

OUR VIEW

Real losers in fight over justice administrator are the taxpayers

Only a few relevant questions remain in the long-running fight between county commissioners and judicial judges over the firing of justice administrator Bonnie Quiroga. None of those remaining questions has much to do with whether the commissioners acted properly when they fired Quiroga in July last year. It's clear by now that as far as the law is concerned, the commissioners were wrong.

What remains to be seen is how many judicial forums they will have to lose in before they concede that fact among themselves, and what the costs will have been once that inevitable day arrives.

The costs are apt to be many and varied.

Among the most baffling things about this situation is the amount of political capital commissioners have been willing to expend.

Through their insistence on continuing the fight, the commissioners have undermined their own credibility as governmental officials among other leaders from here to Austin. They have undermined their own credibility as political leaders in their own party.

What we can and will finally calculate is the amount of taxpayer money that went to paying a squad of outside attorneys — billing at \$325 an hour — who've been making the commissioners' losing arguments before various judges and panels of judges.

The fight is probably not the only reason well-respected former Justice of the Peace Darrell Apffel decided to challenge incumbent Commissioner Ryan Dennard in the March 2016 Republican primary, but it must have helped make the decision.

They have disrupted the normal operations of county government, which residents fund through their taxes and have a right to expect be carried out as efficiently as possible.

We'll probably never be able to calculate the full amount this fight has cost

those taxpayers in time paid to county commissioners, judges, county employees and the costs of special meetings and trials, but it's clearly more than any public good that was ever possible in any outcome.

What we can and will finally calculate is the amount of taxpayer money that went to paying a squad of outside attorneys — billing at \$325 an hour — who've been making the commissioners' losing arguments before various judges and panels of judges. At last count, that number was \$38,000, which didn't include billings for June, an especially active month.

The number is certainly much higher now, and \$38,000 already was outrageous in context of the issue — who gets to manage a midlevel employee. Most people the court serves will have to have worked most of a year to earn that much.

It's time for this thing to end. The commissioners need to concede they have lost and stop filing appeals. If they just can't find the fortitude to do that, they need to deal the public out and start writing the checks to pay the lawyers out of their own personal accounts.

• Michael A. Smith

Razor cuts through time

I will never buy another razor in my lifetime.

"Dad," she said, me sitting on the steps of a shop nestled in the SoHo district of New York City. "I bought you something."

My daughter is now an adult. Traveling together, just the two of us arms length from each other for a week, was a new experience. Until this particular trip, arm's length meant me holding her hand to keep her out of traffic or wandering off into a crowd. College-aged adults don't need this type of supervision.

Leonard Woolsey



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Sitting down next to me, she hands me a small bag flowing over with colorful tissue paper.

She is beautiful. Long gone are the days of the little girl who'd sit closely against me as crowds swirled around us or see me as someone with the means to purchase a souvenir she might spot on a shelf. Today, on this trip, she is confident, educated, and self-sufficient. She is an adult in every sense of the word.

"Open it up," she said. I can't help but wonder how we've arrived at this point in life, the two of us each capable of making independent decisions across

wide spectrums of issues. To her, this is her city, a place she could only know better if she already had a local Zip code. That of course, is next.

Pulling the noisy tissue paper from the bag, I reach down and discover a box. I look back up at her, the moment we're sharing distracting me, and see her face in the afternoon light. I see my wife, her mother, below the surface. Inner strength and drive are on display.

Pulling the box from the bottom of the bag, she helps me open the sliding case.

She tells me she knows this is not the same price as an airline ticket, but she wanted to get me something to remember our trip.

I don't know the name on the box let alone the names of most of the stores along the narrow street. But she does, and to her this is important.

The box slides away to reveal an orange handled razor and a couple tubes of liquid. Taking each out, she tells me how to use them on my face. I listen.

What strikes me is how different this moment is to me. As my mind tells me, gifts from my daughter come in forms of stuffed animals or T-shirts. The box in the bag is different.

Reaching down, I pick up the razor.

The razor gently balances in the palm of my hand. What I see, however, represents much more. My daughter is an independent adult completely capable of making her own decisions, formulating opinions, and supporting herself. And this one, the orange handled razor with a name I don't recognize, is her sharing a small part of her new world with me.

The world may very well come up with a razor capable of mowing the lawn, loading dishwashers and monitoring blood pressure. But to me, nothing else will be able to give to me what I received sitting on the steps while staring at an orange razor in the palm of my hand.

Killing mockingbirds in Galveston

On May 4th, the Galveston Charter Review Committee voted 6-3 to recommend to the city council that it place on the ballot in November a proposal to change the city council election system from 6-1 to 4-2-1. This vote of 6 Anglo males versus 2 African-American males and 1 Anglo female as cast 46 days before Juneteenth. The heartbreaking irony surrounding what was happening in Galveston on the eve of our Juneteenth celebration has forced us to continue speaking out.

We have been talking to our friends around the country about our concerns and have listened to their disbelief. On June 11th, we appeared at the city council meeting to advise council of our deep concern.

As you participated in our local Juneteenth celebration activities, we hope everyone reflected on the current effort to diminish the voting rights of minorities in Galveston. An effort that has been rejected four times by the Department of Justice

Guest column



Cornelia Banks, Galveston Northside Taskforce, Leon Phillips, Galveston Coalition for Justice, Steve McIntyre and Joe Compian, Gulf Coast Interfaith, Mary Patrick, Galveston Chapter of the NAACP, and Amy Quiroga, LULAC Galveston Council No. 151.

under four different presidents: H.W. Bush, Clinton, G.W. Bush, and Obama.

This excerpt from the last DOJ rejection letter on Oct. 3, 2011, demands careful consideration by the Charter Committee and a clear public explanation of the motivation and rationale for those six votes.

A voting change has a discriminatory effect if it will lead to retrogression in the ability of language or racial minorities "with respect to their effective exercise of the electoral franchise." *Beer v. United States*, 425 U.S. 130, 141 (1976). The voting change at issue must be mea-

sured against the benchmark practice to determine whether the ability of minority voters to participate in the political process and elect candidates of their choice will be "augmented, diminished, or not affected by the change affecting voting." *Ibid*.

Under the existing method of voting, minority voters currently have the ability to elect a candidate of their choice in three of the six single-member districts. In contrast, this ability would exist only in two of four districts and in neither of the two at-large positions under the proposed system. Indeed, in the course

of our investigation, the city acknowledged that the proposed method of election will decrease the number of minority ability-to-elect districts.

Intentionally diminishing the opportunity of minorities to vote and elect someone of their choice under the Voting Rights Act is crossing into dangerous territory. The fact that the Justice Department rejected Galveston's four prior efforts to change to 4-2-1 strongly suggests the depth of the hurt, anger, and distrust that many feel as Galveston rushes toward this fifth attempt.

For decades many public school students were required to read the beloved American novel "To Kill A Mockingbird." It was believed to be the only book ever written by Harper Lee. This past year an earlier book by Harper Lee was discovered that tells the story of the characters decades later. The new book will be published on July 14th.

What would Atticus Finch say to those six members of the Charter Review Committee?

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