

Larry Golden: Secrecy gets city into trouble time and again

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The recent State Journal-Register editorial on the Springfield Civil Service Commission's consideration of the suspension of City Water, Light and Power workers in the noose incident was merely an introduction to an event with secretive and anti-democratic actions that bring shame to the entire city and its citizens.

Springfield citizens concerned about hate activity wanted to attend a meeting where the suspensions were to be considered in order to speak about them. But the Civil Service Commission's office said the substance of the agenda was secret. The initial meeting was, in fact, closed to the public, including the press, until the commission finished its business, despite the fact that there was no indication of a closed meeting on its agenda.

When the meeting was finally opened, the commission approved all of its actions with general votes, except one that we learned later was to acknowledge the suspensions.

Member Kent Gray made a motion to have a discussion of that item, but he could not get a second. Gray later explained that he thought the commission should hear the story behind the suspensions publicly and either reconsider the punishments or have the individuals terminated but that legal counsel had advised the commissioners not to take any public action.

After all votes were taken, in a way that no one could tell what the substance was, the chairman invited public comment. Without knowing for sure whether they acted on the suspensions, each of us addressed the commission, but now there were two issues: First, the commission's action and secondly the suspensions.

When asked what it meant to "acknowledge" an action, the commission refused to provide clarification. When asked the simple question about what the process and their responsibilities were, they again refused to respond.

We were told by the city's lawyer that citizens were allowed to speak but not interact with the commission, and therefore, they would not respond to our questions.

We were then left to express our frustration about what we knew of the suspensions. We had heard that the workers received only a 60-day suspension and that they would take those suspensions in increments to avoid personnel disruptions at the water plant (and even be able to use vacation time to avoid financial penalty).

What was not being talked about was the continuing pattern of racial/sexual/homophobic harassment at the plant during the past two years that, having been left unaddressed by CWLP despite complaints by Mike Williams, culminated in the action of the noose hanging. As Gray indicated, then, there was no way to discuss the appropriateness of the punishment.

The problem lies directly in the mayor's office and its legal counsel, along with a passive city council. In every instance, but particularly in those involving racial conflict, it seems that with the mayor's countenance, this legal office advises those working for the city to keep quiet or to acknowledge no wrongdoing. In turn, the city council refuses to hold them accountable to the city at large. In turn, we are faced with continuing legal action by employees.

We hear people extol American democracy and complain about the tyranny and secrecy of other countries. Those practices have now reached such a critical point that Springfield citizens have to say such business as usual is no longer acceptable or it is time for a new, more open administration of this city.

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