

Councilman Schools Questions Why Media Covers Ray City Meetings: Does the Freedom of Speech Bring the Responsibility to Listen?

By Carol A. Gasser Moore

RAY CITY, Georgia – Of the five basic U.S. citizen rights, most people say that our right to speak freely is the basis for all of our other freedoms. Quick online research will tell information seekers that the freedom of speech is also the basis for living in a free society. The Ford Foundation indicates that “without freedom of speech, there is no preacher in the pulpit, nor defense at a trial. Without freedom of speech, citizens cannot cast their vote or call their elected representative. It was curious then to sit through the March Ray City Council Meeting and hear an elected official question why one media is covering the council meetings and another is not ... or whether or not those media have the right to cover what that councilman seemed to believe was an ‘out of area’ organization.

This, of course, connects to Ray City Councilman David Schools concern about his business practices and whether or not they are violating laws designed to help driver safety when parking vehicles on a corner, which may in turn affect a driver’s view and ability to turn a corner more or less safely.

As this writer listened to Schools points to Councilman Bennefield’s questions at the meeting, Schools articulated and seemed to indicate the notion that media are supposed to cover stories in a territorial manner. This directly seemed to articulate his opinion that only the Berrien Press should cover the news of Ray City Council. Yet, two Lanier County based media were the only ones present – Lanier County News and the Lanier County Advocate.

If this is true, it would mean that national media shouldn’t carry stories about states or local cities in those states. This writer does not remember that Schools criticized the Atlanta Journal Constitution’s coverage of Ray City’s stories, nor the Valdosta Daily Times, nor WALB (Albany), nor WCTV (Tallahassee) and any number of other media which have also covered stories coming from Ray City or Berrien County.

The question becomes one of transparency. If an elected official believes that media should be limited, does that elected person feel that he or she has an obligation to its citizens to inform them? More so, does that elected official believe that he or she has an obligation to listen to the citizens that elect them to serve their community?

The Ford Foundation says the with the “freedom of Speech comes the responsibility to listen”. With the “freedom of belief comes the responsibility to accept”.

The freedom from want brings the responsibility to serve, and the “freedom from fear brings the responsibility to take action.”

I cannot say this any better than the Ford Foundation has stated:

“As the phrase ‘moral renovator’ suggests, free speech gives us the tools to repair, update, and improve our society and its principles, the way one might consider rebuilding a home. We can address damages, tear down harmful walls, open new doors, and even restore a crumbling foundation.

This power to remake ourselves is partially why the freedom of speech is enshrined in the very first amendment to the U.S. Constitution, and why it is the first freedom that President Roosevelt asserted in his iconic speech. It must come first because our right to speak freely is a prerequisite for all of our other freedoms—and for living in a free society.

Without freedom of speech, there is no preacher in the pulpit, no defense at a trial. Without freedom of speech, we cannot cast our vote or call our representatives.



L-R; Councilman Wesley Bennefield, Councilman Hank Studstill, City Attorney Chad Corlee, Mayor Brenda Exum, City Clerk Denise Ray, Councilman David Schools and Councilman Jeff Sly

Without freedom of speech, there is no women’s suffrage or March on Washington, no marriage equality or Black Lives Matter or #MeToo movement.

It’s no wonder that Frederick Douglass called free speech the “dread of tyrants.” He knew that, as he put it, “Thrones, dominions, principalities, and powers, founded in injustice and wrong, are sure to tremble, if men are allowed to reason of righteousness, temperance and of a judgment to come in their presence.” Speech and reason are bulwarks against an unjust society.

Of course, free speech is not a panacea; and while some speech allows us to confront injustice, there are plenty of instances when our speech can perpetuate injustice and harm. For example, on many college campuses today, students are testing and contesting where free speech ends and hate speech begins. It’s a question worth asking—and one, from my perspective, with no easy answer.

But what amazes me is that more than 240 years after our founding, and more than 150 years after Frederick Douglass’s stirring defense of the First Amendment, the freedom of speech is still vital to the functioning of our democracy.”

The Lanier County news has long stated that its readers have both a “right” to know as well as a “responsibility” to know.

The Georgia First Amendment Foundation (gfaf.org/) is a good Georgia organization to learn more about how it works to support and uphold Georgians Right To Know.

Readers are encouraged to read the Ford Foundation’s article about Free Speech for themselves by going online to: <https://www.fordfoundation.org/news-and-stories/big-ideas/with-four-freedoms-four-responsibilities/with-the-freedom-of-speech-the-responsibility-to-listen/>.

So, with one question about media “coverage territory”, brings questions about transparency and responsibility to inform citizens ... AND LISTEN to them?

Retractions: Councilman’s persistence leads to changes at Dangerous Intersection

By Carol A. Gasser Moore

RAY CITY, Georgia - The safety of passing through the Ray City highly traveled Ray City corner of Samuel Street/Georgia State Route 64 and Main Street/Georgia State Route 37/U.S. Highway 129 which cross each other, was placed on the March Ray City Council Meeting agenda by David Schools, Councilman.

The intersection is also the location at which the Royal’s Automotive business is located (20 Samuel Street).

• STATEMENT: Often, the Royal’s Automotive staff has numerous vehicles parked on both the east and west side of Samuel Street in the right-of-way easement area.

• CORRECTION: “in or near” the right-of-way easement area.

• STATEMENT: The manner in which the business’s manager David Schools authorizes vehicles to be parked blocks the view of south bound drivers on Samuel Street.

• CORRECTION: It is the “opinion” of a number of drivers, who regularly go through the intersection, that their view is partially blocked by the placement of parked cars on the corner lot across the street west of the Royals Automotive business.

• STATEMENT: Mayor Brenda Exum was described as offering a “positive response”.

• CORRECTION: The Lanier County News was not clear at the March Council Meeting that Exum is positive about addressing a safety concern at that intersection. Her choice seemed to pit one councilman against another by placing an agenda item on the Ray City Council’s March Agenda. The manner in which the audience experienced the council’s discussion seemed to allow one councilman to attack another about something that does not involve Ray City Ordinances or Codes and, therefore, is may not be an item of business by the Ray City Council.

• STATEMENT: Schools has authorized his employees to park vehicles overnight and often during the day, who have to make a turn between Samuel Street and Main Street.

• CORRECTION: Schools states that he does not have an employee, however the one time that this writer stopped at the shop, he had another person in the shop. Regardless, as shop manager/owner or as a supervisor,

it is Schools decision as to what business actions are correct or incorrect whether through the actions of an employee or himself.

• STATEMENT: Sometime in past few years, the Ray City Council required a property owner to cut back thick shrubbery because the shrubs blocked driver’s view and, therefore, their ability to make a safe turn at the intersection. Despite some recent discussion on the problem in council meetings.

• CORRECTION: Discussions occurred during official Ray City Council Meetings in approximately 2017. More recent discussions have been at City Hall outside of official meetings.

• STATEMENT: Schools is one of Ray City’s councilmen.

• NO CORRECTION: David Schools is an officially elected Ray City Councilman.

• STATEMENT: Ray City Council required a property owner to cut back thick shrubbery because the shrubs blocked driver’s view and, therefore, their ability to make a safe turn at the intersection.

• NO CORRECTION: This event happened in about 2017 during Mayor Gulley’s last term in office.

• STATEMENT: ... indifferent attitudes to Councilman Bennefield’s safety question, by Mayor Exum and other Ray City Council members to the identified problem.

• CORRECTION: At the March Ray City Council Meeting, the mayor and councilman were more aptly described by observers as hostile, instead of indifferent.

• STATEMENT: Bennefield enlisted assistance from Jeff Royals (property/business owner), and the Georgia Department of Highway Safety (GDOT).

• NO CORRECTION: When driver visual safety concerns have occurred, Councilman Bennefield has gone to those more knowledgeable about road/driver safety rules and consulted with them to better educate himself.

• STATEMENT: The Department of Highway Safety identified a long time ago that Royals Automotive’s employees were unsafely parking vehicles on what was a government right-of-way easement and should refrain from parking vehicles on the easement area.

• CORRECTION: When vehicles are parked

(anywhere) are past the crosswalk, those vehicles are considered impeding visual safety of anyone at an intersection. Since the vehicles, across from the automotive business, are not permanently parked and are moved based upon normal business, this varies from day to day.

• CORRECTION: Last week a Georgia Department of Transportation, in response to the identified problem, sent out an investigator to again check out the intersection. GDOT found it was a public safety issue.

• NO CORRECTION: GDOT Supervisor James Dove did respond to citizen concerns. The standard is that vehicles should be parked behind the marked crosswalk.

With the published Facebook post by Tina Schools on the Lanier County News’ Facebook page, she used the term “libel” which is defined as “a published false statement that is damaging to a person’s reputation; a written defamation.”

The Lanier County News sincerely apologizes for any statement that it has made that someone might feel is damaging from one point of view. The LCN believes that it objectively attempted to present two views relating to the practice of vehicle placement on a corner with regard to visual safety of drivers making turns at that corner.

Driver’s safely making turns was the focus of the article as it was initially written. It’s focus was the safety of drivers making turns between Samuel Street and Ray City’s Main Street. The Lanier County News presented the state law’s view as well as that of the business manager and area citizens.

The intent of the article was to inform the public about concerns of several Ray City residents which were expressed to Councilman Wesley Bennefield and the differences of opinions between the parties involved in the controversy. Those parties are Councilman Bennefield, Councilman Schools, DOT Supervisor Dove, and several concerned Ray City citizens.

The article, as published about February 22nd, attempted to accurately report a difference of opinion