



Union Township supervisor apologizes, residents question censored agenda topics

By **Randi Shaffer**, *The Morning Sun*

POSTED: 10/22/14, 9:46 PM EDT | UPDATED: ON 10/22/2014

6 COMMENTS

Union Township’s supervisor continues to draw heat for the way he handled a potential agenda topic earlier this month.

Trustee Tim Lannen said he had approached Township Manager Brian Smith and asked that the township review its 2014 and 2015 budgets at a meeting in light of misinformation being spread in conjunction with the 99th district state representative race, in which township trustee Bryan Mielke is the Democratic contender.

“(There was) something on TV that I felt was being slanderous to us as a board, and to our citizens,” Lannen said. “Union Township was being accused of mismanagement of its funds.”

Township resident Ron Primeau said that phone calls and television advertisements from a campaign group called “Hard Working Americans” have indicated that the township board has been mismanaging its finances.

“The accusation’s been made that the budget’s been run into the ground; \$815,000 wastefully spent,” said township resident Matt Mertz.

Lannen said he asked for a presentation of the budget at the Oct. 8 public meeting in order to clarify some of the ads, and his request was turned down.

“It had to do with the campaign that was going on with the two candidates that were running for state rep- Representative (Kevin) Cotter and Representative Mielke,” Township Supervisor Russ Alwood said. “I just didn’t feel it was the right place for it in the board room, and that’s all there was.”

[Alwood kicked off the Oct. 8 meeting](#) by stating that, as authorized by the Michigan Townships Association, the board would not allow residents to speak about “political issues.”

When the content of the public comment took a turn for the worse, Alwood pounded his gavel midway through resident John Zerbe’s public comment, attempting to end the meeting.

Union Township residents were quick to surmise what the attempted censorship might mean.

Township resident Mary Barker, who spoke at the Oct. 8 meeting about how she felt censored, asked the township Wednesday why it did nothing to defend itself against the “attacks against Bryan Mielke.”

“The supervisor doesn’t want the voters to know his Republican friends are attacking our trustee and Democratic candidate, who is running against Republican Kevin Cotter,” she speculated during her portion of extended public comment.

[Alwood has since said he is “really sorry”](#) for attempting to close the meeting mid-public comment.

“I just wanted to apologize for stopping the meeting during public comment,” he said. “I just kind of want to move on and not have that happen again.”

Alwood said he had personally called Zerbe to apologize, and the resident had accepted his apology.

Trustee Phil Mikus asked Alwood what steps he was planning on taking in the future to ensure a similar incident would not happen again.

“I guess it’s my word,” Alwood said.

However, that was not enough for trustee Tim Lannen, who reviewed the township’s governing documents, outlining a portion that detailed the board’s responsibility for ensuring it stayed up-to-date on training.

Mikus questioned whether Alwood would consider looking into new education and training opportunities.

“We’ve been trained with the policy manual,” Alwood responded.

Trustee Roger Hauck took to defending Alwood, stating that Alwood was in a tough situation, and that the board had no obligation to discuss the advertisements in question.

“I just don’t feel we should address political ads as a board,” he said.

Alwood’s apology was not enough for some township residents.

“You, Mr. Alwood, are a disgrace to our community and the office you hold,” Barker said. “The only honorable thing for you to do at this point is to resign.”

SUBSCRIBE TO GET HOME DELIVERY FOR AS LOW
AS \$1.50 PER WEEK

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Randi Shaffer has been the Isabella County reporter for the Morning Sun since 2012. An alumna of CMU, she is in the process of obtaining her MSA degree. Obsessions include hockey, yoga and vegetables. Reach the author at rshaffer@michigannewspapers.com .

Full bio and more articles by Randi Shaffer

Back to top