

# EVERYDAY DEMOCRACY

Seasonal Newsletter from the Citizen Advocacy Center and Citizens in the Western Suburbs  
SPRING 1998

## When Censorship Prevails, Democracy Fails

One would think that the halls of education would be the model for open communication, sharing of public opinion, and the fundamentals of democracy. Unfortunately, after dealing with my local board of education, I see many of the same obstacles noted by others who have written about their experiences in the pursuit of consideration by governing bodies.

I first became involved as a citizen's advocate two years ago when I read about a plan for a thirty-year agreement between my school district and park district. When I nervously spoke at my first school board meeting, I was surprised to be the only citizen in attendance. I was ready to quit except I received a phone call a couple of weeks later. Another citizen had read my comments in a local paper and wanted to pursue the issue. Someone had the same concerns as I did! So we began a small grassroots organization to let the people's voice be heard.

There was a great deal of opposition to the board's plan, and eventually we were able to get over one hundred concerned citizens to attend an open meeting and voice their overwhelming opposition. Of

course, the opposition was not viewed by the boards as a majority opinion. Their plan was already well on its way to approval by each board and their attorneys. Despite the controversy, their plan

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and \$1,000,000 of taxpayer dollars was approved.

There was a tendency to give up after the first issue, but I decided not to be a single issue person and continued to attend board meetings twice each month. I ran for school board last November, but lost to an individual notably more in tune with the board's philosophy and who had several times my campaign budget. I did manage, however, to raise several important issues and earn the respect of many individuals who read about them. I will always appreciate those people who educated themselves and sought out the issues.

I had hopes that a respectable number of votes would bring the

board to realize that my views were shared by many people in the community who may not feel comfortable voicing their opinions. More people began to attend meetings, although numbers were still light. Then last January, another issue began to generate interest.

A petition had been circulated and submitted to the school board regarding a transportation issue. More than a dozen parents (a lot for a school board meeting) attended the meeting to voice their concerns. At that meeting, the senior board member singled me out, calling me a liar and instigator in an outburst one might consider slanderous. As upset as I was, I maintained myself and de-

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## CIVIC FESTIVAL

Please join us  
on **SUNDAY, JULY 19**  
from **4:00 TO 6:00 PM**  
to mark the Citizen  
Advocacy Center's 4th  
Anniversary.

Meet your fellow citizens,  
learn about resources at the  
Center, munch on  
refreshments, and listen to a  
surprise guest speaker.

# To Encourage Whistleblowers

How can we encourage greater citizen participation in government and discourage dishonest government in the state of Illinois? How can citizens point out corruption inside our government? What are the benefits of such deeds? Well, there is an overlooked act that many people are unaware of: The Whistleblower Reward and Protection Act.

A person with knowledge of fraudulent or corrupt behavior of an elected official or a contractor doing business with a taxing body can go to the State Police to prompt an investigation. The State Police will contact the Attorney General to further investigate and, if the facts warrant, eventually prosecute. Also, citizens who spot inappropriate behavior may take the alleged wrongdoer to court if the Attorney General decides not to prosecute.

The person who reports the wrongdoing, the "whistleblower," can collect up to 30% of the damages incurred. If the case becomes a civil lawsuit, then the whistle-

blower can be awarded 25% of the damages and all of the legal fees.

In addition to rewarding the whistleblower reporting government fraud, there are substantial benefits to the taxing body, as well. If the suspected offender is found at fault, the offender is obligated to pay three times the amount of reparations. This pays for the whistleblower's reward, replaces the damages looted from the taxpayers, and provides extra revenue to the taxing body. Another positive aspect is that it doesn't cost anything for the local taxing body to adopt or enforce the act.

The Act protects against petty and frivolous suits because the evidence has to go to the Illinois Attorney General for review first. There must be imposing evidence to suggest a need for investigation. The Act imposes significant penalties against someone for making false accusations about government corruption. This Act does not tolerate people who lie

to earn money or harass public officials. If there is no real evidence for a case, judges can make the plaintiff pay for the defendant's court costs and damages.

Because this Act has nothing but good provisions, it seems quite strange that only a couple of towns have adopted the Whistleblower Reward and Protection Act. Perhaps many citizens are completely unaware of how much good this act can do, so it is hoped that a better knowledge and understanding of this law, as well as adoption of this act by governing bodies, will happen soon.

—Ryan Schwebel

Lake Park High School intern

## **FACT:**

**Not a single municipality in DuPage has yet adopted the Whistleblower Reward & Protection Act.**

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manded an explanation of his remark. Unable to defend his statement, he apologized saying he was wrong and had misspoke.

My point in addressing this incident is three-fold. First, censorship by elected officials should never be tolerated. How effective can a board be when its members resort to intimidation or slander of the

very constituency it is elected to represent?

Second, any acts of intimidation or censure discourages public participation and the very principles of democracy. This elitist attitude promotes fear rather than encouragement, trust, guidance, or leadership.

Third, it is up to citizens like yourself to stand up against such

misuse of power. If I had given into such acts of intimidation, I and others like me would no longer have a voice in our democracy. People must have the tenacity not to give up or give in to intimidation or censure by anyone who would discourage the democratic process.

I encourage you to stay informed and educate yourself regarding the

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# It's a Swindle!

It's that time of year again when you start to worry that the General Assembly has rushed through the end of the session and passed all kinds of legislation that the members haven't even bothered to read—much less understand. Remember that extortionary cable late fee that almost got through last year?

Well, the swindle du jour to be concerned about is mutual insurance. More than 3 million Illinoisans have mutual auto, health, or life insurance policies. Policyholders rather than shareholders own the assets of mutual insurance companies. In Illinois, mutual insurance companies have billions of dollars of assets, including at least \$35 billion in surplus. Under current law, if a mutual insurance company wants to become a stockholding company, it would have to go through a demutualization process that would compensate policy holders for their equity in the company. But

**You don't get information about this, and you don't get a dime for your assets in the mutual company as a policyholder!**

now these mutual companies have a fast one all lined up and already through the House Insurance Committee.

Their greedy plan, opposed by other insurance companies and consumers alike, would gouge policyholders like this: SB 1901 would allow mutual companies to create holding companies, or parents of the mutual company. The holding company would issue

stock and be responsible to stockholders, who have shares and who want the company to focus stockholders' interests—profits—and not necessarily the interests of policyholders—like keeping premiums low. Under the proposed legislation—your assets as a policyholder in the mutual company would be converted to the assets of the shareholders in the mutual holding company.

A typical policy holder could lose thousands of dollars in assets that under the current law the company would be forced to give

the policyholder if it is changed its status from a mutual company to a stockholding company. The proposed law doesn't even require the company to explain to you your rights. Oh, and by the way, there is nothing in this legislation that limits executive enrichment. So your company managers can give themselves a bunch of stock options all while they are supposed to be managing the company for the benefit of the policyholders—you.

This plan is all about more money for the insurance company and no money, no control, and no rights to information about demutualization to the policyholder. It is an outright swindle. Policyholders have rights too, and this is a downright sneaky attempt to rip off *billions of dollars* of our assets!

—Theresa Amato  
Executive Director  
Citizen Advocacy Center

## FACT:

According to the DuPage Board of Elections, not quite 16% of registered voters voted in the last school board elections. Did you?

tant to the function or dysfunction of the democratic process.

—Deborah H. Schultz  
Citizen, Carol Stream

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facts and issues in your community. Don't be a one issue person. Share information with others and get their opinions. Contact your elected officials and local newspapers to get your message across. Influence comes with numbers and knowledge.

Get involved and participate in the democratic process. Go to a

local board meeting, and be sure to vote in local elections and primaries where decisions that affect you most directly are made. Don't let others with your views stand alone or expect someone else to do the work for you. Give them your active vocal support.

Lastly, don't give up or let governing bodies intimidate or censure you. Each person is impor-

*Everyday Democracy* is a publication of the *Citizen Advocacy Center*, a non-profit, nonpartisan, 501(c)(3) corporation. Submissions from citizen advocates in the western suburbs of Chicago are encouraged.

The *Center* is an educational and charitable organization dedicated to building democracy for the 21st century by strengthening the public's capacities, resources, and institutions for self-governance.

If you are interested in more information, becoming a volunteer, or making a tax-deductible contribution to the *Center*, please feel free to contact or visit us.

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EVERYDAY DEMOCRACY

# Citizen Initiative Award

Recognize the efforts and power of a citizen who is acting as a catalyst for citizen participation in the democratic process by nominating him or her for the Citizen Initiative Award. Recipients of the Award will have demonstrated significant and informed civic participation in their communities and by their

example will have inspired others to build democracy. Nomination forms are available at the Center and are due by Wednesday, July 1. Recipients will be honored at the Citizen Advocacy Center's Fourth Anniversary Civic Celebration. **CALL TODAY TO NOMINATE AN OUTSTANDING CITIZEN!**

**630/833-4080**

## Can you contribute?

The Woods Fund of Chicago has presented the Center with a challenge: if the Center raises \$10,000 from individual donations, the Fund will match every dollar of the next \$5,000 we raise. We are only half-way there and need your contribution!

Can you help us? Please support the Center's ongoing efforts to protect our public assets, to improve civic skills, and to make our local institutions more accountable! Make a donation in the enclosed envelope today!