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Deep digging required in Hanson case

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Journalists are often criticized for having short attention spans, skimming the surface on stories and not digging deep enough.

I would be the first to admit that those can be fair criticisms.

I also know firsthand what happens when journalists dig. We can then be faulted for prolonging a story, refusing to move on, and trying to sensationalize the news.

As an editor, deciding when enough is enough is not easy. Some of my toughest decisions are when to keep going on a story and when to back off.

The bottom line, for me at least, is whether we have gotten to the truth: Do we know what really happened? Is anyone keeping information from us and from the public? Is taxpayers' money involved? Would the public want to know?

I find myself asking these questions a lot lately at The Desert Sun. The most recent instance is with our coverage of Desert Hot Springs.

We reported March 24 that City Manager Jerry Hanson received \$322,809 in compensation last year, including \$92,215.59 in retroactive pay from a severance package he received even though he has not left his job.

Hanson's contract was certainly unusual - we have not found any city manager with such a generous arrangement.

Council members defend it, saying they needed someone of Hanson's caliber to guide them through the bankruptcy.

There was an initial flurry of stories in The Desert Sun and on local TV stations. We have continued to pursue the story.

We needed to find out more and understand how taxpayer money was being spent. How did Hanson wind up making so much money? Why was he able to cash out so much vacation? At what rate was he paid when he cashed out his vacation?

I never imagined at the time that three months later we'd be still searching for answers.

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City officials have not made it easy to get the answers (I'm not telling our readers anything I have not already told city officials directly) - so much so that we needed to bring in our attorneys because we were not getting access to public records.

We tried diligently to get copies of Hanson's payroll checks. We thought it was a simple request. The city at first refused, saying we should just read his contracts and calculate it from there. (That still does not give them the right to deny us access to public records.)

We tried calculating his compensation from his 10 different contracts. It still didn't add up, at which point the city said we also needed the city's memorandum of understanding with its unions.

Every time a city employee got a raise, Hanson got the raise too - on top of the 3 percent anniversary of employment raises agreed upon in his contracts.

Relinquishing records

After more than two months, the city finally agreed to give up copies of Hanson's payroll checks. And it took another month for the city to tell us what the payroll codes met. (We assumed "HOL" meant holiday pay, but we try never to assume anything; we did not know what other codes, such as "4572" meant.)

The finance director, the public information officer and the deputy city attorney would not answer questions on the city payroll registers until our lawyers intervened.

Some city officials have told us they feel we are dragging out the story when in fact they are the ones prolonging the story by not readily answering questions and providing documents.

Three months later, and many public records requests later, we have learned that Hanson cashed out 997.15 hours of unused vacation and sick time - not 700 hours as city officials initially said. We found this out by looking at the payroll register.

By the way, "4572" is the code for untaxed city contributions to Hanson's deferred compensation retirement plan.

We have found out that Hanson not only received a \$600-a-month car allowance, he also got 200 gallons of premium gasoline a month (That's about \$500 worth).

We found out that he got 800 hours - 20 weeks - of vacation, sick time and administrative leave every year.

Being a public watchdog

Those are facts that we think residents of this cash-strapped city might want to know.

When we talked to residents, they voiced concerns and were interested. Two council members are running for re-election and Vice Mayor Mary Stephens hopes to be elected mayor in the fall.

Voters need to know how elected officials have spent their money.

We are not making judgments in our news stories. We are trying to provide residents with information we think they would want to know.

We will continue to be a watchdog and tell the stories officials may not want you to know.

We will do so in a fair and balanced way.

We have continued to write many good things happening in Desert Hot Springs even as we pursue the story behind the story with Jerry Hanson.

Recently, we had a front-page story about a beloved Desert Hot Springs doctor who had been killed, high school grads headed to Ivy League schools and the groundbreaking for a new golf course community.

We covered the city's Independence Day celebration and Sen. Barbara Boxer honoring the Boys and Girls Club.

We will continue to look for good things happening in Desert Hot Springs - and many things are. That is important for us to do.

We will also continue to be a vigilant watchdog. That is important work, too.

Steve Silberman is the Executive Editor of The Desert Sun.
