

Karen Spranger: Agent of change or simply unqualified to hold Macomb clerk's job?

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Prior to becoming clerk, Spranger was seen as a political gadfly known to don tin foil accessories and dark glasses to protest smart meters



(Photo: Kathleen Galligan, Detroit Free Press)

In her first seven months as the Macomb County Clerk/Register of Deeds, Karen Spranger got kicked off her county computer for allowing noncounty workers on it; fired her two top appointed deputies; sued the county over a litany of issues, and was named as a defendant in three other lawsuits, including a whistle-blower complaint in federal court filed by her former top aides.

She was fined \$100 for a county ethics violation; totaled her county car in a crash; filed a criminal complaint about the news media harassing her; was caught on video pushing storage bins to a construction area before an office move she opposed, and is under investigation for allegedly lying on her affidavit to run for office.

It has been, to say the least, a less than auspicious start.

Read more:

Macomb County says clerk lied about residency, wants her disqualified

(<http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/macomb/2017/08/01/macomb-county-sues-clerk-spranger/528865001/>)

Who's the boss? Macomb Clerk Karen Spranger sues county to find out

(<http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/macomb/2017/06/23/whos-boss-macomb-clerk-karen-spranger-sues-county-find-out/421333001/>)

But then again, the 65-year-old Spranger came into office with few qualifications other than that of a political gadfly who was known to show up at government meetings in tinfoil accessories and dark glasses to protest smart utility meters and who had been behind repeated attempts to recall at least one local official.

The Free Press wasn't able to find any evidence that Spranger had held a regular job since graduating from high school. The inherited house in Warren where she claims to live hasn't had running water for several years and has been cited by the city as a nuisance.

In the years prior to taking over the \$108,800-per-year county job, Spranger received public assistance, including a state-issued Bridge card.

The little-known Republican shocked observers when she slipped into office last November on the coattails of another neophyte politician and surprise victor, Donald Trump, who handily won Macomb County to become president.

On Jan. 1, Spranger took over what was considered a well-run, award-winning office responsible for handling everything from elections to real estate records to birth and death certificates to jury duty assignments.

Now, county officials say, court e-filings are behind, employee grievances are up and nearly a third of her 80-plus-member staff was unfilled or on medical leave at one point last month. She's the only county official who hasn't submitted a proposed budget for her offices next year — a budget she is to review with county commissioners Aug. 28.

"All these problems that you have, none of these problems seemed to exist during the prior administration," county Commissioner Marv Sauger, a Warren Democrat, told Spranger during a June meeting at which a routine overview turned into a barrage of questions about what's going on in her office.

Read more:

Union leaders picket Macomb County clerk/register of deeds Karen Spranger

(<http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/macomb/2017/06/07/union-leaders-picket-macomb-county-clerk-register-deeds-spranger/378447001/>)

Ex-aide says Macomb County clerk saw employees as 'her enemies'

(<http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/macomb/2017/04/19/macomb-county-clerk-fined-ethics-karen-spranger/100655152/>)

"They keep mounting. Week after week after week, something's going on," Sauger said.

The most recent somethings — questions about where she lives and whether she lied about her residency on paperwork to run for office — could get her removed from office.

Frank Cusumano, Spranger's private attorney who has known her since January, said the firestorm Spranger is facing is political and personal because she isn't the establishment; she isn't the status quo.

He said Spranger lived in the bungalow-style house in question in south Warren when she filed to run for office and is a resident of Macomb County, the only requirement that he says she needed to run for the job. He said she has never been afraid of the truth.

"She's capable of doing the job. She's very detail-oriented. She wants to give her best value for the taxpayer dollar," he said. "She's not equipped to deal with the politics of people making false accusations against her. She's not the type of person to go along to get along. She's trying to adapt and function. She will not compromise for what she thinks is right. Her attempts to right things are being thwarted."

Recently, when asked whether she was unfit to hold office, he said: "She's no more unfit than any other person who comes to office with an agenda of change."

Where did she live?

Thin and petite, Spranger speaks softly, often at length and sometimes going off on a tangent when answering questions. A nighttime e-mail Aug. 1 to the county's finance director about her budget and a concealed pistol license audit she is requesting contained a number of misspellings and grammatical errors.

In June, she told county commissioners: "You can see the mess. You can see the opinions. But what is the truth? The truth is very basic. How do you organize an office that ran for 23 years the way it did? When you walk into the problem, very carefully, you try to fix it. But you can't fix it overnight because it didn't develop overnight."

Spranger did not act on repeated requests for an interview by the Free Press via phone and e-mails to her work and personal accounts. At one point she said she would talk if a reporter answered three questions — one about the story's deadline and two personal questions: Where did the reporter live and who is the reporter's husband. The Free Press declined to meet her conditions.

Spranger is single, grew up in Warren and is one of 16 children, according to election material she provided to the Free Press last year.

Her affidavit of identity to run for the countywide office — which has come into question — states that she has been resident of the county and the state for "60+" years. On an affidavit of identity she filed in 2014 to run for mayor in Warren, she said that she was a resident of the county and the state for "30+" years.

Spranger has an identical twin sister, Sharon Schmidt of Clinton Township, with whom she would attend government meetings to discuss smart meters and the possible effects of the devices.

Schmidt, soft-spoken like her sister, courteously told a Free Press reporter last week that she did not want to say anything about Spranger because her sister is under investigation.

The Sheriff's Office is investigating a complaint about whether Spranger perjured herself by lying about her residency on her affidavit of identity to run for office April 6, 2016.

In her election material, Spranger states that she went to Warren Lincoln High School, where Van Dyke Public Schools Superintendent Piper Bognar said Spranger graduated in June 1971.

Under professional experience, Spranger cited hands-on work experience at Van Dyke Public Schools, Teachers' Workshop at MISD (Macomb Intermediate School District), the Army's Tank-automotive and Armaments Command (TACOM) facility in Warren and various printer shops, according to the election material.

She also listed herself as a community activist and citizen advocate.

Bognar said the district's employment records indicated Spranger worked roughly 14 hours as a co-op student in June 1971, according to payroll records. That was a high school student job as part of the school day, classified as student help. Bognar did not have records for volunteer or nonemployment work.

Spranger was at MISD's Teachers' Workshop on a volunteer basis in the past. The workshop provides services, such as large laminating machines, and materials for the classroom.

Don Jarosz, public affairs officer at TACOM, checked with its personnel office, which looked at its former employees and said Spranger was not listed as one at the Warren facility.

Spranger described her occupation on campaign materials as an environmental consultant with an unidentified private foundation. She listed the business address as the Hudson Street home.

In a 2014 Michigan Court of Appeals opinion — where Spranger appealed a judgment denying her request for a poverty exemption from her 2012 property taxes on the house — she indicated her source of income "was a 'Bridge Card' and that she received assistance from the Department of Health and Human Services for her utility bills." She did not indicate the specific amounts of assistance that she received.

In her poverty exemption application with the City of Warren in March 2012, the appeals court opinion states, she "indicated that she had not filed a federal income tax return because she had no income. She further indicated that she had no bank account balances or credit cards." Spranger attached documentation of some of her utility expenses and a statement showing that the state agency was assisting with certain utility bills.

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Deputy Register of Deeds Jacqueline Ryan, left, Macomb County Clerk/Register of Deeds Karen Spranger and Deputy County Executive Mark Deldin on May 9, 2017 discuss ways to try to resolve issues that Spranger has with the vital records and the register of deeds offices moving into renovated space in the Talmer Building in downtown Mt. Clemens after the county filed a lawsuit over Spranger's objections to the move, which is scheduled to take place this coming weekend. (Photo: Christina Hall, Detroit Free Press)

According to those court records, Spranger presented documentation to the Michigan Tax Tribunal that showed the Department of Health and Human Services paid her utility bills in July and October of 2010, as well as January and June of 2011.

On her Facebook page, Spranger identifies herself as a homeowner and taxpayer from Warren and that she enjoys gardening, maintaining a healthy lifestyle and works tirelessly to attempt to improve her environment.

She recently updated her Facebook profile photo to include a photo of herself surrounded by other county officials.

In July, she updated her Facebook profile photo with one of her and Attorney General Bill Schuette. The photo appeared a day before her attorney sent a letter to Schuette's office asking it to take action after Spranger was denied access to inspect and verify the integrity of circuit court records temporarily moved to a secure county warehouse for storage during office renovations.

A spokesperson for Schuette's office said the office was reviewing the letter. Deputy County Executive Mark Deldin said the issue was resolved after Spranger gave an employee permission to obtain the necessary certification to access the files from the warehouse.

Trouble with smart meters

Several years ago, Spranger went on a crusade against smart utility meters in Warren and Clinton Township, where she attended government meetings wearing foil accessories or, as one official remembered, a silver sauna suit.

Mary Kamp, a former Warren City Council president and the current deputy council secretary, said Spranger regularly attended council meetings and spoke during public comment. Sometimes, Spranger wore a silver metallic jogging suit, floppy sunhat and glasses — often black and perforated.

Kamp said it was her understanding that Spranger wore the items to protect her from smart meters, which she was concerned about and provided detailed information about in three-ring binders. She said Spranger claimed to be sensitive to smart meters and believed that collectively they were a hazard because of radio waves.

Officials in Warren also recalled Spranger filing numerous Freedom of Information Act requests for city documents as a private citizen, sometimes coming to the city clerk's office multiple times a day. Sometimes, she picked up the prepared, requested materials, officials said, other times she did not. At one point, the office began logging the dates and times of her FOIA requests for the city attorney, officials said.

Her objections to smart meters apparently led to water being turned off at the home in Warren in the fall of 2012, as noted in a 2015 unpublished opinion by the state Court of Appeals.

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Exterior of the home of Macomb County Clerk/Register of Deeds Karen Spranger in Warren on July 25, 2017. (Photo: Christina Hall, Detroit Free Press)

The issue came up in Spranger's appeal of an order denying her a Principal Residence Exemption for the 2012 tax year at the Hudson address. She lost the property tax exemption after city records showed the minimum chargeable amount of water was never exceeded from January 2008 through June 2012, indicating the residence was not being used.

Spranger told a Michigan Tax Tribunal referee that she conserves water and uses alternative water sources, an argument the referee "found unpersuasive," according to the court opinion. The referee found that Spranger failed to submit utility bills or other evidence that she occupied the house as her principal residence.

Spranger claimed that she "live(s) a spartan existence" and that she'd lived at the address since 2001, according to the appeals court opinion.

According to Macomb County Probate Court records, Spranger's mother willed the house on Hudson to Spranger "for the care she has given me during my illness."

Neighbors of Spranger's house said they have seen Spranger getting the mail at the home and cutting the grass. One neighbor complained of raccoons at the house. A reporter who visited the house saw an antenna on the roof had fallen over and personal belongings were piled inside by the windows.

The city cited Spranger for not having a whole address on the house, a citation that was dismissed for compliance. Part of the house number now is handwritten in cursive. She also was cited for junk on the property, a citation that was dismissed.

Donald Scott, who has lived on Hudson for eight years, said this spring that he had seen Spranger around last winter and said that she had gotten the mail and cut the grass.

"She's been trying to take care of it, but I guess she takes care of her mother's stuff that's in there," he said, adding that Spranger "seemed all right. She talked to us and all that."

In April, Spranger was driving a county-issued car when she rear-ended a vehicle driven by a Warren woman who was stopped for a red light in Roseville. In her account of the crash, Spranger said that she was "traveling to home on 12 Mile Road." when she saw the light ahead, her foot slipped and the car ahead of her was hit.

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The newly-renovated space for Macomb County vital records and register of deeds and an office for County Clerk/Register of Deeds Karen Spranger in Mt. Clemens.
(Photo: Christina Hall, Detroit Free Press)

The police report and court citation list the Hudson address as her residence. The court found her responsible to impeding traffic and she paid a \$175 fine when she appeared in May.

In June, Sauger asked Spranger during a public meeting whether she remembered a specific number. Spranger asked if the number was in the budget and whether Sauger could help her out.

"That's your address where you're supposed to be living," he said. "That's your address in case you want to know."

On July 18, the city put a notice on the house that the dwelling was not to be occupied until city certification is obtained and an inspection needed to be arranged.

Cusumano said Spranger hadn't resolved the matter yet, but that she plans to either rehab, sell or rent the house. The attorney said he doesn't know where she currently is living and doesn't ask about her personal life. He previously said that he didn't think she was living in her car, and he thought she was living with friends.

Complaints and defenders

It's been a frustrating road for Spranger, employees and other county officials since Spranger took office.

Officials have complained of her canceling meetings. Some employees have complained of disregard of union contracts and policies and complained of health problems from what they say is a hostile work environment.

A couple of county commissioners expressed concern that constituents were waiting longer times for records they were requesting.

Spranger and those who have defended her said she had no help on her transition into office, that other elected officials are trying to run her offices and are orchestrating a smear campaign against her.

Cusumano said some of the union grievances were filed the day Spranger assumed office.

He said Spranger is doing her job, asking questions for a more efficient government "and she's getting savaged for it."

"Whether or not she presents herself well, that's up for debate," he said. "Her role is to establish the most efficient role of operations."

"Karen's basically an honest person. What you see, is what you get," he said. "She's not equipped to play on the field with a bunch of people who's not saying what they're thinking."



Macomb County Clerk/Register of Deeds Karen Spranger speaks with her attorney Frank Cusumano before attending the Macomb County Commissioners committee meeting in Mt. Clemens on March 13, 2017. The meeting invited members of the public to speak on their concerns and thoughts on Ms. Spranger's recent actions including the firing of two union employees in her department. (Photo: Brittany Greeson, Special to the Free Press)

Spranger's deputy register of deeds, Jacqueline Ryan, said Spranger is "like the mother of Macomb County" during an county ethics board meeting. Spranger has defended herself as a very kind and reasonable person.

But Erin Stahl, who held Ryan's job before Spranger fired her and another top aide, said Spranger is anything but.

"Despite her sweet grandmotherly demeanor displayed in public, Spranger is a real detriment and real threat to the office of Clerk/Register of Deeds," Stahl wrote in a letter that accompanied her complaint to the ethics board.

Her former top aides said she referred to employees as her enemies.

Stahl wrote: "Someone needs to stop Clerk Spranger. The county cannot wait a year for a recall. You are our only hope."

In a March letter to the county board, Stahl said she and former deputy clerk Paul Kardasz knew Spranger for a short time during her campaign and "we believed she shared the same goals and aspirations, such as accountability, unity, transparency and dedication as outlined in her campaign literature we helped create. But it soon became apparent Spranger forgot the promises she made to the residents of Macomb County and to Team Spranger."

Other employees have said they haven't had any problems with Spranger, and a few wrote letters of support to the county ethics board.

Despite the swirling controversy, Spranger made one of the most important decisions she's had to make as county clerk — one that was made without fanfare, but is important to the electorate she serves. She, like other county clerks, selected new voting machines from three vendors approved by the state by an April deadline.

Her choice was the vendor that Clinton Township Clerk Kim Meltzer said most of the county's local clerks wanted.

Meltzer, president of the Macomb County Municipal Clerks Association, said Spranger initially was leaning toward a different vendor that Meltzer said was more expensive, basing her decision on what other counties were doing.

Meltzer said the association put out a survey, with two-thirds of the county's clerks responding with the vendor they wanted based on their experience. Spranger held meetings to look at each vendor.

"We wanted her to listen to us, and she did," Meltzer said.

'Hit the lottery'

Spranger won her first political office on the coattails of Trump's victory in blue-collar Macomb County, where even some of her GOP counterparts didn't know who she was.

"I think she hit the lottery with the election," said Warren Mayor Jim Fouts, himself a controversial figure in county politics. "Trump won, she benefited greatly."

Fouts has had his own run-ins with Spranger, who unsuccessfully challenged his re-election for mayor in 2015 after she tried three times to get recall petition language against him approved in 2014.

Last August, Spranger won the GOP primary for the county clerk's seat by 312 votes over her closest competitor. She spent little on the countywide campaign. In basically the last two months of the campaign, she spent just \$136.

On Election Night in November, she sat with her friend and campaign manager, Joseph Hunt, who himself has unsuccessfully run for office, waiting for election results at one of several computers set up in the hallway of the circuit court building in Mt. Clemens — the hallway right outside what would become her office less than two months later.

Spranger beat Fred Miller, a Democrat who served as a state representative and county commissioner, by 635 votes. She lost in Warren, the state's third largest city, which tends to lean Democratic, and six other cities.

But she won in the county's remaining communities, including more Republican-leaning townships in the central and northern swaths of the county and in Sterling Heights, the state's fourth-largest city.

Voters don't decide

The courts may end up deciding whether Spranger stays in the job.

Voters, right now, cannot.

Voters cannot recall a four-year officeholder during his or her first or last year in office, under state law.

Recall petition language would be filed with the Board of State Canvassers, which handles functions related to the recall of state-level offices and most county-level offices, except county commissioner.

Not until next year can recall language be filed with the Board of State Canvassers.

If language is approved, signatures would have to be collected from 25% of the number of voters in the last gubernatorial election, which was in 2014. In Macomb County, that would be 66,276 signatures.

For the governor to remove an elected official, that usually rises to the level of corruption or misfeasance or malfeasance, said Eric Lupher, president of the Citizens Research Council of Michigan in Livonia.

Gov. Rick Snyder's office said on July 25 that no requests for removal of Spranger had come to the office.

Lupher said any time a public official is in the news "it leads to some level of distrust in government, especially within that jurisdiction. People look at it with a tainted eye. ... It affects confidence in government, and that's not a good thing."

Editor's note: A photograph has been removed from this story that misidentified Paul Kardasz as the person pictured in the photo.

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