

Lake Gazette
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Chewin'⁸⁰⁰ the Cud

This week State Auditor Susan Montee released a copy of an audit of various governmental agencies, and surprisingly (tongue-in-cheek) found violations in the form of 1. agendas being incomplete and vague; 2. lack of documentation for reason for going into a closed meeting 3. lack of minutes from closed meetings and much, much more. Across the state, the problems were universal.

After learning that the County of Monroe hired a convicted felon (one with many, many convictions to his name involving drugs, alcohol and abandonment of a corpse over a period of years including a recent jail release for the last offense-never mind that he doesn't have a CDL or a driver's license to operate county equipment), I asked for copies of minutes from closed meetings and a copy of the votes taken in closed session in an effort to see how that vote was taken, what the starting wages were, etc. There are none. Either votes are not taken or not recorded and other than payroll records (which appear annually in the form of a legally required publication of the county's financial statement) there is little to document any of this. A nod and a handshake are all you need.

The newspaper should monitor these things, and unfortunately neither newspaper in the county has the staff to take two days a week out of their already overloaded week to attend these meetings. The county clerk also says she doesn't have time or staff to sit in on these meetings. So what we get in the form of news is really quite diluted and it's quite easy to omit a few minor things like hirings, wages, lawsuits etc.

So, the paper is not without fault in this situation, and while it makes me madder than hops that a convicted felon was hired instead of others who might not have a blemish on their record, there is little I can do about it except splash a little ink on it now and then.

For 14 years, the county has paid for at least three subscriptions for various offices in the courthouse to the Gazette. One got cut recently (after above request and perhaps the timing is purely coincidental), in the name of "saving the county money." Has the county gone so financially haywire that \$35 a year (less if you consider the time/wages it takes for county employees to go to various offices to chase down and return a copy of the paper) is going to break them? Who knows?

So, while some may think that the state auditor wasted her time auditing county offices, we rely on audits such as these because state offices have both the time and staff that none of us have at the county level. Audits such as this may be the only thing that protect citizens and keep public business public. Audits can't guarantee against bad judgment, but they are, a good way of measuring compliance with open meetings laws.