

Questions Linger Over Credit Card Use in the Harbor

September 17, 2024



It's certainly not business as usual at the Crescent City Harbor District, these days. Massive Harbor debt for the next decade should raise lots of red flags to pull in the belt buckle a notch or two. Apparently, this belt tightening wisdom is not reaching some commissioners including the harbormaster.

Following a Del Norte Grand Jury Report of an isolated misuse of the Agency credit card in 2021, questions continue to linger over alleged dubious use of credit card and other imprudent financial authorizations and possible misuse of public funds by Harbormaster Tim Petrick.

Last year, a Temporary Restraining Order (TRO) was sought by the Harbormaster against a Bayshore RV resident who shall remain an anonymous John Doe, over a long-standing multi-year feud between tenant Doe and the harbormaster in 2023. The questionable statement involved the quote, "I'm going to get you," uttered by the John Doe toward the oft-strong armed harbormaster. It should be duly noted there was never any physical contact or violence between the pair, just an angry exchange of words resulting in a frustrated hissyfit by the tenant.

Not according to the harbormaster.

Petrick responded with an order to have the CCHD attorney, Kyler Raden whose office is in Sacramento, fly to Arcata, rent a vehicle, reside in a local hotel for two nights, have meals and file an appearance in Superior Court to effectuate the TRO. Of course, attorneys do not work for free. The charge for the going rate of

attorney's fees is several hundred dollars per hour. The matter required a continuance for another hearing and decision when the request for the TRO was suddenly withdrawn by Harbormaster Petrick. The Harbormaster issued the following statement to The Triplicate regarding his reason to drop the request: Petrick said, "I made my point." What point?

Three separate written requests for a summary of those expenses have been asked for from the CCHD. Without a modicum of expediency, a response from the Harbormaster was absent. Some might call this "foot-dragging."

The entire matter is estimated to have rendered legal expenses between \$6000-\$7500; another burden put upon the beleaguered taxpayer on an already financially-strapped Harbor District.

The Harbor remains mired in massive debt of \$793,000 of annual debt caused by the Fashion Blacksmith lawsuit decision and Dept. of Agriculture loan to repair the Harbor following the last Tsunami event.

The payment of that indebtedness will ensue for the next nine years.

Harbor candidate and paralegal Linda Sutter attempted to obtain copies of receipts for calendar year 2024 and was confronted with significant resistance from the Harbormaster at an August 22 meeting at the Harbor office. Ms. Sutter has filed a Court action for all receipts and verifiable documentation as legitimate Harbor business.

Harbor counsel Ruben Duran of Best, Best and Krieger law firm provided The Triplicate with a list of monthly receipts from January through June of this year. Duran acknowledged Ms. Sutter's California Public Records Act (CPRA) request but expressed his concern in protecting the records from theft, mutilation or accidental damage. In what can only be described as a "Circling the Wagons" mentality, Duran, esq. defended the harbormaster's "refusal to surrender the receipts, providing a reasonable opportunity to collect, search for and, if necessary redact exempt information." Duran underscored the District's commitment for full compliance with the CPRA.

One might conclude the list for justification of these expenses shows indifference to the current financial quandary the CCHD in which finds itself mired in.

Questions continue to fester.

The CPRA request mandates release of all public documents. Ms. Sutter alleges some document receipts remain undisclosed. Petitioner Sutter alleges an undisclosed receipt for air tickets for Petrick and his wife on the CCHD credit card. Other reported questionable receipts, many small, reveal \$127 for a round of golf, \$362 purchase of golf balls, a seemingly endless list of door dash food deliveries, promotional gift cards for employees and attendees who attended a recent conference and much more on the list of items listed on the CCHD credit card. One might surmise, an agency in financial turmoil should be more aware of this public agency's precarious financial status yet the CCHD continues to conduct business as usual. Troubling!

The credit card use and other Harbormaster expenses continue to vex a very concerned, engaged public.

Oversight by CCHD commissioners has been admittedly lax.

Commissioner Gerhard Weber has long been a critic; he and other commissioners were left in the dark on many of these financial issues. Weber specifically highlighted the recent Harbormaster's Annual Meeting in Monterey. Weber was not advised the Crescent City Harbor District was a sponsoring participant of this event which included additional costs for promotional activities. He cited "... the lack of sharing information about Harbor costs by some commissioners in a public venue at a Harbor meeting; nonetheless, the Commission bears responsibility in overseeing Harbormaster Petrick and we've not done that to my satisfaction."

Regrettably the Harbor has yet to adopt a credit card policy; but in the absence of agency policy, California law and IRS guidelines govern spending limits on public employees, during the course of conducting public business. The Harbormaster has far exceeded spending limits for meals and promotional outreach. Commissioners held a Closed Session item last week to discuss the latest legal action; it has not revealed the details of that Closed Session matter, to date.

It is not business as usual at the Crescent City Harbor.

The Harbor meets the first and third Tuesdays monthly at 2pm at the CCHD office on Citizens Dock Way.