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Media ⁸⁰⁰ policy changes stalled in city council

Mayor 'disappointed' with action thus far, issue not yet settled

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Despite recent efforts to secure more open public access to information at Marshfield

City Hall, Marshfield aldermen on Thursday, Aug. 26, opted not to revise a local ordinance stating that all media contacts must be steered through the city administrator.

Sparse in its wording, the 30-year-old rule has been used like a shield by some elected officials, who say that it means they are not allowed to – or supposed to – speak to the press.

After seeing the issue placed on the board's agenda two weeks ago, Mayor C.R. "Bob" Clark

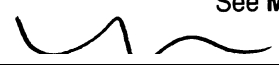
Read what **Alderman Bill Tierney** had to say about the media and access to Marshfield City Hall.
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did not speak to support a change in the policy at last week's meeting. In the end, no motions were offered by the aldermen to change the existing policy.

"Without a motion, the situation remains status quo," Clark said, wrapping up the brief discussion.

But in a follow-up interview conducted Monday, Aug. 30, the mayor expressed disappointment that the ordinance had not been acted upon.

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Also interviewed on Monday, Aug. 30, City Administrator Dan McMillan said he was still determined to continue pursuing the matter until clarity on the public access policy had been achieved.

Press release duties

Presently, the city code lists one duty of the city administrator as to "prepare and assist in the preparation of and distribution of newsletters and news-releases to the citizens." Media relations are not listed elsewhere in the city codes.

City officials have been asked by this newspaper to clarify the current policy, which seems vague as written, making it unclear which employees are allowed to speak for the city, or if elected officials are permitted to be quoted on their own behalf.

McMillan first brought the issue to the board Thursday, Aug. 12, after a meeting he, the mayor and Assistant City Administrator Deana Fishel had with Marshfield Mail General Manager Grant Overstake. Overstake expressed to city leaders that the public's right to know is hindered when reporters are forbidden to speak to city workers or elected officials.

When asked directly about the matter, Mayor Clark acknowledged that the old policy had outlived

its usefulness. He then asked the board to consider the matter on Aug. 12.

The board tasked McMillan with polling other cities to learn their policies regarding the press. McMillan delegated the research to City Clerk Terri Taylor.

McMillan also asked Fishel to begin researching the wording on a more open media policy.

He also asked this newspaper what it needed from the city that would allow it, as the newspaper of record, to do a better job of informing the public.

The newspaper, in an editorial published Aug. 18, replied, in part " ... We want our reporters to be allowed to interview city workers and elected officials, and for them to have the right documents when we ask for them, and to have full access to public information, as provided by law, without filter."

Other cities surveyed

At the board meeting on Aug. 26, Taylor presented a list of 17 cities (ranging in population from 1,100 to 16,500) she had talked with. The heading on the chart she created is titled, "How other cities handle dealing with the Press."

Taylor told the board that "all of them generally either had the mayor, city administrator or city clerk designated to speak to the press." She added that a

lot of cities allow employees to speak on general topics, such as spring cleanup or sports.

In the discussion that followed, Alderman Ed Noland said he would like to see the police and fire chiefs added to the list of those who can speak to the press.

The clerk asked, "Maybe we should clarify, doesn't our ordinance now say that everything goes to the city administrator?"

Clark said the ordinance would have to be changed if the board wanted a revision of the policy.

"It will be status quo, unless I have a motion to change it," Clark said.

Alderman Tommy Owen said the practice could be changed.

"Well, it seems reasonable that we might look for ways to expand this a little bit, within reason, and still guarantee accuracy in city information that's given out," Owen said.

Clark asked Police Chief Doug Fannen to explain the police department's procedures for talking to the media.

Fannen said one person is designated to speak to the media, and "that way there is not different stories or different versions." First, a press release or some other written response is prepared.

Fannen recommended





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that the city also designate speakers within departments if the board opts to expand the practice.

Owen said elected officials and city employees have always been able to speak to the press personally, but not on behalf of the city.

McMillan said he always directs media questions to other department heads if they have more information about a matter than he does.

Clarification - or not

Fishel said the city could create a policy that is more clear about who can speak to the media. "I think that's what the newspaper is after," Fishel said, asking for 60 or 90 days to prepare a policy. "That way it's in writing and everybody knows the rules."

McMillan said Monday, though, that since Fishel was not given the go-ahead to work on such a policy by the board, she was not working on a revised policy.

During the discussion at last week's meeting, Alderman Bill Tierney said the current policy was sufficient. He added that reporters do not need to go from person to person in City Hall, but should go directly to the city administrator for information.

"I think the ordinance is clear," Tierney said. "If there is a press release, then the city administrator

is assigned that authority. And, if the press doesn't know that, then it's pretty easy for them to find out."

After notifying McMillan that the newspaper wished to interview Tierney to get clarification on his comments at the aldermen's meeting, McMillan told a reporter that he could interview Tierney, without delay. Tierney was contacted by phone at his home and, after he was informed that McMillan had approved the interview, Tierney agreed to answer questions.

'Smooth flow'

In the interview Monday, McMillan reiterated that the intended purpose of the media policy was to make sure the public isn't misinformed and that city officials aren't misunderstood.

With him designated as the go-to spokesperson, contradictions and misinformation could be avoided, he said.

McMillan added that he was personally committed to "a smooth flow of information and accessibility" for the media.

"I've got a cell phone and I keep it with me all the time," he said. "I'm available and reporters can call me anytime. Whatever the story, we'll take care of it."

McMillan conceded that the current ordinance may need to be re-written, to

clarify how it pertains to the city's elected officials. If elected officials have seen the ordinance as an order restricting their speech or a shield to protect them from speaking to the media in the past, it has been misunderstood.

Elected officials should feel free to speak directly to the media, McMillan added.

"It's not that they can't talk to the press," McMillan added. "I think that's where the disconnect is."

Asked if he'd lost his zeal in pushing for a more open local government, Mayor Clark said, "I am in favor of a more open government. I don't mean to pass the blame, because the buck stops here. But I was disappointed. I realize that they [the board of aldermen] know that we need to do something, and yet they wouldn't move on it. I pointed out that the ordinance needed to be changed."

"I think it can be revisited at any time by anybody putting it on the agenda," he added.

Asked what he meant by the phrase "status quo," the mayor said he didn't mean to suggest that the matter had been resolved.

"Status quo means it's tabled until something can be worked out down the road," Clark said. "You can quote me on that."

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N.I.E.

Newspapers In Education

Catch the Buzz
bee inside a good book

AMAZING ANIMAL CONNECTIONS

They come with tails or trunks, have coats that are furry, and hides as cool and smooth as stones. Reptile and mammal, animals populate our world in all shapes and sizes, but their effect on our hearts is the same.

This month, Newsbee highlights books about a peppy duck with a plan, a horse who's bright as a penny, and a girl with a gift for greeting wild animals. You'll hoot with pleasure over my Picks.

What is Newspapers in Education?

It is a cooperative effort of this newspaper working with local schools to use the newspaper as a tool for instruction. Under the program, the newspaper provides copies, paid for by local sponsors, to schools for use in their classrooms.

This Week's NIE brought you by:

Glenworth

Auction & Realty

Henry's wild about dogs, but all he has for pets are frogs. His mom thinks the crusaders should satisfy her son, but Henry isn't about to give up on his wish for a doggie in "Wanted: the Perfect Pet," by Finna Robertson.

More stubborn than most kids, Henry is enterprising and will go to any lengths to get a dog, even placing a want ad in his local newspaper. Want ads get results, and faraway on a windy hill there's a lonely duck with a dream of having a friend, someone to play with and talk to. The duck reads the ad and sets his plan in motion.

Duck answer the ad, but not before he's created a costume with ears and a tail, determined to make the boy think he's a dog.

The end result is hilarious, yet sweet, proving that sometimes man's best friend is not a dog—and that wishes can come true in far different ways than we could ever imagine. Simple, cartoon illustrations with plenty of charm give personality to the characters in a Pick you won't want to miss.

Book Level: 3.3
AR Pts.: 5

Jim, the star of "Wonder Horse, the True Story of the World's Smartest Horse," by Emily Arnold McCully was a four-legged Einstein. But Jim wouldn't have amounted to much, if it hadn't been for his owner Bill Key.

Key, a slave born on a plantation in 1833, loved horses and encouraged their kind treatment. He became a veterinarian, and got interested in buying a horse that would be fast at the track. Lauretta, a smart Arabian, fit the bill.

Lauretta had a colt, and Doc was thrilled, but the mare died, leaving him with an ungainly colt. Doc didn't hold out much hope for Jim, until the day the colt brought him a stick and acted like he wanted to fetch it.

Doc soon knew there was more to Jim than met the eye. After lots of training, the pair traveled the countryside putting on shows that demonstrated Jim's ability to count and recognize colors.

"Wonder Horse" comes to life with nostalgic illustrations by McCully, who includes a photo of the real Doc and Jim, along with facts about the friends.

Book Level: 4.1
AR Pts.: 5

If you enjoyed Martine Allen's adventures in "The White Giraffe," "Dolphin Song" and "The Last Leopard," you'll be sold on "The Elephant's Tale," set in the Sowubona Wildlife Reserve in South Africa.

It's been a year since Martine came to South Africa to live with Gwyn Thomas, her grandmother, on the game reserve they both love. Martine continues to befriend animals, ride her white giraffe Jenny and socialize with her friend Ben.

One day when her grandmother is away, a mysterious stranger visits the reserve. Martine and Mrs. Thomas learn he wants to turn the reserve into a safari park. The stranger has every right to do so—according to a will he shows them from Mrs. Thomas' late husband.

Mrs. Thomas and Martine have only 13 days to vacate the preserve or locate an updated will that Mrs. Thomas is sure her husband drew up.

Leaving Martine with Grace, a medicine woman and friend of the family's, Mrs. Thomas returns to England to locate the will. While she is gone, Martine and Ben become embroiled in a mission to save 20 elephants.

It's a race to the finish in this exciting conclusion to the "Legend of the Animal Healer" series.

Book Level: 6.0
Grades 3-6

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Asteroid Tales

Millions of asteroids tumble in a belt around the Sun. They live between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter. They are mostly odd-shaped rocks way too small to be planets. Asteroids are the dinosaur bones of the solar system—the fossils left after all the planets and moons were formed. And they haven't changed much since this beginning.

The largest asteroid is Ceres, 592 miles (952 kilometers) across. The smallest are less than about a half mile (about 1 kilometer) across. All of them put together wouldn't make a rock pile big enough to build our Moon.

There are good reasons to care about asteroids. Just as fossils help us figure out the history of Earth, asteroids give us clues about how the solar system formed 4.6 billion years ago. Scientists want to study them up close whenever possible. So even a spacecraft headed to another destination may take a little side trip to check out a nearby asteroid.

Rosetta is a good example. This spacecraft's main mission is to meet up with Comet Churyumov-Gerasimenko in 2014. But on July 10, 2010, it flew close to an asteroid named Lutetia. Rosetta took detailed pictures from about 1965 miles (3162 kilometers) away. The pictures show that Lutetia is more or less potato-shaped, about 80 miles (130 kilometers) long. It has many craters and a big bowl-shaped dent on one side. It looks as if it's been beaten and battered by smaller objects for billions of years. Scientists are studying the images and other data to see what else they can learn.

Now Rosetta will continue to its final destination, the comet. Rosetta will orbit the comet nucleus for two years as it travels toward the Sun. Rosetta will also drop a small lander on the nucleus. Rosetta is an international mission lead by the European Space Agency (ESA). NASA provides support and several important science instruments.

Find out more about asteroids and the solar system. Play the Solar System Game, and help Rosetta on its mission. Visit The Space Place. <http://spaceplace.nasa.gov/kids/solar-system>.

This article was written by Diane K. Fisher and provided by the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, California Institute of Technology, under a contract with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

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Despicable Me-dia ⁸⁰⁰

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The phones rang or e-mail in-boxes ponged at 17 city halls in Missouri over the past couple of weeks.

It was Marshfield City Clerk Terri Taylor calling. "How do you folks deal with the press?" she asked.

Seventeen inquiries, 17 similar responses. None of them totally open to the press. Apparently, it's easy to find city workers and elected officials who hate dealing with the media.

To hear them describe 'dealing' with us, newspaper reporters are the cockroaches of city halls.

The Marshfield Board of Aldermen used (read abused) this "survey data" last week to bolster its position, that when it comes to "dealing with the media," they've got it right and this paper and other advocates for free access have it wrong.

The aldermen decided to leave their limited-access media policy just the way it has been written for the past 30 years, stiff-arming the media and the public it was elected to serve.

You've probably heard of Bell, Calif., the Los Angeles suburb, where the city manager was getting paid more than President Barack Obama and the police chief more than the commander of the nearly 13,000-member Los Angeles Police Department. Where angry citizens demanded, and got, the manager, the chief and another high-salaried official to resign. Where they looked for the culprits and found them in the city council members, the very people they entrusted to lead their city of 40,000 people.

Those salaries were approved by the Bell mayor and three of their four council members, the same people they saw every day at the grocery store or church. Those same elected officials put an obscure measure on the ballot that allowed council members to pay themselves between \$90,000 and \$100,000 a year as part-time officials.

How did they get away with it in Bell? Until the Los Angeles Times showed up, no local newspaper reporters had been covering Bell City Hall. Few citizens were paying attention, either. Those who did keep tabs on Bell City Hall said they

