

July 2, 2024

CM Henjum COMMENTS: Donelson Censure

The core issue here is trust. Another issue is transparency. I support measures that genuinely increase trust and accountability – including campaign finance reform. But Councilmember Donelson’s actions undermine, rather than build, public trust.

My comments today fall into three categories: the **what**, the **how** and the **why**.

FIRST, I will address the WHAT.

Distrust of elected officials and public institutions is at an all-time high. I favor constructive, good faith efforts to hold public officials accountable. When such measures truly promote confidence in our democratic institutions, the cynicism that “everything is rigged” diminishes.

I support limits on donations to campaigns that would apply to everyone. I am concerned about the influence of so-called ‘dark money’. Citizens should be able to see from whom a candidate has received financial support. Such disclosures help citizens determine whether candidates are being influenced by campaign contributors.

For the record – and for those who are concerned about integrity – I hope you’ll look at both my campaign contributions and my voting record. I’ve cast votes both for and against development-related projects. To highlight some NO votes:

- 2424 GOG - 8/24/21;
- Kum and Go- 8/9/22;
- Extension of Constitution Avenue -2/28/23;
- Kettle Creek-7/25/23;
- Kum and Go – 8/8/23;
- Water Tank in Mountain Shadows- 11/14/23.

I’ve done my best to base my votes on the legally required decision-making criteria. I have not always agreed with my fellow Councilors on votes we’ve made. Some of the decisions have been charged and emotional -- however, I assume good faith in their decision-making.

It may not be the case that Councilmember Donelson has the same faith in his colleagues.

Now on to the “HOW” of the matter.

Councilmember Donelson’s timing raises a question. After three years on Council, why bring this up now? He told us himself at his press conference last week. At last Monday’s work session, all of those present opposed his request to advance a building height ordinance to a regular meeting. At the press conference he said – quote: “It spurred me to look at financial reports.”

He found data that he believed confirmed his suspicion that conflicts of interest must have been at the heart of our not seeing things his way.

So why the sudden concern related to campaign contributions?

Where was this concern when he was voting on an appeal from the Planning Commission by developer Gavin Light on March 12, 2024, who donated to his campaign? Why didn’t he mention the donation he received from this developer and determine if he should recuse himself?

Why didn't he recuse himself from votes during the midst of his recent state house run when he accepted thousands in donations from developers, home building associations, and other parties who had business before council?

Back to last week: I am struggling to find any other reason for his sudden concern about donations than his surprise and anger at the lack of support from his fellow Councilmembers.

Couldn't he have thought he was simply a minority of one because we made our decisions based on an honest disagreement?

Apparently...

- arguments in support of private property rights, or
- the economic chilling effect of such a change to the City Charter, or
- restrictions on housing during a time of shortage, or
- concerns about whether certain issues should be put to the ballot –

apparently, Councilmember Donelson did not believe that his fellow Councilmembers could have been motivated by ANY such concerns!

Could he have handled this differently?

Yes. At his own press conference, he gave an example. He could have approached members individually, explaining his position and seeking to understand theirs. Or, he could have contacted Council leadership and asked to start a discussion about campaign finance.

So, why didn't he?

It was already clear the Arrowswest vote was going to be delayed. What was the reason to blindside his colleagues at that very moment?

Now the WHY.

Why is Council voting on censure and possible removal from board and committee responsibilities?

- Councilmember Donelson's comments and actions last Tuesday showed a blatant disregard and disrespect for the leadership, members, norms, and the institution and body of City Council. He demonstrated his belief that the ends justify the means – that is, in order to get his way on a vote, instead of depending on criteria-based argument to carry the day, he will attack through implication the integrity of colleagues who may disagree with his position, attempting to intimidate them into recusing themselves, thus swaying the vote, not to mention fueling distrust in local government.
- The majority of City Council can no longer trust Councilmember Donelson to operate in good faith in such settings.

Let's focus on real transparency measures, not political opportunism that serves only to breed cynicism.