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**NORTHEAST  
FIRE DISTRICT**

# Residents kept in dark on finances

**Requests for records  
on legal fees, details  
on bonds go nowhere.**

**By Elizabeth Holland**  
ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

**BEVERLY HILLS** • Retired McDonnell Douglas supervisor Bob Beckring began trying in August to get a breakdown of his north St. Louis County fire district's legal fees and two items on the district's budget: \$100,000 for public relations and \$60,000 for "special projects."

As he had done a few times

before, Beckring, 69, filled out records request forms. And as he has done almost weekly, he showed up at meetings of the Northeast Ambulance and Fire Protection District in hopes of getting answers.

The result? Nothing.

At a fire board meeting earlier this month, Beckring tried again. He asked the board to make public its expenditures since July. Board President Joe Washington "started to go off on me, said that I was trying to stab him, and that's the word he used, 'stabbed him,'" Beckring said. And, he said, Washington never gave him an answer.

Other Northeast residents say they are also getting nowhere in their searches for details on the district's finances, and on its \$10.7 million bond issue on the April 7 ballot.

The ballot language does not specifically state what the \$10.7 million would be used for, instead referring to several possible expenditures, such as land, a new firehouse, ambulances, firetrucks and equipment.

In response to the Post-Dispatch for its online voters' guide, the district's attorney,

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# Residents in dark on finances

Elbert Walton Jr., said those matters would be resolved after the election.

The bond issue already has failed three times in the last year. Those three elections have cost the district \$42,130, as well as a deposit of \$14,420 to the St. Louis County Election Board for the forthcoming election, according to the board.

Other district expenditures are not easily trackable.

In November 2007, the Post-Dispatch reported that Walton had been paid \$76,671 in his first six months on the job — more than six times what the board's previous attorney was paid in an entire year.

Efforts by the Post-Dispatch to determine what Walton, and fellow attorney Bernard Edwards, have been paid since have been unsuccessful.

In September 2008, the newspaper requested records detailing a year's worth of the district's legal and consulting fees. Walton responded that the newspaper would have to make a "deposit" of \$550 to cover, among other costs, attorney fees for Walton and Edwards, as they would have to review the records before releasing them.

An attorney for the Post-Dispatch told Walton in an e-mail that state law does not allow the district to charge legal fees to review the payment of legal bills. The district hasn't reduced the fee.

On Feb. 27, the newspaper made a follow-up request, for records listing checks authorized by the board since September. Last week, the district told the Post-Dispatch it would charge \$50 to search for the information, about 25 pages. The Post-Dispatch paid, but on Wednesday, nearly three weeks after making the request, had yet to receive access.

Missouri's Sunshine Law says requests for access to public records must be acted on within three business days. If access

is not granted immediately, the custodian of records — in Northeast's case, board member Robert Edwards — must explain the cause for delay and give the earliest time the records will be available.

Edwards has not returned calls to the Post-Dispatch, nor has the newspaper received anything in writing from him. Washington, the board president, has refused comment. Walton said he had no comment, told a reporter to never call him again and hung up.

Linda Love-Tolbert, a district office administrator, told a reporter Wednesday that "I really can't say," when asked when the records would be made available. She said an ongoing state audit of the district was hampering efforts to make them available.

Allison Bruns, a spokeswoman for the Missouri auditor's office, told the Post-Dispatch that auditors had obtained an electronic version of the records sought by the newspaper and that auditors did not have the documents requested by a reporter, as was suggested by Love-Tolbert.

Bruns said the state agency does not view ongoing audits as "a valid excuse for not complying with the Sunshine Law."

The audit is expected to be released later this year.

Fire board member Bob Lee, who is consistently at odds with directors Washington and Edwards, said records he had seen during board meetings indicate the district has paid \$18,000 in legal fees in the last three weeks. He said he voted against paying the bills.

## APOLOGY SOUGHT

Deputy Chief Airst Wilson, the district's public relations officer, said that the district is forthcoming with information and that its website offers more information than any other area district. Wilson also said he tries to answer questions on the

bond issue and other matters.

He attributes much of the negative feelings to residents who are upset with the board's new political order since the April 2007 election. The three-member board became entirely African-American in that election; Wilson maintains some residents are racist and cannot accept that makeup and that several black employees have been hired since.

Wilson also said that a state and federal investigation into whether asbestos was improperly removed from the district's administrative office may be one of the reasons requests for public records aren't being met. Investigators seized "tons of books" and have yet to return them, he said last week.

Patricia Gaddess, a 63-year-old housewife, offers a different perspective.

At a board meeting last fall, Gaddess filled out a form — required by the board for questions from the floor — asking how a new firehouse would make her community safer. She said she had received a robo-call making that claim.

She never got an answer. Instead, her form was mailed back to her, with the following note on the back:

"Due to your disrespectful outbreaks in previous meetings, you will get no answers until you a make a written apology to the board."

Gaddess was incredulous. "I sit in (fire board) meetings like a potted plant," she said. "I don't know what the bad behavior was."

Beckring, the retired McDonnell Douglas employee, said there's no excuse for ignoring questions about how tax dollars are spent. He said that a lawsuit has crossed his mind but that he is on a fixed income and doesn't have the money for attorney's fees.

"And I'm sure that's what they keep thinking," Beckring said of the board and Walton. "These people aren't going to do anything."

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