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THE DRIPPING DISINGENUOUSNESS OF LOCAL ELECTEDS' STATEMENTS ON WMMHC CRISIS

by J. Kevin Hunt — Candidate for Missoula City Council, Ward 1
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The self-serving, attempted-face-saving May 26 statements from the County Commissioners concerning public acquisition of The Bridge Apts. — and similar statements by Mayor Engen — are disingenuous. This is particularly so for Commissioner Juanita Vero, who sits on the WMMHC Board. If a May 20 email and internal newsletter message to WMMHC employees from its CEO Levi Anderson accurately relates history, then Vero, Strohmaier and Slotnic were AWOL (Strohmaier for at least two years) as WMMHC sought to transfer The Bridge Apts. to the County, and not at market rate.

It was natural for many of us to have a visceral reaction of outrage when reporter David Erickson broke the story of the properties' listing, last week. The vague comments from Mayor Engen that followed NBC Montana's story in which Ward 3 City Council candidate Daniel Carlino and I were interviewed, raised red flags and CEO Anderson's email to WMMHC employees only made those flags redder. The relevant inference to be drawn from Anderson's implications was that WMMHC's efforts were ignored for two years and that it took market rate listing to produce a response from these politicians due to public reaction.

The Commissioners' assertion that it's not cool to use public funds to purchase something built with public funds, is specious. The local public funds, provided 23 years ago, consisted of $20,000 in TIF. The remainder of the funding came from 14 grants, mostly from private foundations and nonprofits, along with state and federal grant money. A similar concern was raised by Mayor Engen.

The outrageous hypocrisy dripping from these statements is that at present, tens of millions of dollars of public TIF subsidies are being pushed through a strainer of multi-state development consortia that profit immensely from the hundreds of market rate housing units they build, sell and rent out on land bought with public funds and sold to those middlemen at a huge discount…meaning at a huge loss to the public. In return, the developers build a handful of "affordable" units on the small portion of that land retained by the public, which end up not being affordable for anyone earning less than $46/hr.

That, these electeds insist, is a perfectly good — indeed "game-changing" — use of public funds.

Moreover, the refusal of these 'leaders' to comment on potential use of a bit of the $41 million in federal COVID-19 relief funds granted to the city and county, in order effect debt-free acquisition of the Bridge, is mystifying.

Additionally, their categorical refusal to even consider acquisition of the other WMMHC special needs four-unit property on Third St., has not been explained.

Meanwhile, the Lambros Realty online listing for The Bridge describes the building as “vacant,” and features photos of empty hallways and rooms. And, according to a WMMHC employee — who came forward as a confidential informant — WMMHC (meaning the CEO or other management) informed only a few workers directly serving the clients, of impending sale.

According to that informant, the WMMHC tenant clients were told they would be OK, because section 8 housing vouchers would be provided to them. There is a three-year wait for Section 8 housing in Missoula, and no such housing meeting the needs of these folks with mental disabilities.

In this debacle there is no shortage of available finger pointing, and no political party affiliation gets a pass. It's past time to stop the personal political damage control and to act in the interests of our vulnerable, disabled neighbors who are treated as pawns in a cruel game.

Mayor Engen, County Commissioners, WMMHC management: knock off the finger pointing, excuse-making and position-dodging, and quickly resolve this crisis with community acquisition of this housing.

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