



rRemarks Data for February 21, 2023 Village Council Meeting

Agenda Section: Comments of a General Nature

Agenda Item: Comments of a General Nature

Commenter: David Rose

Comment: Comment on the “State of the Village” report

On Tue 06 Feb here in DG we were treated to a confluence of three important political events: the President’s State of the Union message to the US Congress, another instance of a candidate forum ahead of Chicago’s upcoming mayoral election, and the Council Chair (CC) giving the report on the “State of the Village” (SOTV) of DG.

The confluence reminded me of the saying popularized by Mark Twain about there being three kinds of lies, “lies, damned lies, and statistics.”

LIES, DAMNED LIES, AND STATISTICS (LDLAS)

Reflecting on the SOTV, I realized that as practiced these reports are another example of misnaming, a deception very much like that perpetrated by pols when they misuse the phrase environmental sustainability (ENVS).

And so it was with the CC’s report on 06 Feb. Let’s call it instead the “lies, damned lies, and statistics report” — LDLAS.

The LDLAS is simply a listing of “activities” in the prior year that CC wishes to claim as accomplishments. Mostly it discusses purported highlights of “how we spent money.”

The DG LDLAS relies heavily on residents being largely politically uninvolved and uninformed, historically amnesiac, numeracy challenged, self- never system- interested, and short- not long-term minded.

Given that's the choir CC is preaching to, he can say pretty much anything and — when the democracy is as weak as it is in DG (and the US generally) — not worry about consequences.

Regardless of political party affiliation, especially in property rich places like DG, pols use such reports to praise how wonderful things are, thanks to all the wonderful people living in the town. (and without saying so: all the not-so-wonderful people not living there because the high property prices keep all but a few out.)

Such reporting offers little in the way of how/where things were, how/where things are, and how/where policies are trying to move things going forward.

And so it was with the 2022 LDLAS.

EXAMPLES

Simple obvious example: Village council (VC) provides little in the way of information about the village office as a place to work.

While VC regularly thank staff for all their hard work, and congratulates itself and the Village Manager (VM) for running a “tight ship,” what do residents know about the individuals who are ‘staff’ and about the village hall as a workplace? Next to nothing. Is the “tight ship” a good place to work? What work is NOT being done because the ship is tight?

In the LDLAS, CC implied VC was concerned about improving diversity within village employee ranks. His evidence: percentages among new hires who are white, black, hispanic, and asian. Repeat: strictly new hires. What do the percentages mean?

Well, consider what was not said. For one, How many new hires are we talking about? My guess, a total of 14 people. Which means the percentages given reflect hiring 10 whites, 1 asian, 1.5 hispanics, and 1.5 blacks.

What do the 0.5's mean? A single person of mixed ethnicity, two part-time positions, or something else? Good question. But not one the LDLAS talks about.

What does the LDLAS also NOT talk about — what is the reason for the new hires? Simple turnover? Why was there turnover? Expansion of occupations (other than the social worker tasked with taking care of social service referrals)? In what areas?

How long did positions stay open? What was done to accomplish the work while a position was unoccupied?

How much overtime did employees put in during the year? What was the impact of overtime on employee retention?

How much work was handed off to temps? Based on what logic?

Who's included as the pool of workers which the new hires joined? What is the existing diversity of that pool?

What impact did the new hires have on the diversity of the pool of workers? Example: if an asian employee left and another asian is hired, the impact on diversity is zero!

What goals for increased diversity does the village have for the pool? Over what timeframe? How is that effort being promoted?

Cricket on all of these matters.

If the LDLAS provided information that described the "state" of the situation, none of these questions would be unanswered.

Another example: The LDLAS applauded the 500 referrals made by the new social worker hired in 2022 to reinforce and improve referrals previously handled mainly by the police. The LDLAS also lauded the Human Services Commission (HSC) for all its hard work.

Because I provided an extensive critique of VC's new social services referral position and the HSC in an e-remark to VC's 15 Nov 2022 meeting, I will not repeat that assessment other than to say the LDLAS's number is another example of the misleading numeracy VC typically provides residents.

And still another example: the LDLAS applauded VC for building prairies. As in the example above, similar contextual questions apply, such as:

What is the distribution of land usage in the village?

What percent of land in the village is prairie, wetland, forest, or similarly 'wild'/native, etc? What percentage of land is "developed?"

Of that total, what is the breakdown by category — residential, multi-family, low income housing, industrial, retail, office, human services (public and private), transportation routes, etc.?

Again, the missing context is crucial to understanding the relative significance of each individual component and the policies affecting those components.

Key related example: Given VC's and D58's flagrant disregard for the comprehensive plan in selling Lngf and allowing for the development of 12 McMansions on the property, the obvious question is: What framework — set of parameters — guides village land usage decisions?

As I note regularly, to label prairie-building as stewarding environmental sustainability in the absence of such context is blatant deception. Par for the course in DG (and US) governance.

And another: The LDLAS lauded the reduction in water usage over the past 20 years. Why pick that timeframe? Who knows? What is the source of the reduction? Left unstated. It could be due to a reduction in leakage in the village's water pipes. If so, while laudable, it's hardly indicative of reduced consumption by residents.

Furthermore, ALL water consumption in DG flagrantly disregards a fundamental principle of the Great Lakes compact, the set of principles purportedly governing water usage in states bordering the Great Lakes. Under the compact, a community must be within the watershed of a great lake to draw water from it — which DG is NOT. And must then clean it before returning it to the lake.

DG buys Lake MI water from Chicago and then returns it not to the lake but to the Gulf of Mexico. Which is also where Chicago ships its wastewater from the Chicago R. Both practices are done with a wink and a nod, because that's the way things are done in Chicago and IL.

How does Chicago have lake water to sell?

Because its allotment reflects an amount granted during the period of the city's rising population growth in its heydays as an industrial titan — when much of the water was needed for industrial production.

Related example: CC extrapolated by a leap of miraculous logic that the new solid waste collection contract VC negotiated reflects residents' purported desire to reduce consumption of every kind:

"households will have greater flexibility to choose refuse and recycling cart sizes that match their disposal needs and see real benefits from reducing consumption, a goal we all embrace."

"A goal we all embrace?" Hogwash; a blatant lie, a claim completely devoid of corroborating data.

Do residents care about reducing consumption? Who knows? Certainly not VC. Does VC attempt to establish goals for village residents to shoot for in reducing consumption of any material resource? You gotta be kidding.

And this big one: the LDLAS claimed "ENVS has been a top priority for our community." Really? Based on what data? Construction of bioswales? Purchase of rain barrels? Wow.

Paperless permitting promotes sustainability? Based on what data?

Repeating his praise of the HSC, CC applauded the hard work being done by the Environmental Services Commission (ECC). Oh, wait; that's right. The ECC is doing work ... because CC is happy to let ECC lie dormant ... because of the threat an active ECC poses to CC's and VC's way of thinking and operating.

ECC's dormancy would be shameful were CC and VC capable of being shamed.

Generalizing from these instances, one recognizes the LDLAS provides numbers that completely lack the context necessary if one really wanted to describe and understand the state of the village.

But of course, that's not the LDLAS's purpose. Its purpose is to give political cover to individuals on VC, especially those seeking re-election, such as the CC.

FISCALLY RESPONSIBLE?

It's in this implicit electoral context that the LDLAS emphasis on VC not increasing property taxes should be understood.

As I have stated in prior comments, in DG “being fiscally responsible” means “a) do as little as possible, so as not to raise expectations,” and “b) whenever possible, get someone else to pay for it.”

Tax Increment Financing (TIF) districts have been the mechanism of choice in DG to overcome past VC failures to tax at a rate sufficient to set up a sinking fund to pay for repair/replacement of the assorted infrastructure projects undertaken in recent decades. That past failure has motivated recent VCs to find new taxpayers (business owners and residential real estate owners) to help minimize the impact on existing taxpayers who must foot the bill that arises when the work can no longer be put off.

The Downtown TIF is the textbook example here.

The so-called civic center project is another fine example. The ‘false starts’ of the past reflect a failure to find any/enough someone else’s to help pick up the tab.

Th project goes forward at this juncture because

a) VC funds are freed up from the paying off debt for other delayed VC capital projects,

b) money comes from school district 58, money made available thanks to the bond referendum voters approved, D58’s (tragic) sale of the Longfellow (Lngf) property (aided by nefarious action by VC), and

c) for both D58 and VC, money dispersed by the federal government to public and private entities around the country in such gargantuan amounts local governments in property rich places like DG were able to claim they handled the financial impact of the pandemic better than they had anticipated.

Americans being an easily deceived lot — the more well-to-do ones, willingly so — are more than happy to avoid recognizing the dispersal of that federal money simply means shifting the debt burden in place and time, and the entity to whom it will be paid, that is, if it can be repaid ... by future generations of taxpayers.

In the property-rich towns like DG, the presumption is of course that debt will be repaid thanks to either a) economic growth and/or b) the ability of the town’s residents to extract via the private economy the funds they need to pay off both public and private debts.

Yet even with all these sources, VC still created another TIF to help pay for the civic center project. If the TIF falls short or fails, residents will by default have to pick up the tab. As they should be doing in the first place.

As they're now having to do by picking up the tab for the past failure to fully fund public employee pensions.

When — not if but WHEN — investments in the FIRE sector return to 'normal,' that burden on residents will be even heavier.

Does the LDLAS bother to discuss any of these possibilities and forewarn? Never. Instead, it applauds the VC's bond rating continues to be AAA. I still wonder what good that is when we live in a bankrupt state in a bankrupt nation — entities that can't pay their bills?

That CC emphasized in the LDLAS the property tax rate is not increasing ignores the fact residents are seeing rising fees for water and stormwater. Both are textbook instances of the aforementioned FAILURE to collect sufficient tax in the past.

Does the source-mechanism of VC's income matter? Since VC collects money from property tax AND sales tax AND fees, why does VC consider it preferable NOT to collect money via property tax on residential real estate?

When push comes to shove — when revenue from discretionary spending falls, VC's money WILL by definition come from property taxes. As VC will when challenged acknowledge.

But that stream becomes an even nastier problem from residents' point of view when price of real estate falls, as it will when the federal government and central bank stop devaluing the nation's currency.

Of course, the real hammer in that regard will come in the not-too-distant future, when the rest of the world breaks free of the rentier arrangement by which the rich nations of the world (led by the US) have been extracting resources from everyone else in order to maintain their profligate way of living. (More on this issue below.)

Until then, the presumption in property-rich towns like DG is that residents are positioned in the private economy — even in hard times, especially in hard times — to maintain the rate of exploitation required to meet their financial needs.

Which is to say:

Tax policy, if one were willing to operate with integrity, is NOT simply a question of HOW tax is collected and by what level of government but is it “fair” in terms of the proportion of the tax collected by social class relative to the needs of the members of each class? In short, who pays; who receives? Is the tax collected sufficient to meet the need?

In the regressive tax system that prevails in the US, when a property rich town’s government applauds itself for doing a great job managing their funds, it’s simply congratulating itself and its residents for being a net beneficiary of the tax system’s regressiveness.

To be blunt: The phrase “small government fiscal conservative” refers simply to the idea the wealthy do not (want to) pay for services beyond that which is required to “keep the peace,” aka “keep everyone in their place.” That is, they do not want to give back through taxation the money they have worked so hard to maximize in their struggle against the lower classes in structuring the way the private economy operates.

The LDLAS applauded VC’s ongoing support for the Economic Development Corp (EDC), VC’s mechanism for giving tax breaks to certain companies operating within the village.

WHO gets those tax breaks? Typically, companies with the possibility of generating income from economic activity paid for by individuals living OUTSIDE the community. As with TIF’s, if the idea was imagined as a way to help economically disadvantaged communities, its universal use means it has become nothing more than another way the upper social classes prey on everyone else.

Supplementing the LDLAS at the 06 Feb meeting, the new EDC head Bryan Gay gave the organization’s latest report on the sales taxes VC collects, along with some other numbers purportedly reflecting a positive business climate in DG.

Under the prior head of the EDC, reports to VC would routinely list, as the 06 Feb DMC report did, all the wonderful businesses coming to DG. Conveniently omitted in such reports: a listing of the businesses leaving DG, including ones that had “gone out of business.”

New businesses formation. It’s a common trope in American politics for pols to applaud new business formation. But typically, as is the case whenever VC receives reports from

the EDC and DMC, context is again missing. Meaning: they offer little in the way of analysis underlying the numbers.

Not wanting to cast doubt on the value VC gets for the money it gives the EDC and DMC to operate, members of VC never ask anything approximating a probing or tough question. Nor does VC give members of the public an opportunity to fill that gap.

Are the tax breaks VC extends “worth it?” Who knows, since VC provides only assertions to that effect.

In the ECC’s 06 Feb report, Gay provided lots of numbers, most of which are collected by other entities and are simply passed along to VC. What do the numbers mean; what is the methodology by which the numbers are collected? Crickets, including on the EDC’s website.

Members of the public are expected to take everything at face value as if a) the numbers are useful information and b) show positive results/“progress.”

In trying to scrutinize EDC’s data, two items caught my eye. On its web page, I was perplexed by an apparent inconsistency between the graphs for hotel tax reported for year 2021 in the Dec 2022 report versus the Jan 2023 report. Was there a revision? I could find no explanation. Perhaps I just misunderstood.

Second, in the report to VC, Gay included data on “downtown visits” during this past Thanksgiving-Christmas holiday season. He described it as a new set of metrics he intends to make available for any portion of DG for any specified time period of the calendar year. I could find no mention of this information on EDC’s website or of any explanation how it is intended to be used.

In his report to VC, Gay did not identify the specific boundaries of the “downtown” area covered by the tracking he was reporting. Notably, I wondered if the boundary included the DG library ... because its inclusion would affect how one interprets the numbers.

More importantly, however, I was intrigued no one on VC voiced concern the set of numbers rely on utilizing data gathered by tracking cellphone locations. Or did I simply overlook that portion of the meeting?

So my question is: Are residents of DG so pro-business they welcome without any public discussion whatsoever the procurement of that tracking information by EDC and VC? Is it in fact useful? How? To do what?

CULTURE WAR OR CLASS WAR?

CC and VC regularly pronounce that DG must maintain a favorable business climate, claiming that only by doing so will property taxes be kept low.

That objective in practice is simply another euphemism for the idea business owners and their minions (those residing in the top 10-20%) want pols to support them in their struggle against the working class (the bottom 50%).

In that battle, the remaining portion of the top 50% — call them the “aspiring 30%” — find themselves forced to choose with whom to align politically — those below or those above them? More often than not, especially when times are hard, they opt to align with those above.

Voter suppression then is nothing more than the top 50% preventing the bottom 50% from using the public arena to offset the political disadvantage the bottom 50% experience as a fact of life in the US private economy.

However, suppression must also be supplemented by voter distraction if the top 20% is to keep the aspiring 30% aligned with them. A prominent distraction these days are the culture wars we witness in the US. Such as the recent case in DG when we saw populist conservatives speak out at VC and library board meetings against a drag queen bingo event the library had scheduled for teenagers. K12 education and school boards are also targets of this culture warring.

A fundamental belief of conservative culture warriors is that the economic decline the country is experiencing — and they may be experiencing personally — is due to an erosion of spiritual and/or cultural strength.

Do conservative culture warriors entertain the possibility the decline they experience is the result of globalized capitalism leaving them behind? Indeed, many do. And this notion is a core point of disagreement between cultural conservatives and cultural liberals. The liberals either fail to appreciate the problem or have no solution for it.

Do conservative culture warriors entertain the possibility the decline is due to a more materialist explanation, such as I have been arguing repeatedly to VC, namely the decline in the supply of (energy-) slaves on which a rich nation's economy is based, a decline fundamental to explaining why a rich nation's way of living is NOT ENVS?

Asked differently: Do conservative culture warriors recognize that the far greater danger facing them and rich nations as a whole is the ongoing relentless impact of our way of living not being ENVS?

Some do, but as far as I can tell, many (most?) do not. At least not completely.

Among those who do, two kinds of response tend to develop. For those who believe change of policy — aka change of political economic direction — is either not possible or futile, time and effort are spent trying to protect themselves, friends, and family.

The other kind of response is known as the rise of nationalism, and it's happening both in the US and around the world. It's the cultural conservative response to the decline of the US-dominated international political economic order thanks in no small part to the diminishing supply of (energy-) slaves.

Rising nationalism amounts to that same sense of protecting oneself, manifesting not simply at a personal or local level but at a national level.

But I have yet to come across an American nationalist who endorses and provides a 'glide-path downward' of reduced energy usage, heaviest users going first.

G H W Bush said it years ago, and it remains true to the top 20% today: "the American way of life is NOT negotiable."

Ironically, however, it's the cultural conservatives who are now prominent among those rejecting the American-dominated international order. Prominent among those rejecting the claim the fighting in Ukraine is about protecting democracy. Prominent among those doubting the wisdom of supporting the fighting in Ukraine down to the last Ukrainian.

Ironically, because the vast majority of Americans fail to appreciate that our way of living is NOT ENVS, by default only the far right and the far left are prepared to deal with the difficult realities we face.

However, when the differences between them reflect diametrically opposing worldviews, working together to stop the fighting, as the 19 Feb Rage against the War Machine rally in WDC signaled some of them are trying to do, draws as much skepticism as support. The risk of nuclear annihilation jumps to mind as the foundation of their stab at a marriage of convenience.

Why aren't more Americans concerned about being fried by the 1000 degree sunburn? Is the predominant attitude another example of blissful ignorance? Or of a misguided belief the American way of living is not at risk because our purported military superiority will protect us? What happens when that superiority is exposed (again) as ineffective and/or inadequate?

Much of the world's populations other than the so-called "golden billion" living in the rich nations see the US military as a paper tiger.

Given the US military's recent track record in Iraq and Afghanistan,

given Germany's Merkel and France's Holland admitting that the Minsk agreement was negotiated in bad faith as a stalling tactic, reinforcing thereby Russia's perception that NATO (led by the US) refuses to allow Russia (and the world's non-rich nations more generally, for that matter) to plot its/their own course of economic development,

given Seymour Hersh's reporting that the US blew up the Nordstream pipelines supplying Russian gas to Germany (a story thus far all but blacked out by US media) (a story vehemently denied by US officials, repeating a response pattern for every one of Hersh's controversial reports dating back to the My Lai massacre in Vietnam), and did so in an effort to break growing economic ties between Russia and Europe, and

given many similar relevant examples,

how does the conflict in Ukraine end without things getting out of hand (aka nuclear annihilation)?

Do the aspiring 30% believe the conflict in Ukraine is existential ... both to the US and to Russia? and one step removed, to China?

Will the aspiring 30% continue to align with the top 20%, and do so until such time as they too are pulled down and overwhelmed by impact of our unsustainable way of living? And do so believing that preventing the bottom 50% from living a good life is better/easier than trying to force the top 20% to live a much less extravagant one?

Which is to say (again): What will it take for Americans to take the goal of ENVIS seriously?

FAILING TO ENGAGE

None of these grave issues can reach the level of public discussion in DG because VC will not allow it at their meetings. Nor does VC encourage and endorse public discussion of such matters in any venue whatsoever. Easier to talk about prairies, bioswales, and rain barrels.

By coincidence with the LDLAS, Marshall Schmitt pointed out during public comment on 06 Feb that the CC has been violating a village ordinance regarding public comments at VC meetings when CC recites his pro forma announcement VC will NOT engage the individual making a comment in discussion.

As I have remarked repeatedly, this refusal by VC to engage is one of the core features of the tone of autocracy that has pervaded VC's operations during CC's tenure.

Sadly, one can't help but conclude a main reason for the pattern is CC's desire to cover up his and his colleagues' incapacity to engage — their need to disregard or ignore the public's comments, particularly when members of the public are more knowledgeable and more informed than VC. VC claims "it's listening," but what does that mean when they refuse to engage?

VC's conduct regarding the goal of ENV5 and its refusal to engage my many comments on ENV5 over the years is for me the most flagrant example of its disdain for the ordinance.

Of similar notoriety however is the Lngf fiasco in 2021 into early 2022, when we saw CC and VC practice first the art of stonewalling (as D58 had done) and then the art of abusing power.

CC failed to attend THE Nov 2021 Coffee with the Council in which Lngf neighbors expressed their dissatisfaction — dare one say tempered outrage — over the sale of the LNGF property and the plan to allow the property to be divided into 12 lots for building McMansions. It was at that Nov gathering Lngf neighbors informed VM and VC existing ordinances meant the property could be divided into at most 8 lots.

That revelation then led to VC and staff scrambling to change the language of one ordinance, without which VC faced the prospect of being sued by the developer who bought Lngf.

That his winning bid was so much higher than everyone else's then made sense: the losing bidders interpreted the plain language of the ordinance and bid on the expectation of building 8 not 12 houses!

Subsequent Coffees with the Council prior to VC's final vote on changing the language were cancelled in order to preclude CC and VC having to face increasingly hostile interaction with Lngf neighbors disgusted with CC's, VC's, and D58's conduct.

VC's flagrant disregard for the Plan Commission's 0-7 vote recommending not to approve the language change was the shameless icing on that cake. VC voted 7-0 in favor!!

Mr Schmitt then took it upon himself in a series of subsequent VC meetings to elaborate at length the travesty VC had perpetrated, showing how the language change was illogical and a simple abuse of power.

Why was a series of comments required? Because in another abuse of power, VC refused to allow him to speak for more than the five minutes at a time, the standard to which public comments are held, especially whenever someone speaks unfavorably about VC's conduct.

As the series of Schmitt's comments went on, CC repeatedly urged him to move on. Aka "don't expose my lie for all to see."

"Supportive business climate, indeed!"

Nor did CC distinguish himself in handling the village hall project. In that case, members of the public pointed out he had failed to recuse himself and had instead been promoting the project in a variety of ways. Why should he have recused himself? Because one facet of the project, moving the communications tower, was likely to increase the financial value of his personal residence.

Did CC ever acknowledge the legitimacy of the observation and recuse? No, he just didn't show up for VC's big final vote to approve, purportedly because he had more important family matters to attend to that evening.

MORE OF SAME?

So everything is wonderful in DG, so long as you don't look too closely, too often, or too skeptically.

The 2023 LDLAS did indeed follow the DG tradition. Sad.

Thankfully, voters have a choice in the upcoming election.

Do they want to continue that tradition? Do they want to keep being fed LDLAS by the current CC?

I for one hope not.