

Subject: The Northlands Golf Course Affair - A case for more whistleblowers?

Date: Tue, 4 Feb 2003 00:49:00 +0000 (GMT)

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Corrie: For FONVCA if you see fit.

14 January 2003

THE NORTHLANDS GOLF COURSE AFFAIR - a Case for more whistleblowers ©

Liz James _____

To blow the whistle or not; that is the question in North Vancouver District. Whether 'tis nobler to obey the rules or, on occasion, to break them and give the people meaningful information about the affairs that concern them. Time will tell and, in the Northlands affair, 'timing' may well be everything.

There were difficult questions for 50 or so residents who attended the 13 January regular District Council meeting to express concern about how *alleged* misappropriation of funds is being handled at District Hall.

The Mayor pre-empted the usual 30-minute public input session, to make his own statement on the troubles that have beset Northlands bookkeeping - perhaps for as long as five years.

As one might expect in BC's sour political climate, it appeared that someone had tipped the Mayor off as to the issues that the public - many wearing the message, *Northlands Audit Now* - intended to raise, as he touched on nearly all points. But if this was an attempt to ease concerns or to divert the attention of the public, it did not work. Former councillor Doug Mackay-Dunn was but the first of a diverse line of citizens who persisted in making their points regardless.

Mackay-Dunn emphasized that he expected a November 30 2002 decision of the outgoing Council - to hold an operational audit of Northlands; an audit of sufficient scope to include all processes directly and indirectly connected with Northlands - to be dealt with "forthwith", as required by the motion.

Other speakers, including another mayoralty candidate Dave Sadler, expressed dissatisfaction at how the matter was being handled by senior staff and Council. It was plain that many residents have difficulty with the official version of events. This is a concern which appears to be shared by those members of the outgoing council who, on November 30 2002, passed an *in camera* [later released] motion which stated in part: that..."the veracity of the November 29th 2002 joint staff report.....[should] also be included in the external auditor's review....."

Of particular importance to Sadler was the question, "Was the Mayor told of the problems prior to the November 16 local election?" And, "if not, what about the District policy that he's to be told immediately of liabilities of \$25,000 or more?" The inference was that, had the public been aware of *irregularities* at the golf course during the election campaign, vote results would have been different.

This writer then asked Council not to sign settlement agreements with the *alleged* perpetrator, Christie Hammond or, indeed, with anyone connected with Northlands *irregularities* until full public disclosure of all the facts - and certainly not before the RCMP investigation and external audits are concluded and reports released. Confidentiality clauses in such settlements have a nasty habit of allowing too many of the details to be kept from the public eye.

Stopping short of naming his target, Mr. Weldon Congdon then unleashed a 'shoot-the-messenger' diatribe on Council, in complaint that details of recent Council discussions had been leaked to *The Outlook* by someone in attendance at the *in camera* meeting - presumably Councillor Crist. He had a point - a point upon which the Local Government Act is quite clear.

In this instance, however, in true *whistle-blower* fashion, one councillor at least felt that the citizens who pay the bills are entitled to more than the confusing crumbs they have been allowed about a very serious, perhaps even criminal, matter.

The November 21st Statement of Claim filed by the District details a loss of \$44,697.49 and other amounts "yet to be ascertained". According to current rumours, the amount now is said to be '\$375,000 and climbing.' Pretty uncomfortable stuff for newly-elected politicians - in fact, for readers not aware of the math, or for those who might feel this is 'much ado about nothing', it would be close to a 1-percent hit on a DNV property-tax bill.

There appears to be some difficulty with detailing this fact in a forthright statement to the public yet some, it seems, are less than cautious about what they are saying within earshot of anyone who may be walking the corridors of District Hall.

As to Clr. Crist's breach of the Local Government Act, while it is indeed a sad fallout of what may well be over four years of *irregularities* in management of the funds of a successful public golf course, it seems it is not the worst that could happen.

In its wisdom, Time Magazine chose three women whistle-blowers as its 2002 *Persons of the Year*, of whom it said: "*They took huge professional and personal risks to blow the whistle on what went wrong at WorldCom, Enron and the FBI*", and, "*Democratic capitalism requires that people [can] trust in the integrity of public and private institutions alike. As whistle-blowers, these three became fail-safe systems that did not fail. For believing - really believing - that the truth is one thing that must not be moved off the books, and for stepping in to make sure that it wasn't, they have been chosen by TIME as its Persons of the Year for 2002.*" [The complete series of articles can be found on the Web at: www.time.com/time/personsoftheyear/2002]

Over many terms of District Council, questions have been raised but few answered about fiscal management, Heritage Fund depletion, and about why the golf course cannot repay the fund, or why so many projects - the Landfill site and District Hall renovations are glaring examples - go over-budget. So, bearing in mind that citizens can no longer appeal to the Provincial Ombudsman about unfair treatment at the hands of municipal councils, it is to be hoped District residents will remember these things and understand and appreciate the 'huge professional risks' faced by anyone at District Hall who makes a decision - and acts on it - that those who pay the bills should know more about how their multi-millions of dollars are being spent.

BC politics needs a few more whistle-blowers, not less.

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