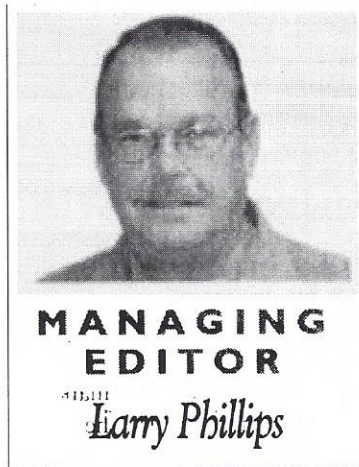


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**MANAGING
EDITOR**

Larry Phillips

Citizens have the right to know what's going on with gun range

When someone at city hall issues a press release notifying the public the shooting range is closed, that's no big deal to a majority of the folks.

But when the reason for the closure is patently vague – "The City of Liberal has received new information from the EMC Insurance which has raised a concern about public safety" – it becomes suspicious.

Then when the release closes with: "No further information will be released until City Administration and City Commission have completed their review," – it becomes unacceptable.

The outright arrogance of such a statement should be condemned by every citizen in Liberal.

When the city says, we're closing the range because of "safety concerns" and then says take it or leave it, and we're not going to answer any other questions, so don't even think about asking," that infuriates me.

It should also infuriate everyone else, too. These people work for us and they should answer to us as well.

Of course there are questions.

Was the gun range uninsured?

If so, for how long?

Was the rifle and pistol club providing insurance prior to the changes made by the city?

Can additional insurance be acquired?

If a lack of insurance was not the issue, what safety issues exist?

This is America, and we do not tolerate some

dictator-like release from city hall telling us to swallow swill and then telling us "don't ask what the city is doing – or why."

This whole affair over the shooting range has turned into an ugly debacle.

Right now, it looks like Liberal City Manager Mark Hall has created most of the mess, albeit unintentionally, by assuming the city owned the range. It doesn't. It was deeded to the county in 1994 with only an easement guaranteed to the city – that's "ingress and egress" only.

Southwest Kansas Rifle & Pistol Club President Jim Stoddard told the city commission during citizens' comments in July that his club and the Liberal Police had looked at some property north of town to rebuild a new and larger range.

When they went to Hall to include him in discussions about what they were checking out, Hall told them that land was no longer available – some deal with a local company wanting it.

That's when things went south very quickly, according to Stoddard.

Hall then began his own planning for upgrading the current range – and as Stoddard found out – Hall's plans did not include SWKRPC

All of a sudden, Hall was bringing up "complaints" about the lock SWKRPC had on the range gate. Accusations started flying around that SWKRPC was "making people join the club to get entrance to the range."

SWKRPC did have a lock on the gate – so did Liberal Police Department, National Beef, Seward County Community College and the sheriff's department (at one time).

"The locks are still on the gate," Stoddard told the commission in July.

"But apparently, all of the keys have been lost due to mismanagement by the city," he added.

SWKRPC members gladly, and often, opened the gate for people who called them. But people

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were never told they had to join SWKRPC or the NRA, which covered liability insurance for SWKRPC members while they were at the range.

Hall then made his case to the commission that he's going to open the range to the public, and that he has developed plans to improve the existing range. Several commissioners actually started badgering SWKRPC member Bill Asmmussen as if he were on trial, accusing SWKRPC of locking everyone else out of the range.

That was bull, and I believe Hall knew it, but he didn't intervene or correct the commissioners' erroneous accusations and innuendos.

Then Hall also admitted he had budgeted \$52,000 to make improvements – which were desired by LPD and Chief Al Sill – to the existing range.

When someone budgets \$52,000 for improvements to property they don't own, questions need to be asked.

I would love to ask Hall what's going on and allow him to explain all of this to the

public, but the fax from someone at city hall says, "No further information will be released until ..."

I guess that means until they're good and ready and to heck with the citizens.

The fax mentioned EMC, which I believe is an anti-gun insurance underwriter that made news last summer when they sent out letters to all the schools, cities and counties in the state after the Kansas Legislature approved HB 2052 allowing concealed carry in public buildings saying that schools permitting employees to carry concealed handguns would be declined coverage.

Here is an exact quote from that letter EMC sent out:

"We are making this underwriting decision simply to protect the financial security of our company."

Sounds somewhat reasonable – until you compare it with the law:

In Section 2 of HB 2052, paragraph "f," it reads as follows: "(f) A state agency or municipality which does not provide adequate security measures in a state or municipal building and which allows the carrying of a concealed handgun as authorized by the personal and family protection act shall not be liable for any wrongful act or omission relating to actions of persons licensed to carry a concealed handgun concerning acts or omissions regarding such handguns."

I discovered in July that three schools – Independence Community College, Coffeyville Community College and Neosho County Community College – joined forces and found insurance that would cover them together while they allowed concealed carry on campus. The company is IMA, which is an independent broker in Kansas.

Liberal and Seward County – and any other local entity – should look for insurance options that reflect the needs of the community.

I still can't understand why city commissioners or the mayor would allow someone in city hall to tell their constituents to "Shut up and back off, we'll inform you about what's going on when we're ready."

Maybe the citizens should get on the phones to the commissioners and ask them why they are allowing this dogmatic clamp-down on public information. Maybe that edict came from them, who knows, but we need to find out.

We have a right to know. And someone at city hall better look up the statutes of the Kansas Open Records Act – and soon. —