

A call for justice on Tiregate

by Virginia Starrett

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When cautioned by a Good Governance Group attendee at its Feb. 12 meeting that most of us here in the county don't want the recent Nevada Division of Investigation's report on Tiregate to be "swept under the rug," Commissioner Chair Barry Penzel assured the crowd that the Board of Commissioners had already put the report on the commissioners agenda for March 7.

He then stated that there would be time allotted for public comment as if that should satisfy us. Playing Karnac, here's my rendition of how that meeting's Tiregate Report item will go:

Presenter: "It was regrettable. Chris Oakden is dead. End of story."

Taxpayers/residents public comments: "We want action. The county is corrupt."

Commissioners' discussion: "You're right to demand we do better. We pledge we will. Let's move on."

I got the impression from Commissioner Penzel that allowing the worst scandal ever in this county to "end" with a whimper (or chorus of whimpers from people venting at the time and place designated by the BOCC) and not with a bang would, in fact, be the best we residents should expect.

I mean, says the county with a shrug, what more can really be done? As Penzel noted to the crowd in the room, the attorney general declined to prosecute any and all persons named in the report, even those the investigators clearly found to be guilty of criminal acts. One has to wonder why? Could it be that some kind of "pressure" was put on those in charge of the investigation to soft peddle the response because high level Douglas county folks they knew might be implicated once the dominoes started falling?

But then there's that \$1 million-plus Oakden (helped by family and friends) embezzled. Surely the county should aggressively be doing something to recover that, right? You'd think, but see, the "process" put in place to apprehend the thieves was handled so poorly that by the time anything of value could have been attached, there was nothing to attach. Why wasn't Oakden arrested and his assets seized right away? My bet is the county's insurer is asking this same question. It won't pay off if it can argue that the county didn't mitigate its losses. Goodbye to a million bucks.

Yep. The report is a true eye-opener. Every resident should locate a copy and read it.

A close second to the number of folks described in the report as participants in criminal activities is the list of county employees and elected officials who displayed gross, and in some instances, likely willful negligence in either indirectly or directly aiding and abetting the perpetrator for not months, but years, as he systematically stole tires, work space, and tools again and again. Douglas County government has, according to the report, a "pervasive culture of entitlement" that made what Chris Oakden did "acceptable" to too many, and in that environment, dozens, if not hundreds of fellow employees of all ranks ignored or took part in his crimes or ultimately lied to investigators. The report describes how he used county facilities to work on the personal vehicles of many — including more than a handful of sheriff deputies' vehicles as well as the vehicle of the past sheriff. A large number of deputies bought those "highly discounted" tires, too.

Two past county managers, the district attorney, two past county chief financial officers, the head of the county public works department at the time, and others are all described in the report as doing things that enter the realm of questionable ethical behavior or demonstrate negligence. The investigators weren't after ethical violations or negligence, though, and it looks as if the county won't be sorting those out, either.

Here's what I project will be the county's mantra: "Don't pay any heed to the underbelly of county incompetence and dishonesty uncovered in the AG's report. Just look at these shiny objects over here. We fired two low level employees (see, we're tough when we need to be), we established an anonymous Whistleblower process, and we put together an audit committee.

All of these, I would point out, are akin to shutting the barn door after the cows got out. And in this case shutting the door with a whole lot of people with dirt on their hands on the inside continuing to do what they do, suffering no consequences whatsoever for their bad acts, and collecting paychecks.

I'm of the mind that this will not do.

We residents and taxpayers of this county deserve real justice. Incompetence needs to be highlighted, with those who have shown it named, and in most cases, fired. Those guilty of unethical behavior need to be exposed officially and prosecuted for ethics violations. It doesn't matter if the employee or elected official no longer works here or lives here. Ethics violations can be pursued even years later. Those in law enforcement, particularly, need to be disciplined for their role in those tire and services thefts. The legal standard is if a person "knew or should have known" regarding the acquisition of stolen goods. Deputies are explicitly told to not take discounts from local merchants. Those that bought cheap tires from Oakden should have known he was dealing in "ill gotten gains." There is no excuse.

Douglas County deserves honest government. Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their county. Demand accountability and demand it now.

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