ... They got rapid youth demobilization.”

Young voters, after playing a big role in the campaign, became little more than an email list for the White House and Obama's Organizing for Action group. Then came health care reform. The millennials, very liberal overall, saw Obama's plan as too timid. They were disillusioned by his failure to fight for the “public option” of government-run health plans.

Even if Obama had worked harder to keep his youth army engaged, it's not entirely clear that the effort would have succeeded. As a group, the generation's attachment is fickle.

A Pew survey of the generation, released this month, found the 18-to-33 crowd less attached than older generations to organized politics and religion, less patriotic, less eager to marry and less trusting of people.

The millennials are at least as passionate as earlier generations and more entrepreneurial, but they lack ties to institutions — unions, political parties, churches — because of their online existence.

“The organizational structure they're growing up in is so weak,” Tuft's Levine tells me. As a result, “there aren't very many durable institutions that can capitalize on their enthusiasm. They're being asked to do it themselves, online, and it's a tall order.”

Asking them to pay money to join a health care exchange, it seems, is too tall an order — even though the presidency they created depends on it.

