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VBH BOT ePacket Legal FOIA

1 message

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Wed, Nov 30, 2011 at 7:45 AM

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District 26 fulfills \$2,800 FOIA request

By KATIE ANDERSON - kanderson@shawmedia.com

NW Herald

Wednesday, November 30, 2011

CARY – Between August and September, it cost School District 26 more than \$2,800 to answer a Freedom of Information Act request that sought to compile material for a forensic audit of district bookkeeping from July 2010 through July 2011.

The 2,500-page answer took staff more than 103 hours to compile, according to a district report obtained by the Northwest Herald through a FOIA request.

The expensive FOIA request actually was six individual requests filed together. Each sought a separate two-month period's worth of copies of all documents relating to district finances, including checking, savings, mutual funds, bank statements, canceled checks, deposit slips, ledgers, account applications and more.

"The reason it took so long to fulfill the FOIA was that the scope of it required thousands of documents and in all, over ten thousand redactions," school board President Chris Spoerl wrote in an email to the Northwest Herald last week.

"So much redacting was necessary because, for example, each check had to have the account number and signature redacted at minimum. Sometimes there would be other private information as well," Spoerl said.

The multipart probe cost \$2,845.13, without factoring in attorneys' fees, according to district records.

Ken Hillman and five others were behind the large FOIA request, records said.

After reading through the materials when they were ready for pickup, they took only a portion of what was requested.

"We wound up not taking the entire amount," Hillman said. "I think we ended up spending between 50 and 70 bucks between all of us."

"We have discussed trying to get a reconciliation process going between the financial statements and the bank records, but, quite honestly, it is a low priority for us," Hillman said.

According to Hillman, school board member Chris Jenner inspired the request.

"He asked me for it," Hillman said. "The whole idea of bank records came from Jenner."

To support what he said, Hillman provided a copy of a short email thread between Jenner and himself in which Hillman asks Jenner where to send the results of the FOIA requests.

Earlier in the thread, Jenner writes, "So now you have 2,500+ pages, what's your plan?"

Jenner on Tuesday said that he never told Hillman or anyone to file the cumbersome requests.

"I did not initiate a forensic audit, I did not ask for a forensic audit, and had I wanted forensic audit, I would have approached the administration directly," Jenner said.

Jenner added that he previously had conversations with Hillman about the value of forensic audits, and mentioned that he would be interested in the results of one, but that he did not direct Hillman.

"I had spoken to Ken Hillman once or twice, and I had encouraged him back around August to talk to Larry Snow, a former board member in [Huntley] School District 158," Jenner said.

Snow, who has since died, had knowledge of the forensic audit process.

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