

SPJ Georgia Board Meeting

January 18, 2020

Present: Pam Dorsett, Charlotte Norsworthy, Isaiah Singleton, Ross Terrell, Ashlynn Webb, Jennifer Parks, Stell Simonton, Curt Yeomans, Brenda Goodman

Approve January agenda

approved

Approve December minutes

approved with corrections

Treasurer Report

See attachment

Committee Reports

- Advocacy Committee
 - o Brenda: SPJ national protesting restrictions on journalists during impeachment trial. IRE: In NH, legislature introduced bill to require outlets to retract or correct criminal stories if defendant is found not guilty or face hefty fines
- Freelance Committee
 - o Stell: Met this week; in the process of planning Job Fair. April 18, Saturday morning. No space yet.
 - o Pam: Would like board members to participate. Identifying speakers. Pam and Mark Wolty will co-chair freelance. Would like to serve on events but not chair.
- Events Committee
 - o Stell will chair. Discussion of what that looks like. This is a new committee, figuring it out. Lots of delegation. Pam: Resource and liaison around events and work with volunteers for each event.
- Student Affairs Committee
 - o Ashlynn: Where are chaps now, what do they want from us. Only 3 right now. UGA wanted list of speakers; swag incentive to join; more interaction with J schools; be a resource.

Old Business:

- Digital presence: We are updating the website and social media presence. We hope to have contact info and a calendar of upcoming journalism events.
 - o Headshots: send to Charlotte
- Slack channel: Ross has set up channel.
- SPJ Google Drive: Charlotte has cleaned up drive, added some new files
- SPJ Wordpress Domain: Renewed; now have to renew domain name. Pam will handle. Pam does not know how dues come in from national. Get that info into Google Drive Treasurer folder.

New Business:

- Board to elect in new member at large: Isaiah Singleton, Savannah native. Savannah State graduate; cofounder of Society for Collegiate Journalists SPJ chapter. Moved and seconded to elect to board. Unanimous.
- First event of 2020: seeking to take place in Q1. Seeking to establish date, time, location. Mixer, welcome kind of thing. Georgia Beer Garden? Friday shortly after work. End Feb-mid Mar
- Ralph Garner SPJ Georgia Request (See supplemental). Charlotte will draft letter to Ralph and ask him to keep us informed if the dismissal is appealed.
- Brainstorming: other programming for 2020. What do you want to see out of this year?

Next agenda February 15 10am Zoom:

- Review of bylaws
- First 2020 mixer

Adjourned

Treasurer's Report:

Description	Jun-19	Jul-19	Aug-19	Sep-19	Oct-19	Nov-19	Dec-19	Jan-20
BOM	\$4,197.83	\$4,197.83	\$4,204.31	\$4,304.31	\$4,004.31	\$4,230.53	\$3,450.34	\$3,647.26
Income								
Donation								
Event					\$967.26			
Grant			\$100.00				\$250.00	
Membership		\$587.50						
Expenses								
Event								
SPJ GA		\$386.60			\$441.04	\$780.19	\$53.08	\$500.00
Committee		\$194.42						
Director Grant				\$300.00	\$300.00			
Supplies								
Services								\$13.00
EOM	\$4,197.83	\$4,204.31	\$4,304.31	\$4,004.31	\$4,230.53	\$3,450.34	\$3,647.26	\$3,134.26

Ralph Garner SPJ Georgia Request Below:

Please find here a link to the SPJ/GA's powerful press release in protest of Superior Court Judge Brenda Weaver's false arrest on trumped up charges -- orchestrated with

District Attorney Alison Sosebee (Weaver's former law clerk) -- of Mark Thomason, publisher of the now-defunct *Fannin Focus* newspaper, and his attorney, Russell Stookey: <https://spjgeorgia.com/2016/07/01/society-of-professional-journalists-georgia-condemns-outrageous-response-to-open-records-request/>

I wrote a lengthy letter to the editor of both Blue Ridge, Georgia, local papers in protest to the report of the dismissal carried by *The News Observer* in its October 23, 2019, edition. *The News Observer* editor, Glenn Harbison, did not publish my letter, neither the long or short version of it; the *Fannin Sentinel* editor, Elaine Owen, published it in full in her November 14, 2019 edition. Along with a cover letter, I sent the pertinent page (8A) from the *Sentinel* to U.S. District Judge Steve Jones -- himself a former Georgia Superior Court judge -- who dismissed the charges against his fraternity member, Brenda Weaver.

Without ads to sustain itself, the *Fannin Focus* ceased publication with its October 13, 2016, edition. Publisher Mark Thomason's life began to spiral downward with addiction to Suboxone and, I believe, meth. He is now in a rehab facility to address that addiction and get his life on track.

In his decision, Judge Jones accepted Weaver's position that Thomason lied when he is alleged to have said several banks told him that checks from the taxpayer-funded Superior Court operating budget account had been cashed instead of deposited. My letter to the editor and to Judge Jones focused HARD on my **first-hand knowledge** of a local bank manager telling me TWICE that a check pertinent to Thomason's allegation of checks drawn on the Superior Court's taxpayer-funded operating budget account may have been illegally cashed instead of deposited. Indeed, the bank manager repeated her remark a THIRD time in her phone call to Thomason in my presence. Further, I learned a year ago the bank manager made the same remark to Fannin County Attorney Lynn Doss. However, Doss told me the bank manager now disavows having ever made the remark she had previously freely stated until, apparently, the implications of the remark were made clear.

That Jones was satisfied with Weaver's contention that Thomason's allegation was false is key to his dismissal of the charge against Weaver.

Gerry Weber of the Southern Center for Human Rights was Thomason and Stookey's attorney. He was quoted at the time of Jones' dismissal that an appeal was under consideration. I have not heard of anything further being done with the matter. My witness -- as stated above -- was not requested, and I had no part in the legal proceeding. So much outrage was expressed when the false arrests occurred, but not a peep of protest when the dishonest judge and district attorney were given a pass.

I am satisfied from your note that you are a well-intentioned person, Charlotte. I would be happy to reply to any further questions you might have of me. If attorney Weber is not filing an appeal, I have no idea what can be done. I did not get a reply from Jones as to my letter to him or the copy I sent him of my detailed letter to the editor.

As to my background: I worked as a reporter for the now-closed *Fannin Focus*, the paper that was so miserably impacted by the false arrests of its publisher and his attorney on charges that were trumped-up by Superior Court Judge Brenda Weaver and District Attorney Alison Sosebee (Weaver's former law clerk).

I regularly attend the two Board of Commissioners meetings each month and speak on occasion from the podium when I see abuse of office taking place by the commissioners or county department heads. I always try to have something positive to say, as well, but **I try to serve as one of the VERY FEW watchdogs** in our corrupt backwater community, Blue Ridge, Fannin County, GA.

At this point in time, Charlotte, with the federal judge's dismissal of the charge against ol' lady Weaver, I do not know what can be done. I underscore that the federal judge, Steve Jones, was a former member of the GA Superior Court fraternity. Moreover, I heard just two days ago from the publisher's mother that one of the attorney's involved in his lawsuit against the aforementioned ol' lady Weaver has informed that a decision NOT to appeal had been reached. The attorney said the publisher's past addiction treatment for hydrocodone abuse, and his return to drug abuse -- Suboxone and possibly meth -- after the paper's closing would not lend credulity to an appeal of the suit he waged on truthful grounds against the withch.

What happened -- the arrests of the publisher and his attorney for attempting to access with **Open Records Requests and a subpoena** copies of checks written on the **taxpayer-funded** Superior Court operating budget account is a damnable outrage, a damnable outrage!!

Moreover, consider that one of the linchpins in Weaver's counter to the suit against her was that the publisher said he had been told by several bank officials that checks may have been cashed instead of deposited. Judge Jones accepted Weaver's counter as truthful. However, as I have belabored in a letter to the editor -- published in the *Fannin Sentinel*, November 14, 2019, p. 8A -- I can personally attest that one bank official told me directly twice and a third time in my presence to the publisher by phone call that a check "was processed in one of our drive-throughs and appears to have been overridden and cashed instead of deposited." If you want more details, just call me at 706-258-2386, or have me to send a Word copy of the letter the paper published.

Here's a copy of the letter I wrote to Judge Jones, which I sent along with a copy of the letter to the editor:

Ralph W. Garner
15 Peyton's Place, Apt. P
Blue Ridge, Georgia 30513
Phone: (706) 258-2386 (home)

e-mail: ralphgarner10@gmail.com

November 21, 2019

U.S. District Judge Steve C. Jones

U.S. Courthouse, Room 303
121 Spring Street, S.E.
Gainesville, Georgia 30501

U.S. Courthouse, Room 1967
75 Ted Turner Drive, S.W.
Atlanta, Georgia 30303

RE: Your decision to dismiss the lawsuit against Judge Brenda Weaver

Dear Judge Jones:

Please find enclosed a newspaper copy of my letter to the editor of the *Fannin Sentinel* (Blue Ridge) that serves to respond to the report in *The News Observer* (Blue Ridge), 10/23/19, of your dismissal of the lawsuit against Judge Brenda Weaver.

You recall the publisher of the now closed *Fannin Focus* newspaper, Mark Thomason, and his attorney, Russell Stookey, alleged in their suit that they had been falsely arrested on trumped-up charges in an ambush orchestrated by GA Superior Court Judge Brenda Weaver and her former law clerk, District Attorney Alison Sosebee.

I invite your study of the letter I've enclosed. I trust you will find information you have not heard before and will understand why I must speak out against so gross a miscarriage of justice as represented by your dismissal of the claims against Weaver.

Effectively, your decision validates Weaver's snuffing out of a major player in the tentative effort to rid Fannin County government of its legacy of corruption. Please read the lower half of the letter that serves to itemize just some of the scandals the *Focus* exposed during its short existence. And how many **taxpayer-funded** court operating budget accounts in Georgia are impervious to subpoenas and Open Records Requests?

And by the way, next time you see B.J. Pak, ask him about the letter I wrote to him, dated April 30, 2019, about highly questionable investigatory work done by the same DA Sosebee re. misappropriations of revenue over the 28-year term of a recreation department director. Despite polite requests, I and other concerned citizens have not received any update as to where *that* matter is. I'd be much obliged.

