



Office of County Treasurer of Schoharie County

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To: Conesvilleny.com

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Dear Fred,

Fourteen is greater than two. It sounds like simple arithmetic, but that is something that Chairman Earl VanWormer and the majority of the Board of Supervisors should keep in mind. For the past few years, Cobleskill Supervisor Leo McAllister has positioned himself as the Chairman of the immensely powerful Finance Committee. His second-in-command is Conesville Supervisor Bill Federice. These two close allies have reduced the number of supervisors who serve on that very influential committee down to just five, so getting items approved (or denied) is pretty easy for them – they only need one more ‘yes’ vote to come up with a majority of three. And the second-most powerful committee of the Board is the Personnel Committee, which is made up of the same exact five members who sit on the Finance Committee. And guess who chairs the Personnel Committee? None other than the same Bill Federice, with McAllister serving right there beside him.

The really important issues facing county government are funneled directly to the Finance Committee where they decide which ones see the light of day and which get buried behind closed doors. Then, when the full Board of Supervisors meets each month, Mr. McAllister, as Finance Chairman, announces the official position of that dominant committee and very often convinces the full Board to approve the motion. Keep in mind that Mr. McAllister holds even more personal sway on the Board because he casts the heaviest weighted vote. In casting his 481 weighted votes, Mr. McAllister can achieve his goals with as few as four other members of the Board voting his way even if all eleven of the other Board members vote ‘No’. So in most cases, as goes Cobleskill and as goes the Finance Committee – so goes the final decision of the full County Board.

If Supervisor McAllister’s record of decision-making and financial management showed consistent good judgement, then perhaps his extraordinary level of influence on county government would be acceptable. But Mr. McAllister has lead the county, and the Board, into some serious financial pitfalls.

First and foremost was his insistence on borrowing an additional \$15 million to dump into the Streambank Project. McAllister did this knowing full well that NRCS had at that time suspended all reimbursements due to serious problems with the project. I did everything I could at that time to try to stop this risky financial gamble, but he used those weighted votes to get it approved. Two and a half years have now gone by and the borrowed money has mostly been spent. And yet, the project remains stalled – so the extra \$15 million accomplished absolutely nothing.

The taxpayers of this county have now pumped a total of \$23 million into that project, and we have only received back a little more than \$6 million in state and federal reimbursements. On the rare occasions when Mr. McAllister allows the Board to discuss the Streambank project, they do it behind closed doors in executive session, hidden from the very taxpayers who will be stuck paying the bill.

Furthermore – Mr. McAllister and Mr. Federice were the driving forces behind the creation of a County Administrator position back in 2015. Despite their claims at the time, they obviously did not really want an experienced, trained, professional county manager. That would explain why they hired someone with absolutely no experience whatsoever in managing county government. If what they wanted was a ‘yes man’ who would simply toe the line, then that’s exactly what they got in County Administrator Steve Wilson. To date, the creation of this position has cost us \$356,709 and by the end of this year, the total cost of salaries and benefits for that office will exceed \$500,000. I fail to see what that half-a-million dollar investment has gained us. In fact, Wilson’s Washington D.C. mentality has added even more levels of bureaucracy, duplication, and dysfunction to county government. It should also be noted that almost immediately after he was hired, the new County Administrator stood up at a Board meeting and supported Leo McAllister’s stance on borrowing the additional \$15 million for the Streambank Project. Can that be just a coincidence? I seriously doubt it.

And finally, under the current McAllister/Federice regime, the labor contracts with the county workforce have all expired. When Wilson was hired we were told that one of his most important duties would be to negotiate union contracts. Now, more than two years have dragged by with workers having no contract and the negotiations are stuck at an impasse. Morale among our workforce is at an all-time low, and when the contracts finally do get settled (whether through an agreement or because of the judgment of an independent Labor Arbitrator), county government will likely have to come up with about \$800,000 to pay for the accumulated multi-year retroactive cost-of-living increases. McAllister’s unreasonable and unrelenting demands for employee concessions have derailed the entire process. Furthermore, Steve Wilson’s recent “financial report” to the Board of Supervisors was nothing more than a shameful, thinly-veiled effort to back up McAllister’s positions. He should be ashamed of himself.

It’s time for the other 14 members of the Board of Supervisors to admit that mistakes have been made and concede that Schoharie County government must get back on track. Supervisors McAllister and Federice have had their chance to “improve” county government, and they have bungled things badly. The other Board members should unite together in a bipartisan way and reconfigure the Finance and Personnel Committees. They should expand those committees to include seven Supervisors, and they should “reassign” McAllister and Federice.

Each of the mistakes that were made are fixable. There is nothing facing Schoharie County that we can’t handle together. The aftermath of Hurricane Irene is certainly proof of that. But in order to move forward – you MUST be travelling in the right direction. Moving forward if you are off-course only takes you farther away from where you want to be. Schoharie County government should change direction when it comes to Steve Wilson, the Streambank Project, and the union contracts. After all, the facts speak for themselves and the numbers tell the whole story. And fourteen will always be greater than two.

William Cherry
Schoharie County Treasurer