

Juneau Reporter Fired After Taking Ethics Stand

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Lisa Phu/KTOO

A bill making its way through the state legislature would allow municipalities to forego publishing public notices in local newspapers. Not surprisingly, many newspapers, already struggling with declining revenue, don't like that idea.

When the Juneau Empire's publisher wanted to discuss the bill with its sponsor and have his reporter cover the conversation, she declined, saying she felt it was unethical to mix the business side of the newspaper with the reporting side. As KTOO's Lisa Phu tells us, the reporter, who would be familiar to Kodiak listeners, lost her job the next day.

(Empire Bill 3:51

Municipalities buy space in newspapers to publish notices on certain information, like raising taxes, meetings, and foreclosures. House Bill 275 would give municipalities another option and publish the information electronically, to be accessed on a municipal website.

Rep. Mike Hawker is the main sponsor of the bill. He says it would empower municipalities to find the most cost effective way to operate.

harker2 (:17)

It's information that we have determined that it is in the public necessity and good that it's made available and, as time has progressed and moved forward, there are alternatives to the traditional newspaper route of publication that might actually even do a better and more efficient and effective job of informing a public.

Juneau Empire publisher Ruston Burton disagrees.

ruston1

(:11) It's a common legislative move that's made in a lot of states, it's been made before, trying to basically take public information and hide it behind a website that nobody goes to essentially.

Burton wanted to keep tabs on the bill. He mentioned the idea to the Empire's state government reporter Jennifer Canfield.

On Feb. 4, Burton also asked her to set up a meeting with Rep. Hawker. Burton wanted to meet with him and intended that Canfield be present at the meeting as well.

Ruston8 (:23) In my mind, I'm thinking that as we're sitting with him, she's asking the questions and a reporter

would be asking the questions about, you know, 'Why are you wanting to push this bill? What's the reason behind it? What instigated it to make you feel it was super important?' It's pretty simple. There's somebody pushing a bill, we want to know why, and we're going to tell the story about it.

Reporter Canfield didn't think it was so simple. She didn't want to do it.

jenn1

(:07) There really needs to be a firewall between the business side and the editorial side and I think any journalist understands that implicitly.

ruston8/7 (:07) I didn't think anything of it at the time when I asked and I didn't expect such a push back on it either. I don't know that there's anything unethical about saying, 'Hey we're going to go talk to this guy that's trying to push a bill and I want to be there when you're talking to him and you can report the news.'

To Burton, it was just a meeting. He says the Empire has a financial stake if HB275 passes, but says his concern is not about the money. He says less than 1 percent of the paper's total revenue comes from municipal notices.

Canfield made it clear she didn't want to set up the meeting.

Jenn4

(:17) It was insisted that I do do it, and eventually the conversation got to the point where I was told that if I didn't do it, our working relationship could not continue. I again expressed my ethical concerns and I was fired.

Canfield says she got notice of her termination the day after being asked to set up the meeting. She says being fired is a direct consequence of her saying no.

jenn3 (:03) In our conversation it was pretty clear that was the reason.

Burton says the two events are unrelated.

Ruston2

(:12) Ruston: A decision had been made long before there was ever anybody asking for a meeting with Hawker. Me: Which decision? Ruston: In relation to what our relationship with Jennifer was going to be.

Canfield is not the first reporter to abruptly lose her job at the Empire. In 2012, state government reporter Pat Forgey was dismissed from the paper; he went on to cover the capitol for the Alaska Dispatch. His replacement at the Empire, Andrew Miller, quit after just one day, claiming the work environment was 'dysfunctional.'

At the time of the interview, Burton still hadn't set up an interview with Hawker but says he plans to.

In Juneau, I'm Lisa Phu.