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Coda

We don't need no stinkin' ethics board around here!

GREG BEAN

Grab onto your seats, because I'm about to tell you something so absolutely shocking you'll fall onto the floor with a case of the shivering fantods if you don't hold tight.



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Gregory Bean is executive editor of Greater Media Newspapers. You can reach him at gbean@gmnews.com.

The city poobahs in Long Branch - the national poster child for eminent domain abuse - don't want an ethics board that would look into things if people accuse them of dicey dealings like conflict of interest.

They've been kicking around the notion of creating an ethics board since it was suggested by Councilman Brian Unger, a green-thinking independent politician who got elected by beating the candidate the council supported in the last election, and has been driving everybody crazy since.

A political nudge in the true sense of the word, Unger has nagged the council on a host of issues on everything from protecting the American dream by ending eminent domain abuse, to historic preservation, to beach access, to the incredible concept of ethics in government.

He is, in other words, the worst nightmare imaginable for a council that likes to steamroll its agenda without argument, and the public opinion be damned.

Unable to keep him quiet, Unger's political opponents recently tried to smear him for a comment he made about the employment of a city worker whose

salary for her *part-time* job is \$60,000 a year. After a budget hearing in April, Unger apparently asked City Council President Michael DeStefano, "Whose girlfriend is she?"

That comment is a bit sexist and inappropriate, certainly, but you can't argue with Unger's outrage, and you might even cut him a little slack because his heart is in the right place, even though his mouth isn't.H

is enemies didn't, though. Even though the comment wasn't made in a public forum but in a conversation with DeStefano, the offended DeStefano took the comment back to Schneider, who sent the upstart councilman a nasty e-mail about creating a hostile work environment. Then, a whole controversy over emails developed, which had the effect of diverting everyone's attention from the thing that caused the situation in the first place - the fact that a Long Branch zoning official is getting \$60,000 a year for a part-time job.

While they'd be really, really happy if Unger just went away, however, they can't always dismiss him and his ideas out of hand.

For example, when Unger brought up the idea of an ethics board - in part because he had some questions about Mayor Adam Schneider's representation of a client who had an application before the Planning Board, which Unger thought might be a conflict of interest - the council had to at least pay the idea lip service before turning it down.

Although they obviously wanted to, they couldn't just laugh at Unger's idea and sneer, "Ethics board? We don't need no stinkin' ethics board."

They had to discuss it so everyone would know why they thought it was a bad idea. And you just wouldn't believe some of the things they said to defend their reasoning.

DeStefano, for example, had this twisted bit of logic, as reported in our story in the June 19 edition of the Atlanticville, a Greater Media newspaper.

"If you are ever cleared by the board, then the response is going to be, 'Well, you appointed them,' " he said.

In other words, if your ethics board clears you of a charge, nobody will believe it wasn't a political decision, so



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we're better off not having an ethics board in the first place.

You know that LOL thing young people write in their e-mails, that's short for laughing out loud? I'd be LOLing like mad after reading something that bizarre, except I'm crying a little inside with the knowledge that some people out there, some of DeStefano's constituents, might be buying that load of bull.

Or how about City Attorney James Aaron, who noted that while the state government is all in favor of local ethics boards, creating one would cost the city money? Even though the members of the ethics board would be volunteers, he said, the city would still have to pay for a secretary and attorney.

This may be the first time in recorded history where you have one attorney trying to derail the gravy train for another attorney, but there it is. I'm sure there's a professional lawyers' organization somewhere that will censure Aaron for his attempt to keep a brother attorney from feeding at the public trough, if they ever get wind of it.

"I can also see a battle as to who gets appointed and why," Aaron said.

Well, yes, Mr. Aaron. There might be a battle if council members create an ethics board and then try to load it with yes men and women they could control. There might be a heck of a battle if you did that.

Better not to have one in the first place, if there's a chance people are going to criticize who you put on it.

Although the council turned down the idea of an ethics board, Aaron did explain that people with concerns can take them to the Finance Board. The Finance Board is appointed by the state at no cost to the city, he explained, although he did not explain why the Finance Board would look into things like conflict-of-interest allegations.

Wouldn't the dog control officer be a better alternative? At least he or she likely has a muzzle and cage handy if things get out of control.

Mayor Schneider, who might or might not have had a conflict of interest (he says he doesn't, but then there's no ethics board to decide the matter) had this gem of wisdom.

"It is an appointed board of people with no real qualification," he said. "I don't see the point in it."

Well, mayor, the members of the board would only be unqualified if the council appoints unqualified people. And if you can't see the point of having an ethics board to monitor the ethics of local officials, then God help us: at least those who live in Long Branch.

Now that community is not only the poster child for eminent domain abuse, it's the poster child for goofy political reasoning and obfuscation, and a primer on how to do things wrong.