



Southwest Neighborhoods, Inc.
Grievance Board
Multnomah Arts Center, Room 5
7688 SW Capitol Hwy.
Portland, OR 97219

Dear Grievance Board:

I work as an independent journalist for Raindrop Works, an online media organization that focuses on government transparency and legal processes in the Portland, Oregon, area. On Tuesday, March 15th, 2023, I joined the Zoom meeting for the SWNI Special Meeting that was meeting to discuss the resolution for applying to receive city funding as you had previously had.

Before this meeting, the only direct interaction I had with your organization was a request for a statement I emailed the current board president last year in regards to a story I was writing. An email that was never replied to.

Before the meeting began, I was asked by Secretary Janet Hawkins who I was there representing, and after identifying my organization, an individual shown in chat as Michael Kaplan (I'm uncertain of his current affiliation, but I understand he used to be the South Portland NA board president) stated he'd never heard of my organization (of little surprise, as we are a small outfit run by a disabled veteran with significant limitations on abilities to work) and asked what kind of work I did.

When the meeting started, President Steve Mullinax stated that "Janet [Hawkins] will be monitoring the chat and she may choose to bring up comments or questions that she judges are pertinent to the discussion" before outlining the 'rules for the road for this evening':

- Be courteous with each other and patient
- During discussion please raise Zoom reaction hand to be recognized

- Please keep your comments short
- “If you talk over the chair or any other member or attack anyone personally, you’ll be warned that doing so is disruptive behavior, and with a second warning you’re subject to being removed from the meeting”

As the meeting progressed, much discussion on the first resolution was focused on the language surrounding the money that was anticipated from a City Contract, which made sense given earlier discussions of the dire straits SWNI found itself in with its limited funding and forced austerity measures.

After the first measure was passed, I took the opportunity to ask a single question in the chat, focused on the fiscal history of the organization. While I understand that past scandals such as the 2011 conviction of Virginia Stormer of embezzlement, the 2020 forensic audit, and ongoing questions of a PPP loan from the same year would rather be left in the past and forgotten, I felt that they were eminently relevant to not only residents of South and Southwest neighborhoods, but all Portlanders whose taxes in part fund neighborhood coalitions. I opted to use the chat as opposed to raising my Zoom hand specifically so that I would not interfere with Mr. Mullinax’s ‘rules for the road’ and could allow the meeting to continue unimpeded. The specific question I asked was:

While there are questions regarding future and possibly increased funding coming from being a recognized coalition again, what is SWNI doing to ensure that the gross mismanagement that led to the blistering audit of the past does not happen again, such as applications for PPP loans when their funding was already secured through the city? What kind of outside programs are being put in place to ensure clean audits?

I had a few other questions that I was considering asking, based on the review of the resolutions made public before the meeting, but that was the relevant one to me at the time. Honestly, I did not expect an answer immediately, but hoped that the question might spark a conversation, either after the meeting or by text during the meeting.

Instead, approximately 30 seconds after sending the message, my first interaction during the entire on-recording meeting, I was banned from the meeting. I cannot confirm which host was responsible for it, but I suspect it was Ms. Hawkins based on previous statements that she would be monitoring chat.

This blatant violation of the rules of the meeting is the core of my grievance. Per Article XI of the current bylaws on your website, as I cannot confirm independently who

banned me, Section 1 does not apply to me.

To add to this injury, I was informed later that when another user in the chat asked why I was banned from the meeting, they were reprimanded verbally by Ms. Hawkins for being disruptive, and were similarly threatened with expulsion, with no explanation given.

Part of what made this violation so grievous to me personally is that I know firsthand most, if not all of the current board members were members last year when the Multnomah District Court ruled against SWNI (*Hiller-Webb and Tyvoll v SWNI*) in that when receiving City funding they were subject to public records laws the same as any other government entity. A status that this meeting was explicitly about trying to regain. Notably, when covering that story last year was when I attempted to reach out to the board president for a statement for the article.

As you may have seen in recent reporting by the Portland Mercury, other journalists are also watching this situation, and are reporting accurately on your actions. And if you do gain City funding and become once again a de facto government office, such bylaw policies such as following Civic Life guidelines as well as legal requirements like Oregon Public Meeting and related Sunshine laws will become highly pertinent.

While Southwest Neighborhoods Inc. may wish to ignore it's troubled past and not respond to legitimate questions in the hopes that the public forgets about them, they can no longer ignore the specific issue of banning me from the chat, not only chilling my voice as well as interfering with my ability to observe a public meeting, and it's potential implication for violations of future First Amendment freedom of press violations. I am due an explanation for the board's actions, and an explanation on how such violations will not happen in the future.

I look forward to seeing this addressed at an upcoming board meeting in accordance with Article XI Section 3 of the Bylaws.

Sincerely,

A solid black rectangular redaction box covering the signature area.

Heather-Lynne Van Wilde