

Audit criticizing Grays Harbor employees was 'strikingly similar' to Denver report

When complaints were lodged in late 2008 that the Grays Harbor Planning and Building Department was taking too long to process building permits and that staff members were making up the rules as they went along, the then Public Services Director Paul Easter denied the allegations. But, to clear the air, he suggested an independent audit be conducted.

An audit would provide an unbiased insight into the workings of the department, he reasoned, adding only one stipulation — that none of the 10 employees, all members of Local 275 — would be disciplined as a result of the audit's finding.

So it was that, in late 2008, Grays Harbor County asked the International Code Council, a nationwide non-profit group of building officials and code administrators, to conduct the audit at an estimated cost of \$20,000.

No one could have anticipated at the time that the audit would turn into a bizarre story involving charges of plagiarism, invalid conclusions, wasted time and ill-spent money.

The first indication that something was awry came during 2009 when anticipated interviews with the public and the staff failed to take place.

Then the county received a draft report in late 2009 that officials said was inaccurate and made little sense.

Facing pressure from two Grays Harbor County newspapers, *The Daily World* of Aberdeen and the *Montesano Vidette*, who sought release of the report under the Freedom of Information Act, the county said it planned to do so. But Brian Shea, head of the Grays Harbor Planning and Building department, filed an injunction to prevent the release of the report, saying it would damage him in his work.

Council 2, acting on behalf of the members of Local 275, also filed an injunction in Grays Harbor Superior Court to stop the release. The union's general counsel, Audrey Eide, argued that the report would violate the employees'

right to privacy and was a violation of the county's union contract as it relates to evaluating an employee. Although the employees would not be named, they could be identified by their titles in the small community, she said.

Each employee signed a statement

Bizarre story of 'fill-in-the-blanks cookie-cutter' report

saying they had reviewed the report and "believe that the conclusions and recommendations in the evaluation are based in whole or in substantial part on unsubstantiated allegations."

Judge Gordon Godfrey granted the injunctions requested by the employees and Shea.

Soon after that ruling, the newspapers and Humptulips resident Ron Armstrong, a critic of the department, filed a motion for the lifting of the injunction and Judge David Edwards approved its release.

The report was critical of the department, suggesting it needed to streamline the process, foster a better relationship with the public, do a better job of explaining what they do and even consider hosting public workshops.

Tom Frost, senior vice president for technical services of the code council, wrote that "it only takes a few reversals of agreements or approvals, a few lengthy delays in reviews, a few conflicts between agency requirements, and a few disagreements on code interpretations to turn the development process into a nightmare for some."

The report mentioned that employees were somehow creating regulations on the fly or using "phantom codes" that did not exist.

Following release of the report, Local 275 members said they strongly disagreed

with it and expressed their disappointment in it, at the same time adopting a unanimous vote of confidence in Shea.

Further investigation revealed that the report was "strikingly similar" to a report criticizing the City of Denver's planning department seven years ago. Although some part of the report was localized to fit Grays Harbor, both documents listed similar "problems" and nearly identical "solutions," the Grays Harbor County commissioners said.

They described it as nothing more than a "flawed, fill-in-the-blank, cookie cutter" document. Inquiries also revealed that fewer than half of the people listed as being interviewed had, in fact, been questioned.

Commented Local 275 shop steward Mark Sigler, "The members feel that the discovery of this document (the Denver report) validates our concerns regarding its lack of credibility and further strengthens our position that there was never an actual audit performed due to the lack of fact finding on the part of the 'expert.' It is clear now that the content and findings of the report are unfounded and lack merit."

Former Public Services Director Easter, who originally suggested the audit be ordered, told *The Daily World*, "Never in my wildest dreams did I anticipate such a turn of events. It appears there has been such a disservice by this report that clearly it comes up short of doing what its intended purpose was. The public didn't get their money's worth and the employees and staff of the building department didn't get their due as well."

Council 2 Staff Representative Kathy Brown, who worked with the union during the process, says the county commissioners, who refused to pay the balance of \$13,500 owing on the report, have invited comments from anyone who wishes to discuss the department's performance and to give them ideas.

"Shea and the employees were absolutely correct," she adds. "They did what they were hired to do."