

One Man's Meat by Philip Connors

The costs of a toothless press corps

Bit by bit, and due in part to legal pressure brought to bear under the state's Open Meetings Act statute, sunlight is being cast on the Interstate Stream Commission (ISC) as it prepares to render a decision on whether to dam and divert the Gila River according to the terms of the Arizona Water Settlements Act. This is a welcome development for anyone who cares about transparent government decision-making.

Among recent revelations, minor thought it may be in the larger scheme of things, is the fact that a local journalist was paid many thousands of dollars over the course of several years by the ISC to "provide assistance . . . in conducting AWSA/Gila meetings" and act as "communications coordinator for the AWSA planning process."

The journalist in question is Mary Alice Murphy, formerly a reporter at the Daily Press and currently the publisher and main writer of the Grant County Beat.

When I asked her about the payments, she said they were compensation for providing the ISC with notes about who said what at certain public meetings conducted by the agency, as well as other meetings conducted by the Gila/San Francisco Water Commission and the Gila Basin Irrigation Commission. She explained that the notes were similar to reports she published in the Daily Press and the Grant County Beat but were provided to the ISC in a slightly different form.

This is a peculiar expenditure by a government agency, to say the least. Instead of paying a supposedly independent journalist to be what amounts to a court stenographer, why not buy a fifty-dollar audio recorder at Radio Shack?

The revelation would be less troubling if Ms. Murphy hadn't recently written an opinion column in the Beat declaring her support for a diversion project on the Gila River. When the column was posted and for five days afterward, no disclaimer mentioned the fact that she'd re-

ceived public moneys from the same agency hell-bent on diverting Gila water. Indeed, no such disclaimer ever appeared on any of her ISC-related stories over the course of many years, either in the Daily Press or at the Beat, and probably never would have if I hadn't raised the issue with her in a phone call yesterday. After that conversation, an addendum to the editorial was quickly appended.

"Truth be told, I never considered it a conflict of interest," she told me. "I was just reporting what was

"For years no reporter asked a tough question or raised a contrary viewpoint. The ISC must have thought it could get away with murder."

said at the meetings." She added that she received no payment for her recent editorial, and that her opinions therein were entirely her own.

I take her at her word.

Nonetheless, as a product of a journalism education that emphasized ethics and independence, I find her acceptance of the money distasteful at best. ISC records indicate that she was paid more than \$4,000 in the past 16 months alone. She covered the ISC first at the Daily Press and then the Grant County Beat — while accepting money from the ISC. She currently runs an Internet news operation that accepts advertising money for banner ads in favor of a Gila diversion. Donning a different hat, she wrote an opinion column perfectly aligned with the interests of the agency from which she accepted payment. And until my phone call yesterday, she made no disclosure of this fact.

I must take care here to say that I don't impugn the character of Ms. Murphy. I've met her in person and enjoyed her company and conversation. She strikes me as an indefatigable storyteller and a decent woman.

The bigger issue, to my mind, is how the financial relationship the ISC forged with a supposedly objective journalist is perfectly in keeping with the agency's strategy of neutering critics and paying to hear what it wants to hear. The consulting work done on its behalf, at enormous public expense, has been a travesty and an embarrassment — all of it perfectly calibrated to reinforce the agency's reflexive urge to stick a big fat straw in the river and suck. Until very recently no one but a few lonely citizen-activists and poorly funded nonprofit groups had asked the ISC tough questions about its work on the Gila — work shot through with faulty assumptions and outrageously rosy scenarios, work so intellectually dishonest it would make a political speechwriter blush. The whole process has been one of the most egregious and mendacious exercises in wishful thinking and fantastical conjuring ever undertaken by a government agency anywhere. The word "shameless" doesn't even begin to describe it.

As a recovering journalist recently fallen off the wagon, it pains me to say it but it must be said: A portion of the blame lies at the feet of a simpering and toothless press corps. Until very recently, no one in the press was watching with a skeptical intelligence. For years no reporter asked a tough question or raised a contrary viewpoint. The ISC must have thought it could get away with murder.

It still may. For make no mistake: it aims to murder a river. If it succeeds, you can only tip your hat.

Philip Connors is a Grant County writer whose work has appeared in the Wall Street Journal, High Country News, Harper's magazine, and many other periodicals.

Notes from Nick

by Nickolas Seibel

My commitment to you

There are a few things that can put a newspaper publisher in a foul mood. Getting scooped on a big story is one of those things, as is having to publish negative news about a person you know and respect. But perhaps worst of all is having to deal with mistakes that reflect poorly on the newspaper — and you can double that impact if those mistakes are related to ethical lapses, intentional or otherwise.

So last night at 10:15, when I received and read the column from Phil Connors that appears right next to this one, I realized that I was going to have a very, very bad night. We had gotten scooped, by one of our own columnists, and were going to be in the awkward position of breaking news on Page 3.

I reviewed the column with our editor, Avelino Maestas, and asked him to immediately look into the story with our Gila beat reporter, Benjamin Fisher, to see what else we could uncover for a future follow-up. But the problem didn't stop at being scooped.

I phoned Mary Alice Murphy as a courtesy, to let her know that we would be running a column about her today, leaving a message on her voicemail. I've known Mary Alice personally for many years and have always had great respect for her and for her work in creating and growing the Grant County Beat, an online competitor and sometime partner of the Daily Press. Mary Alice and I have been discussing future joint endeavors for some time, and we have an informal agreement to provide occasional breaking stories to each other in unusual circumstances.

And then I visited with our sports editor, Dean Thompson, who until recently also served as our editor, about the most troubling part of the story, at least to me. The public records on which today's column is based indicate that Mary Alice's relationship with the Interstate Stream Commission could go back as far as 2008, just after Mary Alice had left the staff of the Daily Press. During that time, however, she continued to contribute articles on the ISC and the Arizona Water Settlements Act process to the Daily Press as a paid, freelance reporter.

I asked Dean — and in a subsequent midnight phone call, former Daily Press Publisher Christina Ely — whether anyone at the newspaper had been advised of any agreement between Mary Alice and the ISC during the time she was freelancing for us. Not surprisingly, neither Dean nor Tina had any knowledge of the arrangement at the time.

This, of course, does not excuse the lapse, and, beginning today, I'm working with our editors to ensure that everyone working for us in any editorial capacity is aware of the journalistic ethics that should prevent such situations. We will also be reviewing, modifying and sharing the Daily Press' own policies in the coming days.

We cannot do our job as the voice and the watchdog for this community without preserving the trust that we will do those jobs fairly and without bias — and as transparently as possible. However this story ends, I'm deeply sorry for any role this newspaper played in it, and I will do my best to make sure we never find ourselves here again.

Letter Policy

The Daily Press welcomes readers' forum letters, which can be mailed to Box 1371, Silver City, NM 88062, or emailed to letters@silvercitydailynews.net. Letters must be signed and, for verification purposes, must include an address and telephone number. As has been the newspaper's policy for more than 20 years, only letters exclusive to the Daily Press will be accepted for publication. We prefer short letters which are typed and double spaced, and less than 250 words in length. Longer submissions may be rejected or considered for publication as a guest column. Letters of a religious nature; those which could be libelous; those bearing multiple signatures; and those intended simply to say "thank you" to someone will not be accepted for publication.