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OUR VIEW: OPEN GOVERNMENT

Email case threatens public's right to know

In an unprecedented blow to government transparency, St. Louis County has refused to comply with a state authority's direction to provide the public with information that must be disclosed under state law.

Why it matters:

St. Louis County officials have refused to follow the direction of state authorities to release public emails by county commissioner and congressional candidate Pete Stauber.

It's an egregious violation of the Minnesota Data Practices Act and has implications for government accountability and transparency across the state.

It started when St. Louis County administrator refused to supply public emails between county commissioner and GOP congressional candidate Pete Stauber and the National Republican Congressional Com-

mittee, a GOP PAC.

The Star Tribune requested copies of the emails, which are deemed public under state law when they are between elected representatives and organizations or other public officials. Emails between public officials and individuals are private under state law.

That's where St. Louis County's sleight of hand comes in. The county argued that the emails between Stauber and the RNCC are private because the RNCC is a person or individual. This argument goes beyond reason. And the state authority governing such disputes has agreed with the Star Tribune that St. Louis County must make the emails public.

In its ruling, the Data Practice Office of the Minnesota Department of Administration made clear the emails must be released. It noted that the statute does not intend to consider anyone acting as an agent of an organization an "individual" for purposes of the law.

While the advisory opinion does not hold the power of a court ruling, well-intentioned government officials usually comply with such rulings.

In this case, St. Louis County appears willing to defy that opinion and bankroll its flimsy legal argument on the backs of taxpayers. In that case everyone loses.

The Star Tribune and other media organizations are considering legal action against St. Louis County, noting that the county's current interpretation of the law would make all email correspondence by public officials secret unless they agreed to the release.

The Star Tribune is seeking the emails because Minnesota law prohibits government resources and tools, such as email, to be used for political purposes. So if Stauber's emails with the NRCC were political in nature, there would be a violation of the law.

Right now, the public has no knowledge of whether Stauber violated the law because the county thinks it's the only one that needs to know.

If St. Louis County takes on the legal challenge, it will only be imposing legal fees on its taxpayers for the sole purpose of keeping those same taxpayers in the dark when they have a right to know.

We call on the county to reverse its position and release the emails so voters can decide for themselves if campaign-related laws were violated.

OTHER VIEW

Staying the course in Afghanistan unwise

New York Daily News

In broad daylight Thursday, a Taliban attack in Afghanistan killed leaders of Kandahar Province — and could well have killed America's top in-country commander, Gen. Austin Miller.

The violence is a screaming siren: The longest war in United States history needs a change in strategy, or reinforcements, or a decisive pullout. Staying the course is not an option.

Dead at the hands of the insurgents is Abdul Raziq, the region's police chief, as well as the region's intel-

ligence chief, Abdul Momin. Wounded is the province's governor and three Americans.

American forces entered Afghanistan right after 9/11, aiming to crush Al Qaeda and break the back of the Taliban, which had sheltered the terrorist network. Al Qaeda has scattered; the Taliban, after limping, is strong again.

Donald Trump once called this war a mistake. Last summer, he halfheartedly announced that American troops would stay there with a new strategy — and no withdrawal timetable.



Cautious optimism about climate change

For decades climate scientists have warned about the effects of human-kind's propensity to shift carbon from its stored state in the earth to the atmosphere, with the results being rising ocean and atmospheric temperatures; higher sea levels; more dangerous storms; flooding from severe rain events; ocean acidification; and melting glaciers and ice caps in Greenland, the Arctic and Antarctic.

It is now apparent that we are seeing these events today, as detailed in a recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report. What were once reported as future effects are happening now.

We know these changes are only going to get worse with negative effects on fresh water systems, agricultural production, forests and biodiversity. Livability in many parts of our planet will be impacted by unbearable heat, flooded coastal areas and desertification, leading to populations trying to move to less affected areas, creating conflict and instability.

So why the title of this piece? Why am I "optimistic"?

The reason is that we've reached a turning point in the climate change debate. Except for a handful of politicians in our nation's capital (and some even in Minnesota), gone are the man-made climate change disbelievers. Around the world, the science of human created climate change is accepted without argument.

Fortunately, many people are doing something in an attempt to ward off the worst effects of climate change. Cities, counties, states and other nations are striving to become carbon-free. Led by the technology industry, businesses are actively working to lower their greenhouse gas emissions.

Electric utilities are deploying wind and solar while shutting down aging coal-fired plants. Much research is being done on how to make our electric grid more efficient, interconnected and decentralized so as to accommodate new renewable energy technologies and energy storage systems.

Just recently, a group of billionaires under the name Breakthrough Energy Ventures has funded new companies that are breaking the mold in

developing clean energy solutions, including ways to pull carbon out of the atmosphere — the holy grail for dealing with our carbon addiction.

Methods for reducing carbon and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere are available, for example, in the book Drawdown and at drawdown.org. Some of these solutions are very simple, like planting trees — lots of trees. Others are more complex and, for the moment, farfetched, like small-scale nuclear fusion.

Local, agricultural related methods to reduce greenhouse gasses were presented at the recent Gustavus Adolphus College Nobel Conference on soil. By minimizing tillage, planting cover crops and implementing broader crop rotation, Minnesota farmers can reduce the amount of carbon and nitrogen that are emitted from the soil into the atmosphere — all the while maintaining or increasing yields at a lower cost for fertilizer, herbicides and pesticides, and using less fuel for farm equipment.

Fortunately, Minnesota is ahead of the curve in implementing energy efficiency and renewable energy programs as a result of the state renewable energy standard adopted by the legislature and signed into law by Republican Governor Tim Pawlenty



LEIGH POMEROY
My View

in 2007.

Our electric utilities are taking up the call, as Xcel Energy has recently committed to using 60 percent renewable energy sources and to be 85 percent carbon-free by 2030.

Locally, because of energy use reduction and commitments to community solar, the City of Mankato is now getting nearly 40 percent of its energy from renewable sources. Plus, North Mankato, Blue Earth County and Nicollet County have all signed contracts to receive energy from community solar projects.

Pessimists may scoff that this is not enough. What about China? What about our country's current administration and majority party in Congress, both of which refuse to recognize climate science altogether?

China is today the world's largest producer of solar panels and has built a number of massive wind projects. And all it takes is an election or two to change the U.S. ship of state.

To continue the ship analogy, it takes a long time to alter the direction of a large freighter at sea. Changing our direction on carbon and greenhouse gas emissions will take a while as well. We may not avoid future catastrophes, but today we are finally taking steps to at least try to avoid them.

Minnesota may not be a big player in the worldwide game, but in our own small way we can be a leader. And since Minnesota has often been a leader among states, isn't working towards a healthy planet the right way to lead?

Leigh Pomeroy is a board member of the Southcentral Minnesota Clean Energy Council and sits on the Southeast Steering Committee of Clean Energy Resource Teams, part of the University of Minnesota Extension.

YOUR VIEWS

County needs fair, not vengeful, prosecutor

Michelle Zender Fisher has received letters of support touting her involvement in community, county affairs and her experience. A county prosecutor must administer courtroom justice, and her courtroom actions have troubled me and others.

Zehnder Fischer is too eager to convict and punish everyone accused of wrongful acts.

Whatever it is in Zehnder Fischer, or her background, that drives her to want to punish defendants seems to blind her from seeking anything but retribution.

One of her courtroom cases involved a Vietnam War veteran. He suffered from a "flashback" to his war traumas one evening while at home with his family. He got his gun, went outside, and discharged several rounds into the air. He was a hard working married man with two children and no previous legal encounters. He also suffered from untreated PTSD.

Zehnder Fischer charged him with various threat and deadly weapon charges. If it were not for a last-minute intervention by his veteran services officer, who insisted on a psychological evaluation from me, Zehnder Fischer would have had him sent to prison for years.

His family would have been shattered; he would have lost his job and relationship with his children, and his PTSD would have gone untreated.

With our intervention, the court diverted this veteran to treatment at the VA. He completed treatment, returned home to his family and job and has had no further problems to this day.

Nicollet county needs a fair, not vengeful, prosecutor.

*George Komaridis
Madison Lake*

Law enforcement labor union supports Seidl

The members of Law Enforcement Labor Services 98 — a union comprised of jail staff, dispatchers and records clerks of the Brown County Sheriff's Office — overwhelmingly support Jason Seidl in the upcoming sheriff election.

Our union comprises two-thirds of the current staff employed by this office.

We have complete confidence that as sheriff, Seidl would lead with the in depth knowledge he's attained from being employed by the sheriff's office for the past 24 years. For the last 12 of these years, he was employed as chief deputy.

Seidl became our go-to person in the office. He knows every aspect of the duties this office is responsible for and how to handle them. He does so with an approachable style but remains very professional.

Seidl treats everyone here at the office fairly and he often expresses his appreciation to staff for the work we do. He is hard working and dedicated. We believe in his ability to serve the citizens of Brown County.

Please join us in supporting Seidl for Brown County Sheriff.

*Ryan Froehlich
Local 98 president*

Spears conducting honest campaign

A number of letters appeared July 7 in The Free Press expressing outrage that there was a poll circulating that favored House District 19A candidate Kim Spears.

Recently, there has been a cascade of mailings by the state DFL and their associates that are extremely nasty and wildly misrepresenting Spears' character. He is conducting a professional, ethical and honest campaign.

Spears is a genuine and sincere person, who will listen to anyone and who truly seeks to represent the under-represented in our society. He has a record of unselfish community service and the support from many of the active members in our community.

These attack missives by the Democrats are nothing but desperate, disgusting distortions. This proves nothing but the fact that Jeff Brand and his DFL cronies will stop at nothing to lie and cheat their way into power in St. Paul.

One Brand supporter attempted to vilify Spears for his support of due process, rule of law and the presumption of innocence which is the foundation of our justice system.

The writer glorifies Brand's support for the #MeToo movement while the DFL still justifies the behavior of their candidate Keith Ellison, accused of abusing Karen Monahan.

Is Brand listening to Monahan? Where is the outrage?

*Ronald Schmidt
North Mankato*

FOUNDED IN 1887

The Free Press

1st Amendment: Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

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