

Missouri's Poli-ticks: A Who's Who of Government Bloodsuckers

November 2nd, 2015

by Jon Schuessler

[Introduction](#) | [Read Part One](#) | [Part Two](#) | [Part Three](#)

Americans think that they are accustomed to dirty politics. If a story talks about politicians misbehaving, most people shrug and say, “What else is new?”. When corruption crops up in their own county or school, however – then the problem becomes real.

It's a shock, really, once a person realizes how deep, how *normal* corruption has become in Missouri's political system. When misdeeds are exposed, it isn't because the system “worked”. It's because somebody *fought against the system* to discover the truth and tell it to the public.

The very culture in government undermines honesty. The term “whistle-blower” is not seen as a positive trait. Instead, it is grounds for being fired and blacklisted as “not a team player”.

As an example, consider Beau Musser, the Chief Financial Officer for the huge St. Joseph school district who had been recently hired in mid-2013.

The Price of Honesty

After only a short time on the job, Musser was approached by the Human Resources Director, Doug Flowers, with a highly suspicious proposal. The district's superintendant, Fred Czerwonka, would distribute 54 “stipends” of \$5,000 apiece to various administrators (for a total of \$270,000). Musser's own name was on the list. He was assured that this was perfectly legal.

But he had already discovered serious financial problems from past management. The “stipend” proposal seemed like a scheme to hand out money under the table. By putting Musser on the list for a stipend, it looked like the superintendant was trying to bribe him.

Musser voiced his concerns to several administrators, including Czerwonka. He was ignored. Eventually, however, Board Trustee Chris Danford found out about the stipends independently. She stunned everyone by going public at a March 24th, 2014 Board meeting. Seeing an opportunity, Musser made his own findings public to the Board.

He was rewarded with a series of sexual harassment charges shown to him by Superintendent Czerwonka. Czerwonka offered to drop the charges if Musser resigned. Musser refused and filed a lawsuit. He was quickly put on administrative leave, and the charges against him were made public and printed in newspapers.

A Culture of Fear

Musser's family was shaken by the scandal. His brother, sister-in-law, and two of his best friends were teachers in the district. His friends became afraid to talk to him for fear of losing their teaching careers. This is a common occurrence in schools – most teachers have only 1-year contracts, and are dependent upon the goodwill of administrators for their job.

Musser was able to defend himself because he had secretly recorded sensitive conversations. Without this evidence, however, it's uncertain whether Musser would have been reinstated. Certainly, it took a great deal of stubbornness to speak out, when the only support he had at the time came from a single Board member, Chris Danford.

As for Danford, she also had to endure mockery and belittlement from her peers for a time. The culture of a school administration is to *never go public*, even if things are horribly wrong.

A Happy Ending?

In this case, Musser was vindicated, after a six-month ordeal in which the FBI, the State Auditor's office and a grand jury conducted an intense investigation that revealed an astonishing history of corruption. Over \$25 million – and possibly as much as *\$40 million* – had been illegally bled away from the schools and into the pockets of contractors, school administrators and relatives of Board members. Fred Czerwonka and Board President Dr. Dan Colgan resigned in 2015.

Although both men have retained the services of a lawyer, no charges have been filed. The FBI continues its probe as of this writing.

In November of 2014, Beau Musser was cleared of all charges and returned to work as CFO. In March of 2015, the Board voted for a \$450,000 settlement with Musser, but without admitting to any wrongdoing.

Saved by the Cavalry

In the end, the two goats, Musser and Danford, became public heroes, but this was far from inevitable when it began. A great deal of the initial credit goes to Sam Zeff, a freelance journalist in nearby Kansas City. His articles turned the St. Joseph scandal into national news. The ultimate blow, however, was struck by the State Auditor, the late Tom Schweich. With a five-man team, Schweich performed his usual thorough investigation and spared nobody when he released a scathing report early in 2015.

Conclusion of the Matter

When it comes to government corruption, the deck is stacked in favor of the criminals. *Secrecy* is the biggest friend of the embezzler, and Missouri's governments prize their secrecy. This is particularly true for budgets.

The system also looks after its own. When you read about the fraud committed in this report, you may notice that some of the time, nobody goes to jail. There's a reason for that – when fraud occurs, administrators will ask for a resignation rather than press criminal charges. They simply want the whole thing to just “go away”.

So what can we do? For starters, read this report. See firsthand how corruption occurs, and who is responsible. Don't re-elect the people who have used public money for personal benefit. Spread the word among your family and friends. Look for people who care enough to take action and maybe, just maybe, you might find someone willing to run for office who isn't worried about how much it pays or what benefits they get.

You might find that rarest, most precious resource of a good government – an honest leader.