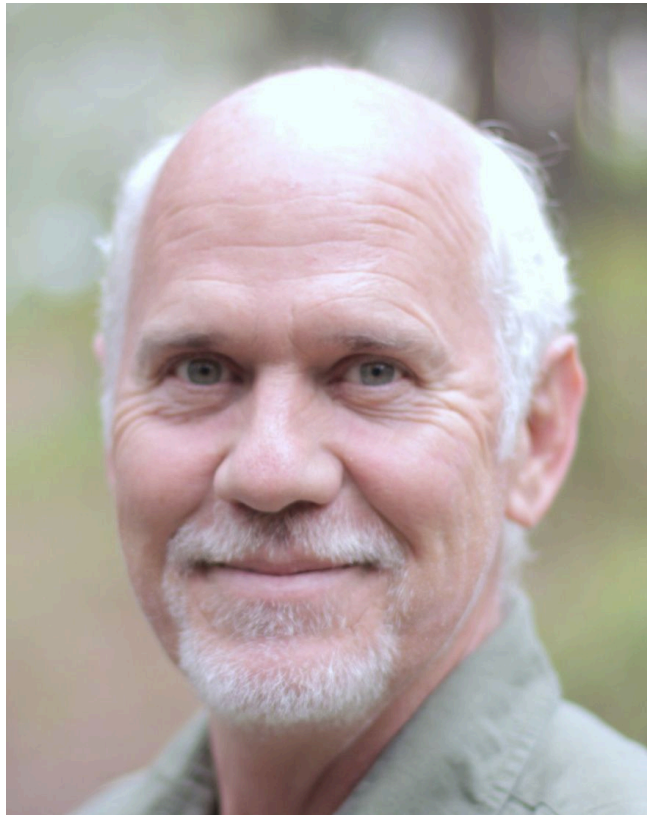

In My View: When a reporter becomes the news

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Sometimes I can write about my insights into local government activities from a firsthand perspective because I attend board meetings and record what I observe.

I was at a recent meeting of the Harbor Commissioners when they approved sending a letter to the publisher of the Triplicate asking for correction of factual errors in a story by Roger Gitlin regarding a lease with Crescent Seafood fish market and restaurant. The Harbor claims the story was inaccurate, accusatory and inflammatory.

It is common practice for newspapers and reporters to run a correction if it is shown that they made a mistake. How they respond when they are corrected demonstrates their commitment to reporting the truth. At the Harbor meeting, Gitlin said he will stand by his facts.

It is unusual for a reporter to become the news. How can he objectively report on this?

Pushing Out Tenants?

The original story by Roger Gitlin (11/15) had the headline, “Is the Harbor pushing out tenants?” The story begins, “Confusion abounds surrounding the uncertain future of Crescent Seafood.” This statement also accurately describes the story about this story.

Gitlin decided to step into the middle of a contract dispute over the terms of a lease with the Harbor District. His narrative and conclusions are largely based on an interview with only one party in this conflict.

Although there were quotes from the Harbormaster, the story clearly leans toward the viewpoint of Crescent Seafood.

This story is also peppered with speculation and innuendo. Gitlin opined, “In the wake of the recent arbitration decision awarding Fashion Blacksmith \$1.9 million...one can draw the conclusion that the harbor is seeking to replace lost revenue on the backs of its tenants’ base.” There is no factual basis for this statement.

Facts In Dispute

The facts in question are related to the date that a new lease was provided, the amount of insurance required and the fairness of applying the standard Harbor lease revenue sharing provision.

The Harbor disputes the facts presented in this article and provides their own facts.

“Fact - For restaurants, the standard revenue sharing percentage is 6%. This has been true for many years. It is not a new item as claimed by Mr. Gitlin.”

“Fact - Between 2015 and 2019, Crescent Seafood paid a 6% revenue sharing rent. That provision has remained suspended since 2019, but it was never intended to be permanent.”

“Fact - The Harbor District, as good stewards of the people, wants tenants who can pay the going market rate to occupy its buildings. The Harbor District wants Crescent Seafood to pay the same rate as its other tenants.”

More Criticism

The Harbor letter also includes the following criticisms:

“Mr. Gitlin does not explain why it is the function of a government agency to assist a struggling tenant for more than five years. Or how giving one tenant a discounted rate is fair to other businesses who pay market rate. In fact, Crescent Seafood has had preferential terms for 5 years already.”

“Ignored by Mr. Gitlin is another fact: the Crescent City Harbor District has a legal duty to get the highest best use and market rates for the people’s property. Businesses that cannot perform, or consistently underperform may not belong in the Harbor District.”

One could make the case that the Harbor District made a mistake when they gave a five-year waiver of fees to Crescent Seafood. When the Harbor provides special deals, tenants can come to expect this. There is value

to having a seafood market in the Harbor, but it should not be subsidized with taxpayer money.

Correction Requested

The Harbor letter continues, “This community also deserves a newspaper that prints actual news instead of error filled opinion pieces disguised as news and designed to cause confusion and division in our community.”

“We respectfully request that you, as the publisher of the Del Norte Triplicate, issue a corrected article that will mitigate the damage that has been done.”

Why Intervene?

It is not apparent why Roger Gitlin decided to intervene in this ongoing negotiation. It has been evident for some time that Gitlin has enduring animosity toward the Harbor. Previously he sided with Fashion Blacksmith in their lease dispute. Now for whatever reason he seems to be advocating for Crescent Seafood.

It is inevitable that some personal bias will affect the content of a story, however news articles should be built on a solid factual foundation. People need a news outlet that provides reliably credible information.

An informed populace will lead to more effective public participation and better government.

If a reporter makes significant errors in a story, it is reasonable to request to have these misstatements corrected. It seems unlikely that Gitlin will acknowledge that he made a mistake, but he works for a large professional media enterprise that should care about maintaining journalistic integrity.

Keep Subscribing

Some people have told me that they cancelled their subscription after Roger Gitlin started reporting news. Conversely other people have said that they continue to subscribe because they like to read my column.

I frequently encourage people to continue to subscribe to the Triplicate. I firmly believe that we need a community newspaper, and my hope is that it will get better. This is why I volunteer to produce this column.

Usually, I avoid criticizing Roger Gitlin’s news stories and would prefer to stay in my own lane, but sometimes I feel compelled to speak up. Some will learn from their mistakes. Some will not. What will the Triplicate do?

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