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Mirabile Township residents dig into gravel records, find discrepancies

By Anne Tezon

Mirabile Township has been the subject of some intense scrutiny the past several months. Monday afternoon that scrutiny reached an even higher level as a private investigator hired by Clarkson Construction, owners of Everett Quarries in Kingston, showed up at the courthouse asking questions of the county commission and the county clerk.

The scrutiny started several months ago with some local residents who were disgruntled over the continuing poor condition of their gravel roads. Duane Burnett and Keith Wilcox launched their own personal investigation into the issue and say they became suspicious when Mirabile Township Trustee Bill Hascall refused to meet with them to discuss road conditions. Instead, he invited them to attend the next township board meeting.

The two have been attending every meeting since then and have filed Sunshine Law requests with the county clerk's office in Kingston for records detailing purchases of gravel and reimbursements for FEMA disaster relief projects following the floods of 2007.

The question that Wilcox and Burnett want answered is "Where's the gravel?" In their detailed search of county and township records, they've uncovered several inconsistencies and omissions, some of which they fear may represent fraud, especially where federal disaster relief funds are concerned.

The investigating duo went to Everett Quarries, where Mirabile Township hauls gravel from, and asked for scale tickets that were missing from county records. While personnel at the quarry initially refused to produce the copies of scale tickets for Wilcox and Burnett,

they did furnish a missing statement and some scale tickets to the county clerk's office. Those scale tickets showed that in one day, a Monday in December of 2007, 32 tickets had been printed sequentially for Mirabile Township, reportedly for the FEMA project, to spread gravel on roads that had been washed out in the flooding.

Burnett and Wilcox asked Hascall about the discrepancies, wondering how anyone would know that the rock was actually spread and Hascall reportedly said, "You'll have to trust me."

Last Friday in a meeting with the county commission and The Caldwell County News to counter a report that had appeared in a neighboring newspaper, Hascall said that the 32 scale tickets that were printed sequentially were done that way because the woman who normally works at the scale house had been off on sick leave for several days. The man loading the gravel was too busy to make tickets so he told rock hauler Wattenbarger to make a record at the scale house and the tickets would be made out later and sent to the county and township. "Some of those 32 tickets had already been hauled out," said Hascall, who was at the the scale house the day those tickets were printed. He added that the deadline for the FEMA project made it necessary to print all the tickets at once to cover all the gravel that would still be needed and allow the township to get full reimbursement.

Burnett and Wilcox maintain that the FEMA project that funneled close to \$20,000 to the township for four sites that sustained damage was completed past the FEMA deadline and say that something is not right about 32 tickets being printed

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sequentially, within minutes of each other.

Ed DeMoss, the risk assessment manager hired by Clarkson to investigate the matter, said Monday "If we can't substantiate the rock being delivered, we will make restitution. . . Clarkson has a very definite ethics policy and we're not happy this happened." DeMoss planned to visit the Kingston quarry Monday to talk to personnel there and hoped to visit with gravel hauler Gary Wattenbarger. He promised the county would get copies of all the scale tickets that Wilcox and Burnett requested and send them to the county clerk. "We will get this thing straightened out," he said.

Before finding the 32 scale tickets in question, Wilcox and Burnett had issued an ultimatum to the Mirabile Township board to get the roads straightened up in 30 days. They had also requested detailed records from Hascall on gravel hauled for which roads and Keith put the information onto a computer spreadsheet and started noticing discrepancies.

"Bill's sheets are wrong on a lot of things," said Wilcox, including wrong numbers for roads, which they said Hascall blamed on his bifocals, and the hand transcription of information. They also found 72 duplicate invoice numbers in his handwritten records.

At the second board meeting the two attended, after the township had hired extra help for going over roads to assist Wattenbarger, who reportedly works only on weekends, they asked how many hours Gary was putting in a month. Hascall told them 60. They said that the new operator the township hired covered 14.5 miles in 45 hours, while Wattenbarger covered only 4.75 miles in 23 hours. "It took Gary five hours to go a mile and Steve

3.2 hours to go a mile," reports Wilcox.

The investigative duo urged the township to agree to use of the hour meter on the grader to keep track of the hours it is used and Keith submitted a suggested form for more accountability. They also asked Hascall how many hours get put on the grader every year and were told 650. Upon examination of the financial statements for operator hours, they came up with 332 hours, 425 hours and 305 hours, for three years, but never close to the 650 hours Hascall claimed. They also compared the number of hours that Wattenbarger had submitted and tallied 53 more hours than were actually on the grader. When Wilcox asked Bill how many hours were on the grader when the township purchased it, he said about 5,000. The John Deere credit report the two examined showed it was actually 3,950.

As township trustee, Hascall is paid \$10 a month for writing checks and keeping the gravel records. That amount dwindles down

to \$9.25 with withholding. Then he gets 2% of the first \$1,000 in township revenue and 1% thereafter. Last year that amounted to less than \$500. He's been a trustee since 1999, with a hiatus of two years, and has lived in the township for 40 years. Like Burnett and Wilcox, he got interested in the office because he felt he could do something for the roads. He admits it was a real eye opener when he got into office and saw how little money there was to work with.

The county commissioners said last Friday that in 2007, they got tons of complaints about the condition of the roads across the county. "A lot of people don't know who the township board members are, so they call us," said Dale Hartley, presiding commissioner.

In addition to complaints about the condition of the roads, County Clerk Beverly Bryant said before she was elected to office, she received many complaints about the county not maintaining accurate and up to date information on the amount of money left in the individual township gravel accounts. Those accounts contain sales tax funds for gravel and CART funds, which are replenished once a month. Upon taking office, Bryant said she asked then deputy Kay Brelsford to get the records straightened out. "It didn't happen, so I assigned the work to Deloris Burnett, and it still wasn't done on a timely basis."

Wilcox and Burnett have tried to "connect the dots" to Brelsford, now facing prosecution for mishandling county funds, in the Mirabile Township gravel records, and to Burnett, also dismissed around the same time as her co-worker.

"Is there room for fraud here?" questioned Bryant rhetorically. "I don't think so. I think it's more a matter of shoddy bookkeeping." Since February of last year, the record keeping has improved dramatically, giving township boards a clearer picture of their balances in gravel accounts.

Burnett and Wilcox aren't so sure. They note that the computer system at the county clerk's office, where the gravel records are tallied for the townships, was changed in 2007. "Before that

date, we didn't find any sequential quarry tickets that were printed on the same day," charges Burnett. And Bryant admits that she's not sure where the figures came from for the beginning balances on the new system, figures that were keyed in by Brelsford.

"We're just wanting to get our roads fixed," says Burnett. "We're not trying to

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crucify anyone.”

The persistence of Burnett and Wilcox has resulted in the township board limiting their input at meetings to three minutes, down significantly from the two to three hours that their questions have occupied on occasion. They’ve called the state auditor’s office and called FEMA to ask questions and they continue to dig into records. And, while neither of the two has voted in a Mirabile Township April board election, Wilcox said he might consider running for the board. He’s retired from Ford and when he moved to the township in 1999 he recalls the township put gravel on his road and it was

well maintained. “There’s been hardly anything since then.”

Duane Burnett lived in Kingston Township for 29 years and moved to Mirabile Township five years ago. “Kingston does a lot better job on their roads,” he claims. The two men cited the fact that from Jewell Road to Route 36 is in Kidder Township, and is close to Wilcox’s home. “Their grader makes it out once a month.”

Burnett and Wilcox still want to know where the gravel is. They don’t want the township to have to pay for a petition audit of their books, because it’s too costly, and have been told by the state

auditor’s that they have done what any auditor would do in digging through the records.

They’re not giving up and say they’re motivated because they’re “pissed off.” And Monday, the private investigator for Clarkson was trying to get a handle on township government and who oversees their operations. The commissioners informed him that townships are not audited and the only oversight the county has on their operations is keeping track of how much gravel funds they’re owed and writing check to the quarries that the townships haul out of.

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A brief look at township finances in Caldwell County

Caldwell County is one of only 22 counties in Missouri to still operate townships. As one supporter puts it, “That government that is closest to the people is the best.” However, detractors are expressing concerns that townships are not monitored closely enough, through state-mandated audits, and that the potential for misuse of funds is great. Another challenge for Missouri township governments is that it has become increasingly difficult to find individuals wanting to serve on township boards.

Following is a brief look at township finances in Caldwell County with specific information on gravel funds that pass through the county through sales tax and CART (County Aid Road Trust) funds, an issue that is falling under intense scrutiny in Mirabile Township.

Township	Assessed Val.	Tax Levy	Road Miles	Gravel Funds*	FEMA '07 funds**
Breckenridge	6,777,110	.8669	49	\$1,166.38	\$5,578.83
Gomer	5,248,669	.9388	55	\$1,309.20	N/A
Hamilton	19,596,975	.3800	49	\$1,166.38	N/A
Kidder	10,642,719	.7836	42	\$999.75	\$16,983.06
Kingston	\$5,849,902	.9488	45	\$1071.16	\$30,498.66
Mirabile	\$5,027,053	.8852	39	\$928.34	\$19,805.55
New York	\$4,485,542	.7992	39	\$928.34	\$6,792.94
Fairview	\$2,993,402	.8739	40	\$952.15	\$9,540.09
Davis	\$16,492,357	.5495	48	\$1,142.57	\$26,229.65
Lincoln	\$12,067,387	.6292	55	\$1,309.20	\$29,477.81
Grant	\$22,643,612	.6323	43	\$1,023.56	N/A
Rockford	\$14,050,505	.6610	41	\$975.95	\$24,127.91

*Gravel funds are amounts received through the county for one month.

** Some townships did not apply for FEMA disaster relief funds to re-gravel roads due to flooding in 2007.

Gravel funds