



What Have They Done? Have They Earned Re-election?

Schwab and Shipper Have Mixed Record

By William C. Thomas

Judging by the ubiquitous yard signs in the County and by the close margin they earned at the County Republican Assembly, Schwab and Shipper are not having an easy time running for re-election as incumbents. Part of that, of course, is a general feeling of distrust with our elected officials at all levels; but another, larger, part is a dissatisfaction with the passive roles many of us have played in the past: we now want to know what our government's doing and we question the official explanation because too often, we've not been told the entire truth.

Following is a brief summary of the accomplishments and doings of Commissioners Schwab and Shipper, from January, 2009-present: the goods and the "not delivering the goods," depending on your perspective, listed in order from the most egregious to the most benign, in this writer's judgment. More information concerning these summaries can be found in our "Past Articles" section and in the weekly papers covering the County.

The cost of an open records request, as of May, 2012, is now \$20.00/hour for "research," which is not objectively verifiable, plus copying fees and additional fees, depending on the documents requested. This could be disastrous for anyone researching his mineral rights through several owners; for anyone looking up BOCC minutes and supporting documentation from before 2000; for anyone looking, as I did, in 2003, for the BOCC minutes that recorded the first organized Elbert County Fair; the hiring of the Extension Agent, and information regarding Fair Events. The clerk who helped me do the research spent at least three hours going through the records from the '30s: that would be \$60.00 with today's fees.

The imposition of fees for open records is tantamount to muzzling those who want information, and "open records," whether they be receipts for gas by Mr. Shipper charged to the County or information regarding the first Fairgrounds, are public property and should be accessible to the public without determining how much it would cost first. That there's no verifiable way to determine how much time is spent on research is arrogant and again muzzles the right to know.

The Incumbents threatened a Journalist's livelihood and her right to report by suggesting that the County put its legal advertising in a rival newspaper because of a factual article she had researched on Mr. Pippin's affidavit to the 18th Judicial District. There were no inaccuracies in the article. The Incumbent most likely just objected to the public exposure.

Prohibiting or limiting a free Press is a violation of the First Amendment. By threatening the Journalist's livelihood and her paper's ability to stay afloat financially is intimidation. Incidentally, the rival newspaper has a tiny circulation in the County in comparison to the newspaper originally picked and designated by the BOCC in January 2012. If the Incumbents go ahead and put the County's legal advertising in the smaller paper, the Public's right to know is further compromised.

The "Sunshine Law" has been violated, whether intentionally or unintentionally, by the lack of a clear agenda. A meeting on the Budget suddenly turns into a consideration of the Rubbish Ordinance. Another posted meeting on Water issues suddenly goes into executive session without a clear ending to the Executive Session. While it is understood that emergency consideration must sometimes take precedence to what has been posted, the way this has been handled is inappropriate and excludes concerned citizens. If Executive Session is called for, it needs to be announced and anticipated, with a beginning and an end.

This shows a high handedness and arrogance regarding the citizens who might have concerns regarding the issues being discussed. If someone misses work in order to appear before the Commissioners on an issue and the Commissioners do not address that issue, the citizen is out of a day's pay or worse.

There has also been at least one meeting, advertised as a "public" meeting between the publishers of the Ranchland News and the BOCC that was suddenly closed without prior warning, either to the public or the Ranchland News publishers. When one of the citizens opened a door and asked if there were a public meeting, a Commissioner lost his temper and ordered her out. The Sheriff's Office was called to quell what was seen as a disturbance among the citizens gathered for the "public" meeting. This reveals a suspicion and distrust of the people the Incumbents are sworn to serve and an arrogance regarding the Commissioners' motives and intention. What other "public" meetings will suddenly be closed without notice?



With the tacit consent of the incumbents, Commissioner Schlegel stood before the County Court, as representative of the BOCC, and declared a Vietnam veteran a "terrorist." Legal costs were incurred defending a whimsical Restraining Order against a citizen who kept filing Open Records Requests until what he asked for was provided. If the Incumbents are not willing to stand up against such ridiculous and patently false accusations, spend money on attorneys and restraining orders that get thrown out of Court, they are also capable of keeping citizens out of County Buildings; keeping citizens from getting information; and keeping citizens from doing legitimate business with the County. As ridiculous as this abuse of power sounds, they could bar the parent of a 4-H contestant from the Fairgrounds during Fair on another trumped-up charge; they could conceivably order the Sheriff's Office to keep surveillance on citizens.

Not only is this a waste of time, County resources, and a begging of credibility, it also marks the victim of such allegations with suspicion by the Public. It could ruin a reputation. It also smacks of a desire to use County resources and legal resources to hide something.

The Incumbents have touted that they have cut County staff by 30% "with no change in service." That is a misstatement. Although Road and Bridge personnel are at acceptable levels and the Sheriff's Office personnel are at acceptable levels, the other departments are slashed to nearly nothing. The Extension Office can no longer offer its outreach programs and has far fewer seminars than four years ago; the Assessor's Office does not have the personnel to cover the County and make new assessments; the County Clerk's Office has lines waiting outside the Drivers' License Office for registrations and new license plates because there is less personnel to handle the demand; the papers on property transactions now take an additional two weeks to process. There is no maintenance staff, so basic repairs and cleaning are either neglected or done haphazardly. There is little room for the Health Department to operate: if contagion hits the County, there will be no funds to combat it.

Because many County employees, faced with the prospect of losing their jobs by Incumbents who might try for 40% reduction in personnel, "with no change in service," seriously fear such a move, they work overtime without compensation; volunteer their time to go to work-related meetings, and handle County business on their own. This is not efficiency; it is fear. It means that details of jobs are not being performed; it means that employees will do what's "safe" to keep their jobs.

The incumbents have said that they have balanced the budget. Does "balance" mean deferment of bills until tax rolls revive? Instead of looking at the County budget with an eye to paying bills from January-March, when assessments are not coming in, the Incumbents have deferred payments during those months, anticipating revenues. Can a budget be truly balanced if one is spending on promises?

The word "transparency" has been promoted through the use of streaming video of the BOCC meetings and the Facebook page, kept by Cory Stark, OEM. Unfortunately, the "transparency" is not consistent. Agendas are not consistently posted on the County website in time for people to make it to the BOCC meetings; "Open" meetings are suddenly closed; the Sheriff's Office is called when citizens are gathered to express their concerns regarding said "transparency;" finding information on the County website is sometimes difficult.

Claiming "transparency" is different than delivering it, and the lack of information that continues shows a sleight of hand that is cynical and meant for appearance only. If "transparency" is truly being employed, the Incumbents would not try to intimidate a reporter; they would make sure their meetings were posted in a timely manner; they would not post County legal notices in a newspaper with little circulation in the County.

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