

The Salt Lake Tribune

Gehrke: Snubbed for a tourism grant, this Utah man launched his own journalistic investigation that caught board members enriching themselves



Francisco Kjolseth | The Salt Lake Tribune The Salt Lake Tribune staff portraits. Robert Gehrke.



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After a career as an accountant, Lynn David bought a 9,000-square-foot house just outside of Midway that he turned into The Hiking Inn, a bed and breakfast aimed at drawing tourists with a taste for the outdoors to this mountain recreation wonderland.

In 2017, David applied for a small grant from the regional Tourism Advisory Board, created to disperse a percentage of the hotel tax collected in Wasatch County, but he was turned down.

This year, David was back with a beefed up proposal and a request for \$3,600 — which he would match with his own money — to improve The Hiking Inn's website and to do some additional advertising. He was offered \$500, such a pittance, he said, that it was pointless.

Then David got curious: Where was the money going? Then he got busy digging, and what he found disturbed him.

Through a series of requests under Utah's Government Records Access and Management Act and a dive into other publicly available records, David found that for 2018, the Tourism Advisory Board had \$50,000 to allocate and got 29 applications totaling more than three times that amount of money.

But when it came time to whittle down the field, \$21,600 — more than 43 percent of the available funds — went to six entities with ties to three members of the five-member Tourism Advisory Board.

While the other 20 applicants had their requests shaved way down — like the \$500 that David was offered — or rejected altogether, the three board members received 82 cents of every dollar they requested. All of the other applicants received 23 cents on the dollar.

For example, board member Stuart Ashe is general manager of the Soldier Hollow Nordic Center, which received two grants totaling \$12,000, nearly a quarter of all the funds available, to promote the center and to help host the annual sheepdog championship. Ashe could not be reached for comment.

It simply didn't pass the smell test, David said. Every indication was that the board members were self-dealing.

Wasatch County Administrator Mike Davis said state law requires that the board be made up of representatives of the tourism community, so situations can arise where organizations connected to board members are requesting funds.

"There have been applications from some of these people, but they have to recuse themselves from the process," Davis said, in order to avoid a conflict.

Davis said neither he, nor the county's tourism director, were aware of problems, but there is a proposal expected to go before the Wasatch County Council to change the board structure, creating a new 10-member board to oversee the tourism grants and

the region's \$600,000-a-year marketing budget.

County Councilman Mike Nelson, who is proposing the change, said he hadn't spoken to David about any of his concerns with the Tourism Advisory Board. He wants to change the structure to add "more representation from a broader spectrum of tourism interest in Wasatch County."

The change, if it's adopted, could at least lessen some of the potential conflicts that David pointed out.

But now, he has set his sights on a bigger fish: He wants to know details of how the county spends roughly \$1.5 million in hotel taxes it receives each year. In May, he filed a new open records request seeking itemized allocations going back years.

So far, the city has not been cooperative and David is appealing his case to the State Records Committee.

"So, Gehrke," you might be thinking, "what's the point?" It is, after all, a relatively piddly amount of money in the grander scheme of things.

But what David is doing in Wasatch County is vital. Once upon a time, there were enough professional journalists around the state that we could spend the time and resources to dig into local government budgets and grants.

But as newsrooms have withered, local coverage has been hit especially hard. So it falls, more and more, to average citizens to play the role of watchdog, like David did.

"At its best, [citizen journalism] is exactly what this gentleman did," said Matthew LaPlante, a former Tribune colleague who now teaches journalism at Utah State University and is a champion of the citizen watchdog. "It's recognizing that nobody else is going to ask those questions. Nobody else is going to ask for those records. Nobody else is going to hold elected officials and public servants accountable, so you have to do it."

“When I hear stories like this I get really excited, because that’s exactly what needs to happen to sustain the Fourth Estate,” LaPlante said. “It’s literally every citizens’ birthright.”

(For more, check out LaPlante’s 2014 TEDx talk on the rise of citizen journalism from the decline of the news industry.)

We need more people like Lynn David; like Claire Geddes, who has spent years watchdogging the Utah Transit Authority; like former Salt Lake City School Board member Michael Clara, who calls out inequities on the city’s west side.

There’s no secret sauce to being a reporter. You’ve got the tools — a phone and a laptop. You’ve got the platform, whether it’s Facebook or Twitter or a blog.

So go to your City Council or community meetings. If something looks fishy, dig in. Be a watchdog, tell your story, commit an act of journalism.

Your community will be better for it.



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