Trust on Town Council broken long before 'leak'

Dispatches from Wharf Hill



By Steve Stewart

Amid their outrage over the "leak" that wasn't, three Smithfield Town Council members lamented broken trust within the body.

To hear Valerie Butler, Jim Collins and Raynard Gibbs talk, the "leak" itself was responsible for frayed council relations. Truth is, trust has been missing within that body since December 2022, when an alliance worked the votes ahead of time to install Steve Bowman as mayor, Butler as vice mayor and kick then-Vice Mayor Mike Smith to the curb.

It was the first sign that transparency was an empty campaign slogan for Smithfield's elected leaders – and that, for the majority, trust needn't be a two-way street. In other words, shame on you for violating my trust, but I'm free to violate yours.

Any lingering trust among council members was destroyed a year later by a sham process that put Collins and Gibbs on the council to fill two unexpired terms and preserve a tenuous working majority whose grip on power was slipping in the face of citizen anger over rapid residential growth with no plan to build and pay for the infrastructure to absorb it.

Two weeks before the application period closed for people interested in those vacancies, three different sources, none connected with the other, told me it was a done deal that Collins and Gibbs would replace Wayne Hall and Renee Rountree.

None of my three sources had anything in writing, so I wasn't comfortable exposing the sham at the time. The information was credible enough, however, that when Butler and Councilman Randy Pack convened at the Luter Sports Complex and went into closed session to review the 23 applications that had been submitted by the deadline, I recorded a video while walking to my car, noting, for posterity, what my sources had told me.

A couple of hours later, Collins and Gibbs were, surprise, two of five applicants selected for in-person interviews. Then, a couple of weeks later, Collins and Gibbs were, surprise again, appointed by the majority to fill Hall's and Rountree's seats.

You can believe one of a couple of things: Either my three, unconnected sources were right and the fix was in, or I'm such a good prognosticator that you should have me fill out your NCAA Tournament bracket next March. A statistician buddy tells me I had a 0.4% chance of picking the two eventual appointees out of 23 options.

The sham was carried out behind the backs of Smith and Councilman Jeff Brooks, whose trust was violated along with the citizenry's, including 21 good people who wasted their time and energy going through a "process" whose outcome was known before they ever submitted their applications.

That capable group included Charles Bryan, Bill Davidson, Timothy Hillegass, Mark Dalton, Bill Harris, Vicky Hulick, Brian Lally, Jennifer Stevens, Jay Walls, Kyle Bentley, Dr. Herb Bevan, Tea Frantz, Bruce Gearey, Jackson Goodman, Bo Hamrick, Candy Hayes, Nick Hess, Gene Monroe Jr., Adam Short, Jim Thornton and Chris Torre. What a disgrace.

Regarding the "leak," Collins owes his colleagues an apology. No member of the Town Council gave the Times Bowman's email about his trip to Florida that landed $6 million, with strings attached, in the town's bank account. The allegation that one of them had – and that there was something sinister about their doing so – reveals both a naivete about politics and a fundamental disregard for transparency as a value in public service.

The minute Bowman hit "send" on his email, it became a public record under Virginia law. You can't "leak" a public record. In fact, to the extent that others want to conceal it, you do a public service by sharing it.

In this case, citizens got a chance to be heard on the proposed use of $6 million of their money to match a gift with conditions. But for the Times obtaining and publishing the email, citizens would have had no clue about the plan to spring it on taxpayers in the next council meeting without putting it on the agenda. The mayor, in his email, even fished for a motion, pointing out (wink, wink) that he, as mayor, could not make it.

I'm asked often whether the small group of elected and unelected people who run Smithfield are corrupt. They're not, in my opinion. But they operate with a degree of paternalistic condescension unlike anything I've witnessed in four decades of reporting on small-town politics. They know what's best for the town, and the peasants just need to shut up and pay their taxes.

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