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PRESENTING THE 2020 DUBIES

With apologies to children's author Judith Viorst, 2020 was a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad year. Nationally and internationally, the twin pandemics – COVID-19 and the final year of Donald Trump's gangster presidency – were the primary drivers. But locally, the Republicans who run Grand Traverse County government certainly did their share to help make 2020 a rotten year.

In recognition of their "contributions" to the terrible, horrible, no good, very bad year that just ended, we announce the 2020 BOC Dubious Achievement Awards, aka The Dubies:

MASKS ARE FOR SHEEPLE AWARD – To BOC Chairman Rob Hentschel for his refusal to require his employees at Roy's General Store to wear masks because he's "not medically trained" to determine whether they have medical reasons for



not wearing them, and for his defiance when he was asked to wear a mask after the BOC briefly resumed in-person meetings at the Governmental

Center on October 7. When a masked Penny Hill, Traverse City's assistant city manager, stood up and

implored the commissioners to wear masks out of respect for the city and county employees who work in the building, Hentschel, flanked by maskless fellow commissioners Gordie LaPointe, Brad Jewett and Ron Clous, thanked her for her comments and then ignored them.

JUSTICE IS BLIND AWARD – To Sheriff Tom Bensley for aggravated obliviousness. For five years, Bensley's former jail administrator, Todd Ritter, preyed on women he was sworn to protect, doing so right under Bensley's nose. Using the Tinder handle "Big Tex" to contact female parolees, Ritter pursued sexual relationships with women who had been incarcerated under his watch, misappropriating county assets and property while doing so. Asked during a county hearing on October 7 why he failed to discover Ritter's misconduct and what steps he had taken to ensure that the offenses would not occur again, Bensley responded that Ritter was simply a "bad apple" and that no change in policies or additional oversight would have revealed his misconduct. Added the sheriff: "As long as we hire from the human race, we're going to have problems with people."

I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT I'M TALKING ABOUT AWARD – To Detroit attorney Frank Judd, whom the county hired to advise the commissioners whether they could withdraw from the Municipal Employees Retirement System (MERS). After informing commissioners both in writing and in person during a special meeting on September 23 that the pension fund was only 54% funded and that the county's contract with MERS

required the plan to be at least 60% funded before the county would be allowed to leave – making withdrawal all but impossible – LaPointe asked Judd to read the contract again because he was wrong. Following a pregnant pause as Judd slowly reread the section in the contract that LaPointe had pointed out, Judd stammered: “Commissioner LaPointe, I do see where you’re talking about that and I think you’re right. I think you caught me on that one. . . . It’s pretty much exactly what you cited . . . so, yeah, you are correct on that.”

DON’T YOU DARE PUT WORDS IN MY MOUTH, I HAVE NO PROBLEM WITH CONFLICTS OF INTEREST AWARD – To Commissioner Ron Clous for his ethics-free rebuke of Commissioner Betsy Coffia on December 16 after she asked whether LaPointe would be allowed to vote on his own appointment to two boards overseen by the BOC. Noting that a BOC meeting in



2018 had erupted in acrimony after former Commissioner Tom Mair voted to appoint his wife to the library board, Coffia said she recalled that

commissioners had agreed that Mair should have recused himself because he had an obvious conflict of interest. Not so fast, Clous indignantly responded. “I just wanted to clarify that it was stated that when we voted regarding Tom Mair’s ability to vote for his wife on the library board, I did support Tom’s vote. . . . He’s the commissioner that can make a decision whether he casts a vote or not, and I respected that when Tom did it and I would respect it if Gordie wanted to vote on his appointment.”

LUCKIEST MAN OF THE YEAR AWARD – To county Administrator Nate Alger for landing a seat on the Titanic’s last lifeboat. As the pandemic raged out of control in 2020, infecting and killing people, bankrupting businesses and putting millions of Americans out of work, Alger was the beneficiary of

a financial windfall, courtesy of the BOC and county taxpayers. In addition to voting to nearly double their own salaries, the Republican majority on the BOC voted on December 16 to give Alger a three-year contract extension that calls for 5% raises each year, plus a 1.5% annual COLA. That’s on top of the \$136,282 a year he was already making.

I’M THE PRESIDENT, I DON’T HAVE TO MAKE SENSE AWARD – To Donald Trump for spewing a torrent of hatred and baloney during a campaign visit to Traverse City on November 2, the day before the election. Attempting to take a shot at Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer for halting inside dining at bars and restaurants, Trump blustered: “The only one allowed to have dinner in your state is the husband of your governor.”

In remarks he made at the end of a BOC meeting two days later, a starstruck Hentschel was still gaga over Trump’s mostly maskless MAGA event:

“I typically vote Republican and I run as a Republican, but I was there and I would have been there if I was a Democrat because it’s the President of the United States. It’s really cool. To have the national scene show up on our doorstep here, it felt really special to have the President of the United States come and give a speech right here in Traverse City. That was a neat event. I took my daughter and we had a good time.”

AT LEAST I DIDN’T CALL THEM FAT OLD COWS AWARD – Again, to Rob Hentschel for posting this sign outside Roy’s General Store:



Congratulations, Mr. Chairman. You are the winner of the 2020 Dubies Man of the Year Award. Your prize is a red MAGA mask, adjustable to fit both sheep and cows.

WEDNESDAY'S BOC AGENDA: WHAT TO WATCH FOR

ORGANIZATIONAL MEETING – With the departure of commissioners Sonny Wheelock and LaPointe – both of whom chose not to run for re-election – the BOC in 2021 will welcome newly elected Republican commissioners Darryl Nelson and Penny Morris.

Nelson, a former Acme Township trustee, was elected to the seat vacated by LaPointe. Morris, a political newcomer who operates Crystal Bindi Dance Studios, replaces Wheelock.

Commissioners will elect a chairperson and vice chairperson. Given the board's makeup, it's difficult to imagine much of a change at the top, with Hentschel remaining as chair and Clous or Jewett being appointed as his No. 2. That would allow them to begin collecting the nearly 100% raises that they awarded themselves and the other commissioners on December 16 (compensation for commissioners will increase from \$7,000 to \$12,000 a year; the vice chair's salary will increase from \$7,500 to \$12,500 and the chair's salary will increase from \$8,000 to \$13,000).

Commissioners also will approve standing rules, meeting times and dates and assignments to boards and commissions.

NATIONAL COMMUNITY SURVEY FOR GRAND TRAVERSE COUNTY – Coffia will ask commissioners to engage a professional facilitator to guide a study session on January 13 to discuss the results of a county-wide community survey that the BOC commissioned last summer from the National Research Center in Boulder, Colorado, for \$16,000 (item 13a).

The survey, which was completed by 561 county residents (it was mailed to 1,700 residents), quizzed respondents about a broad range of topics, including quality of life, the local infrastructure, the economy and the natural environment.

A review of the survey's findings reveals few surprises. Respondents largely rated their feeling of safety, the quality of the natural environment, the quality of parks and recreation opportunities, and opportunities for education, culture and the arts as excellent or good. Conversely, most of the respondents rated employment opportunities, the cost of living and the availability of affordable quality housing and childcare as fair or poor.

The survey also provides benchmark data that compares the responses of Grand Traverse County residents to the responses of residents from more than 600 other communities in the United States.

Notably, Grand Traverse County scored "much higher" when compared with responses from residents in other communities when asked about the "vibrancy of the downtown/commercial area" and "Grand Traverse County as a place to visit." Grand Traverse County scored "much lower" on questions about the variety of housing options and the availability of affordable quality housing and childcare.

Grand Traverse County also scored lower than the benchmark when residents were asked whether county government is "open and transparent to the public."

As a result of that latter finding and others, the NRC study is unlikely to be viewed favorably by the Republican majority, particularly Hentschel. Prior to the August 4 primary last year, Traverse Connect asked all of the county commission candidates to respond to a series of written questions. Hentschel's identical answers to the following two questions reveals that he sees no role whatsoever for county government to address what are widely perceived as two of Grand Traverse County's most chronic problems:

TRAVERSE CONNECT: In a recent Traverse Connect focus group comprised of individuals who recently moved to the region, participants noted the availability of housing as a barrier to life in the

region. How do you intend to address our region's housing shortage?

HENTSCHEL: Government is not the answer to all of your problems. The strength of our country comes from private individuals solving problems and being rewarded through the process of capitalism. Local government needs to focus on clearing the way for this process wherever possible.

TRAVERSE CONNECT: Many families struggle to secure quality childcare. This can be a barrier to attracting talent and keeping people in or bringing people back into the workforce. How will you work to increase access to affordable and quality childcare?

HENTSCHEL: Government is not the answer to all of your problems. The strength of our country comes from private individuals solving problems and being rewarded through the process of capitalism. Local government needs to focus on clearing the way for this process wherever possible.

As if those responses weren't depressing enough, Hentschel doubled down on his limited-government, not-my-problem rhetoric when asked by Traverse Connect what he thought was "the most overlooked issue for our region."

"Scope creep," he wrote. "Local organizations and individuals inferring that local government should be solving problems which it has no authority, funding or charter to solve which ends up wasting tax dollars on fruitless initiatives that are put on to make politicians look good."

(To read the National Community Survey for Grand Traverse County and the Traverse Connect surveys, click on the links under BOC Links).

HIGH (AND LOW) LIGHTS FROM THE LAST MEETING

GRAND TRAVERSE PAVILIONS PENSION PLAN – In a stunning and vindictive move, the BOC on December 22 during a special meeting

torpedoed a financially advantageous request by management of the Pavilions to authorize the issuance of up to \$6.3 million in bonds to fund the county-owned nursing home's pension plan.

The Pavilions has long been in the crosshairs of Jewett and Clous, both of whom co-own nursing homes in Traverse City, putting them in direct financial competition with the Pavilions. Jewett is the co-owner of Culver Meadows Senior Living on N. West Silver Lake Road; Clous co-owns Northern Star Assisted Living on Munson Avenue.

Teaming with Hentschel, Clous and Jewett denied permission to the Pavilions to bond its pension debt. The request failed on a 3-3 vote, with commissioners Bryce Hundley, Wheelock and LaPointe voting yes. Coffia was absent.

In voting against the bonding proposal, Hentschel, Clous and Jewett discounted the advice of the financial adviser they had hired. Noting that this was a good time to issue the bonds because interest rates are historically low, Steven Burke, president of Municipal Financial Consultants, told the commissioners, "This isn't a silver bullet, but given the calculated savings . . . it definitely increases the probability that the county will realize savings in the long run."

Hentschel attacked the Pavilions' proposal to close its defined benefits plan for non-union employees as inadequate, dismissing Pavilions CEO Kory Hansen's argument that doing so would incentivize the Pavilions' unionized employees to agree to phase out their defined benefit plan in favor of a defined contribution plan when the union contract is renegotiated this year.

"Here we are again with the best intentions," Hentschel said. "I don't feel like this merits my vote. I feel like if they had already closed all of the (defined benefits) programs then we have a full solution. This is listed on our agenda as a comprehensive solution, but it's not because you haven't closed all your programs yet and I feel like

we're just handing you another Band-Aid. . . . I feel like in the short term this would be a good move, but it's not enough."

Hentschel's comments drew a rare and unusually harsh rebuke from LaPointe, who is the BOC's appointee to the board of the county Department of Health and Human Services, which manages the Pavilions. LaPointe pointed out that Hentschel was discounting his experts' advice and attempting to punish current Pavilions management for "the sins of the past."

"You hire somebody to give you advice, you'd better be damn sure you know the situation pretty darn well before you don't take that advice," LaPointe said. "If the board wants to set the directions for the Pavilions, you make sure that you put the proper representatives on that board and if you don't trust them, you're picking the wrong people. Two of the people you selected recently are both in support of this, so I don't know honestly what more you want unless you want to take control of the Pavilions."

If Hentschel thought that LaPointe was done, he soon learned that he was just warming up.

"I agree with everything you've said about pensions . . . but it certainly isn't a small step," LaPointe added. "They're talking about \$23 million of the \$45 million liability, so it's not a small step, and they can't force the union, they have to ask the union. Should they have done this years ago? Yes. Should they have forced this years ago? Yes. But we are where we are and this is, in my opinion, a good financial step to get us out of this mess."

Hentschel kept his powder dry, smirking at LaPointe throughout his soliloquy. When LaPointe finished, Hentschel simply said, "Fair enough" and called for a vote. Hentschel, Clous and Jewett then voted against issuing the bonds.

The votes by Jewett and Clous are particularly troubling because both commissioners have a

conflict of interest and their votes appear to have been intended to harm the Pavilions. The Pavilions competes for patients with Culver Meadows and Northern Star, so driving up the Pavilions' costs is beneficial to the two commissioners. Since 2017, Clous has floated the idea of selling the Pavilions, disingenuously claiming that his sole motive is to address the Pavilions' mounting pension debt.

So acrimonious was the conclusion of the special meeting that commissioners did not take even five minutes to recognize the 22 years of service by Wheelock, who was attending his last commission meeting. The meeting also was LaPointe's last after serving one two-year term.

So we here at the Beacon will take the time to do what our dysfunctional BOC did not do:

Thank you, Commissioner Wheelock, for your many years of principled service to the citizens of Grand Traverse County. Prior to your 22-year stint on the BOC, you served with distinction for 18 years as a Long Lake Township trustee. During that time, while operating a welding business, you also served as a Long Lake Township volunteer firefighter.

We didn't agree with every vote that you took, but, unlike some of your fellow Republican colleagues, you didn't play backroom games and we believe that you voted with the best interests of the citizens of this county in mind. Best wishes on your retirement.

And that's a wrap. Stay safe, mask up and hang in there. Trump is in the Wicked Witch of the West "I'm melting!" phase of his presidency. Only two more weeks until it's over. Thanks for reading.

BOC LINKS

1. National Community Survey for Grand Traverse County:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1585GnZ15zLrFErDpBaDKhDwI1AouGciK/view>

2. Traverse Connect 2020 Primary Candidate Profiles:

<https://traverseconnect.com/advocacy/public-policy-engagement/traverse-connect-2020-primary-candidate-profiles/>

3. You can find a link to the agenda, packet, and minutes of BOC meetings at:

<https://grandtraversecounty.civicweb.net/Portal/MeetingInformation.aspx?Org=Cal&Id=163>

4. You can watch the meetings live and see replays of previous meetings online at:
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCiB1eEx7uvQn7L1LM1kShGQ>

The next scheduled meeting of the BOC is on January 20 beginning at 8 a.m.

5. You can dial in to make a public comment on BOC meetings or listen on your phone at: 408-418-9388 (access code: 792 476 402)