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# Politicians complain, Pulitzer paper fires columnists

by Patricia Tummons



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The decision, which was announced to one of the columnists within days of his having taken on the Hawaii version of the military-industrial-political complex, is seen by many residents to be the result of pressure from several local businessmen and politicians.

The newspaper's managing editor, Sue Dixon, says the timing was more coincidence than anything else, and that the paper had already made the decision to revamp the editorial page before it printed the April 15 column about pleasure boaters in environmentally sensitive waters by Gary Hooser that caused such a ruckus.

Mary Chase, the other columnist who was let go, says she was notified her services were no longer needed in early April.

On May 3, the Garden Island carried an editorial that sought to justify the columnists'

dismissal. Headlined "Striving for Balance," the piece, written by managing editor Dixon, said the decision to drop the columnists came after a recent bout of soul-searching at the paper. That led to a decision that the paper's editorial pages "were not reflecting a balanced community view."

Dixon acknowledges that complaints about Hooser's April 15 column may have hastened the timing of his firing, but that the decision had been made before then.

The newspaper is now advertising for new columnists. "We hope to have a balanced pool of

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columnists," Dixon says. "The other one wasn't."

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Among those whose complaints about Hooser were expressed as letters to the editor was Gary Baldwin, whose resume says he once worked as an aluminum salesman in St. Louis. Baldwin now heads up several small businesses on Kauai and has been appointed to the county Planning Commission. In addition, he sits on the Kauai Economic Development Board, a non-profit business advocacy agency that has received several federal contracts.

Another letter of complaint about Hooser's column came from Charlie King, owner of an auto parts store, chairman of the mayor's re-election campaign, and a member of a controversial state Economic Revitalization Task Force, whose recommendations were criticized by Hooser.

The third was from Turk Tokita, co-chair of the governor's re-election campaign and, says Hooser, "the most influential Democrat on Kauai."

Former columnist Chase says she understands the firings, as well as the larger editorial-page revamping, to have come about as a result of complaints from the business community to the paper's former publisher, Roy Callaway, as well as its present one, Cynthia Schur, who took over in April. Chase describes her columns as nonpartisan and focused on ways to support sustainable development. "My other soapbox is education," says Chase, a parent with small children.

"I don't like what happened," Chase says, "but they have a right to re-evaluate their editorial policy. I think it would be great if the paper had a stated editorial position now."

"I did write about one development at Kilauea," she says, referring to a small community on Kauai's North Shore. "It was a strip-mall kind of thing. That column might have put me in the anti-growth camp. The business people seemed to think we're all anti-growth."

"The paper is pitifully, poorly funded," Chase continues. "It has no staff, no resources. Sue Dixon is a very talented journalist and has brought on a couple of really good people. She could put out a good weekly, but they make her put out a paper every day that's full of fillers from the AP and 'mahalos' [thank-you letters]. It's kind of a joke. There's good coverage of some issues, but they just don't have the resources to put out a daily."

In an as-yet unpublished letter to the editor, Hooser provides his own take on the paper's

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decision. "Clearly some of the columns I have written over the past two years have angered powerful and influential members of our community," Hooser says in the letter. "It is clear also that powerful and influential people, during the past few months, have conducted an ongoing campaign to 'correct' the political viewpoints expressed in our one and only local newspaper.

"In addition to removal of my column, the same forces at work have effectively engineered the removal of other regular columns as well as limited the publication of contrary viewpoints expressed in letters to the editor."

Hooser places the blame at the doorstep of Editor/Publisher Cynthia Schur. Schur, who didn't return phone calls, was recently appointed to her position, after having spent about 10 years in the advertising end of newspaper operations on Kauai. In his letter, Hooser calls on readers to express their objections to Schur and to her boss, Tom Jackson, corporate head of Pulitzer Community Newspapers, headquartered in St. Louis.

Members of the community who have expressed their outrage over the columnists' dismissals include Ray Chuan, a consulting scientist and head of an activist group called the Limu Coalition that has pressed the county and state government to enforce laws against illegal tour boat operators, and Susan Wilson, a small businesswoman and president of the Kauai League of Women Voters.

Chuan sees the dismissals as having resulted from a letter-writing campaign to Jackson, in St. Louis, by "illegal boaters and their friends." The controversy over boating has riven Kauai for at least the last decade, and shows no sign of abating. The campaign, he says, started as early as last August. In response to the Garden Island now having caved to the boaters and their friends, Chuan says, he and others are considering starting their own publication. So long as "the merchants have no place else to place their ads, they really don't have any effective pressure on the paper, while we, the readers and non-advertisers, have lots of choices besides the Garden Island," he says.

Susan Wilson, president of the Kauai League of Women Voters, says her organization is concerned about the lack of any editorial commentary now in the Garden Island. The league is considering asking the Honolulu Media Council, a watchdog organization, to look further into the matter.

"Without columnists, without editorials stating points of view, the citizenry and the readers very much feel like they're shadow boxing," Wilson says. "Columnists serve their purpose as jump-off points in the development of informed viewpoints. It's civic dialogue at its best."

In SJR

10 years ago

\* Reports surfaced that St. Louis Magazine was about to be sold. There were reports that owner American City Business Journals had lost \$350,000 on the publication during 11 months.

\* Circulation of the daily St. Louis Post-Dispatch increased by nearly 21,000 over the previous year to 430,970. Sunday circulation was also up to 554,658 placing it among the nation's top 20 Sunday papers.

\* Articles written by Julie Lobbia in the Riverfront Times continued to expose a lack of accountability in funding for the annual VP Fair. After extensive coverage of the reports by local TV stations, the Post was forced to follow with stories of its own investigation.

5 years ago

- \* Joseph Pulitzer Jr., who had headed the Post for 38 years, died. Michael Pulitzer succeeded him as chairman of Pulitzer Publishing Co.
- \* The Post reinstated its disclaimer at the end of Sydney Omarr's horoscope feature. Features Editor Dick Weiss told SJR that he wasn't even aware the disclaimer had been dropped until SJR made an inquiry about it.
- \* It was revealed that KMOV (Channel 4) hired a prostitute in an effort to prove that a catholic priest would pay for sex. The revelation resulted in a flurry of negative reaction toward the station.

Pat Tummons, a former Post reporter, publishes an environmental newsletter in Hawaii

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