

# Community Voices: Letters To The Editor

January 24, 1997

Dear Editor,

We would like to thank the Lansing Volunteer Fire Department for their response to an accident on the morning of Jan. 2 by Milliken Station.

We would also like to thank all the community members who stopped and helped. A special thank you to a young woman named Lori who stopped right after.

It is so nice to live in a community with such caring and helpful members. Words cannot express how much we appreciate everything. Thank you and may God bless you all.

- Don and Pat Poch

January 24, 1997

Dear Editor,

We are writing as five residents of the County who, by virtue of sitting on the Lansing Town board, have had a chance to observe closely some of the policies and procedures of the Department of Social Services (DSS). While the County Sheriff has received heavy scrutiny and criticism, very little has come to light about the operations of the DSS, the largest arm of County government.

After the revelation that the Department spent a half million dollars on taxi rides, the Department should have received a top to bottom review. To our knowledge, this did not occur. We believe it would be in the best interest of all of the residents of the County if the Department was examined and a change in structure considered.

The DSS has paid property taxes on behalf of individuals receiving benefits through the welfare system. While the law allows the DSS to pay property taxes, and in some cases it makes financial sense to do so, as a matter of common sense these should

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be rare situations that are handled very carefully.

As taxpayers, we have a right to expect that the amounts paid are monitored and that a lien or mortgage is placed on the property to ensure repayment of that money upon the sale of the property.

The Town of Lansing made inquiry of the DSS last summer concerning this situation. After not receiving any response to a Freedom of Information Law request, the Town discovered that the Ithaca Journal had been able to obtain a list of twelve properties where real estate taxes had been paid in the past year. In most of these situations, the DSS had filed mortgages to secure the repayment against the sale of the property.

However, for reasons that still remain unexplained, some property tax payments have been left unsecured, even after the Town brought them to the attention of the Department. The Town did learn that the DSS computer system cannot track files back further than ten months.

According to Commissioner Dolan and Assistant County Attorney Jonathan Wood, any research into payments made prior to ten months ago would involve the manual search of over 14,000 files. Therefore, the DSS was unable to provide any information on property tax payments made prior to 1996. Because of this failure to keep accessible records, the DSS cannot know whether it has protected the taxpayers' interests.

We can understand the reasoning behind paying the property taxes for a homeowner who requires assistance because of a temporary situation, especially where finding and paying for an apartment would be a far more disruptive and expensive proposition. However, the DSS in this instance has paid certain property taxes for decades. Obviously, this is neither a temporary nor an emergency situation. At a bare minimum, the DSS should secure the amounts paid by the timely filing of a lien or mortgage and have a rational record keeping system in place. Furthermore, it should not be so extremely difficult to get any kind of response from the Department.

As Bob Spaulding indicated in a letter to the Journal's editor on Dec. 28, the County Charter Review Committee has issued a report suggesting that the offices of County Clerk and County Sheriff be changed from elective to appointed positions. The criteria used to determine that these offices should be appointed were the "degree the office-

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**FLAPJACKS & GOODTIMES** were both on the menu for the Woodsedge Pancake Breakfast last Saturday. Griddle-tosser Grover Metzger was encouraged by guest pianist Amy Benjamin (who, by the way will soon be wed to Moravia's Michael Wellauer). It was an interesting birthday breakfast for Thelma Whiting and a taste treat for Darlene and Floyd Boyden, Mary Sutphin, Daisy Isenbarger, Dorothy Negley, Marion Thompson, Millie Christofferson, Jennie Stevens, Virginia Kelley, Sarah Case, Lila Tilley, Kathy McGuire, Grace Sanford, Iva Wright, Marjorie Connelly, Dorothy Fenton, David and Dorothy Braid, Eileen Cundy, and Shirley Benjamin with grandchildren Ron, Stuart and Amy.

holder sets policy, as opposed to administering state or county policy, and to what extent the office benefits from being independent from the elected legislature." While these may not be the best benchmarks on which to make a judgment, applying them to the position of Commissioner of Social Services is instructive.

The Commissioner of Social Services oversees more employees than any other department head in the County and has the largest operating budget of any department, \$38 million out of a total County budget of \$90 million (not including the debt service on the new building). Just looking at the listing for Tompkins County Social Services in the phone book shows the broad scope and authority of the Commissioner. The Department administers federal and state entitlement programs, including public assistance, food stamps and medicaid, as well as prosecuting child abuse proceedings, child support collection enforcement, foster care and adoptions.

As such, the Commissioner exercises tremendous discretion in setting as well as implementing policy on the state, County and Department levels. This responsibility will only grow, given the vast changes in entitlements coming through the system in the foreseeable future. At the least, this office has a policy setting responsibility equal to that of the District Attorney, who the Charter Review Committee conceded should be

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elected.

We do not intend to suggest that the recommendations of the Charter Review Committee in regard to the County Sheriff or Clerk are in the best interests of the people who live in the County. On the contrary, we believe that the current state of the DSS is a good example of what can happen when a government department is secretive and unaccountable to the people.

Direct elections of public officers let the people choose the type of government they want, a principle apparently overlooked by the Charter Review Committee. The residents of this County currently must depend upon the County Administrator appointed by the County Board to provide oversight of the appointed Commissioner and the DSS. It is clearly not working.

An elected Commissioner (or Clerk or Sheriff) who is answerable to the public he or she serves is in the public interest. The Charter Review Committee should rethink its mission in order to address the very real problems plaguing this Department and the County. - **Jeannine Kirby, Paul Butler, Herbert Beckwith, Larry Tvaroha and Jeffrey Cleveland.**

A news summary appears on page 1 and a response from the Chair of the Tompkins County Board of Representatives, Barbara Mink, appears on page 7.