

Guest Column: Political scandals are not always what they seem

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It is so easy to jump to conclusions, and so difficult to jump back.

Everyone wants to be first, to get that scoop, the splashy headline, credit for illuminating some public wrong.

But being first is never more important than being fair. And accepting without further inquiry what others proclaim to be the facts can create an avalanche of falsity.

Former Sheriff Randy Waltz

The Randy Waltz prosecution is one example. It seemed like nearly every newspaper that covers the North Coast – from the Mexican Border all the way up to the California-Oregon state line – came to the same erroneous conclusion: “Randy Waltz fibbed about his voter residence because the address he used is a short-term vacation rental property. Therefore, he must actually reside outside Del Norte County.”

What these newspapers – and our local district attorney investigators – would have learned if they had asked the right questions is that Waltz’s new residence is not a short-term vacation rental. It was then, and is now, a four-unit apartment building, with one unit occupied by the landlord, and another still occupied by Waltz.

True, months before Waltz moved in, the apartment building had been a short-term rental. But that status was changed.

Maybe investigators were satisfied by a quickie Google search that still identified the property as a short-term rental.

It didn't seem to matter to the Gotcha Crowd that, under California law, even a homeless voter can declare a particular tree in a public park to be his domicile, or that one's former domicile for voting purposes, remains in effect until a new domicile has been chosen.

Waltz was already a registered voter in Del Norte County before he moved to his new apartment. If there is some defect with respect to the new residence, then the old former address would remain his domicile.

Waltz is scheduled to be arraigned on a felony complaint of voter fraud on May 3. This would be a good time for District Attorney Katherine Micks to reconsider whether going forward with this prosecution is in the interest of justice.

In an effort to serve the public interests, Waltz resigned as Sheriff rather than continue to draw his full pay while on administrative leave. He also withdrew as a candidate for Sheriff, opening the way for former Crescent City Police Lieutenant Garrett Scott to run unopposed, without the prosecution being a campaign issue.

Who knows, maybe everybody will shake hands, apologize and forgive each other, and Waltz can return as undersheriff to help future Sheriff Scott take control of a department that is badly in need of leadership assistance that only an outsider can bring.

County Supervisor Susan Masten

Newly appointed County Supervisor Susan Masten was almost tangled up in a similar kind of hyperactive, but erroneous, group-think. The Gotcha Crowd jumped to the conclusion that there is some hanky-panky going on with respect to her sale of the Steelhead Lodge and her appointment to the Board of Supervisors.

The following events occurred, not necessarily in this order:

- Masten declared her candidacy for County Supervisor in District 5, and identifies her Steelhead Lodge in Klamath Glen as her domicile for election purposes.
- The state of California announces the intention to spend hundreds of millions of dollars on homeless housing projects throughout the state, including Del Norte County.
- The governor appoints Masten to the vacancy on the Board of Supervisors.
- Masten sells her Steelhead Lodge in Klamath Glen to the Yurok Tribe, but continues to list the Steelhead Lodge as her voter domicile.

- The governor announces a \$2.2 million grant to the Yurok Tribe to purchase the Steelhead Lodge from Masten to be used as a homeless housing project.

The Gotcha Crowd goes wild: “Another political scandal!” “Another candidate who can’t seem to get her address straight!” “Backroom wheeling and dealing!”

Now, I don’t know Susan Masten, never met her, seen or spoke to her until I began writing this commentary.

I decided to go up to the Steelhead Lodge, unannounced, to ask a few questions, just like I did in the Randy Waltz matter.

This is what I found:

- The passing of Supervisor Bob Berkowitz, Masten’s decision to run for that vacancy on the board, and her interim appointment to that office by the governor are entirely unrelated to her sale of the Steelhead Lounge to the Yurok Tribe.
- Since October last year, the Yurok Tribe housing authority was interested in the Klamath Glen location, as part of its ancestral territory, for a tribal housing project.
- Masten was informed that the sale would involve grant funding that the Yurok Tribe intended to seek. Masten assumed the funding would be from the federal government source.
- The governor’s announcement that a \$2.2 million grant has been awarded to the Yurok Tribe for acquisition of the Steelhead Lodge was made without the governor’s knowledge of Masten’s ownership of the Steelhead Lodge. She contacted the governor’s office immediately after the grant was announced to disclose this fact;
- The grant has not yet been funded. Escrow has not closed. And Susan Masten and her husband Leonard continue to reside on their Steelhead Lodge property, just as she stated in her candidacy and voter registration declarations.

Some are wondering if the District Attorney will treat Susan Masten the way Randy Waltz was treated, allowing something to get out-of-hand that can be easily explained if the right questions are asked.

Let’s hope not. Instead, let’s hope next week that these two misunderstandings can be resolved, and that our attention can again be focussed on bringing our community together to address real problems and challenges.

Dan Schmidt