

6-1-04 Doug Dickens publicly attacks AVOC and Editor, Wendell Dawson

AVOC

June 6, 2004

6-7-04 Oconee BOC Meetings Becoming Unfriendly to Citizens

At its June 1, 2004, (Board of Commissioners') meeting a developer was allowed to deliver a multi-page statement supporting the Board and viciously attacking me as he gave his 'account' of some past events.

This person obviously had a personal ax to grind and was playing the "Vinnie Williams Card". The vindictiveness and mean-spiritedness of Ms. Williams toward me is so well known that persons with spite or dislike, personal or political, know the Oconee Enterprise will publish outrageous comments about me without giving opposing views or balancing information. Most of such articles in the last few years have included embellished 'fiction'. While I may have to endure the spite of Ms. Williams as long as she controls the Oconee Enterprise, I will use Another Voice to reach citizens with my side of the story. We will also be looking at possible defamation causes of action. Some articles have involved family matters and are too raw emotionally for public comment, especially during pending litigation, by any responsible person.

My basic philosophy toward such sensational reports is that "the truth will stand and a lie will fade away".

ATTACK ON AVOC AND EDITOR: The latest incident (June 1, 2004 BOC Meeting) involved Doug Dickens who gave a diatribe against me allegedly because of a May 2, 2004, AVOC Article on secrecy of Oconee County Commissioner actions. SEE: 5-2-04 Secrecy of Oconee County Government Leading to Problems;
<http://avoc.info/info/article.php?article=1131&PHPSESSID=e6a18c744861fdcd0b4610ad6598db3a>

I have reread that article and do not agree that it says what Mr. Dickens claims. It touched on the Recreation Park issue concerning a rumor that was rampant a few weeks ago about some dispute involving a person or business that allegedly prepared the Park schematic for the BOC that was used in the campaign leading to the referendum. The rumor claims there were some heated words and threatened litigation about the design work. This alleged incident did not involve Mr. Dickens and I never said it did. With the regular executive sessions of the Oconee BOC it is difficult for citizens to learn the true facts.

In my opinion Mr. Dickens' emotional attack on me was motivated by more than one article. He wears several hats depending on the circumstances and which one he wants to be at the time.

FAMILY MAN: One hat is "family man". He did not tell newer citizens that his full name is Douglas Dawson Dickens. Yes, he and I are first cousins. However, we are not friends or "kissing cousins". (He and I have common relatives and I have never attacked his family nor would I.)

I am several years older than Doug and have known him all of his life. He was mostly occupied with farming interests at Eastville until his Dad died in the early nineties and he inherited hundreds of acres of land along with his brother, Wayne, now deceased. (Wayne was closer to my age and he and I played Hopalong Cassidy at our grandmother's home on Cliff Dawson Road as children.) After Wayne's untimely death in 1994, Doug moved into several positions held formerly by his Dad's Board member of local bank and head of farming operations.

THE BANKER: Doug is currently Chairman of the Board of Directors of a local bank. This fact is not lost on many persons in government and development circles especially when faced with a very aggressive personality. While I have not heard it myself, I have been told by persons that he has said things like, "I run this county!". I do know that such behavior comports with his personality and some past behavior.

THE FARMER: Doug was a farmer for most of his life. The 'family farm operations', less his living siblings or their children, is reputed to be the largest row crop operation left in the county. According to government websites, the operation has been the largest recipient of Federal farm subsidies in Oconee County.

<http://avoc.info/info/article.php?article=588&PHPSESSID=9b71702a8112c017681173d3520350e3>

In the eighties and early nineties, while wearing the farmer hat, Doug frequently voiced anti-growth and anti-development positions. He opposed tax money for water and sewer efforts that I proposed. He also spoke against the Eastville LAS site at a public hearing in 1998 at the Government Annex. The thrust of his opposition was the detrimental effect the site would have on hundreds of acres of area land in which he had a sizable interest. (This is even more poignant when one realizes this is same person who has requested and received sewer service access for residential development.) According to comments from others, he was critical of my salary increase (as Commission Chairman) in the early eighties. Even though we were cousins, I never received any financial campaign support from him until my last year in office.

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS: Often, in large families, there are emotional issues and sometimes even jealousy of one's status. I had some dealings with Doug as Commission Chairman- once wearing the farmer hat and others wearing his developer hat. Once he came in upset and demanding that the County pay for 'spraying damage' to some of his crops. I was familiar with his personality and helped to coordinate the matter. The spraying company operator denied the allegations. We referred it to the spraying company's insurance carrier who finally settled the claim.

THE DEVELOPER: In the late nineties, he was involved in developing the Hickory Lake Subdivision on Elder and New High Shoals Roads. We spent much time with planning and utility staff in working out some problems he had with the former owner which dispute was later involved in litigation if I remember correctly. He became disgruntled with me when, after consultation with Road Department personnel and viewing the situation first hand, the county refused to pay for piping a ditch across the subdivision to the lake. It was a typical road drainage ditch like we maintained throughout the county. We offered to do the same for him as we did for others and clean the ditch and place rip-raff to slow down water flow. I believe we did agree to pay about \$ 1,000 toward the piping in lieu of cleaning and rip-rapping the ditch.

There was also a situation that arose involving sidewalks in Founders Grove. I always tried to be helpful in coordinating a resolution of such problems with citizens and staff. I would not dictate or order staff to bend the rules or make exceptions. My role was more as a mediator or facilitator. I often did this for situations involving differences between Land Planner Ken Beall and Planning Director Wayne Provost.

PARK PROPERTY: My last official dealing with Doug was to have some preliminary discussions with him about buying some Dickens property (approximately 50 acres or less) at Autry Road across from Herman Michael Park. We had looked all over the upper end of the county for land for soccer fields, tennis courts and a Senior Center. Because of logistics of equipment and personnel, County Staff and I felt the Dickens property was the most appropriate.

We wanted to put the planned new Senior Center on the front as kind of the 'main building' for the complex. We had looked at some nice centers, used for community meetings, in Elbert,

Madison and other area Counties and thought it would be a good location and kind of a centerpiece for the park. Many communities use them for community gatherings and meetings..

Doug said they were not really in position to sell for various reasons. He mentioned that the whole place may eventually sell for family reasons. We talked in general about prices. I explained that the county could not afford to purchase the property for cash. We just did not have the money (it was later bought with borrowed funds). I remember no discussion about eminent domain. I negotiated hundreds of right of way acquisitions over my public career and never used a threat in negotiations. There were some rare occasions when the county was forced to resort to condemnation. Sometimes, the subject came up in considering tax consequences of such purchases. There are some special IRS provisions for involuntary conversions. Sometimes, 'friendly condemnations' are used in that context but I do not remember such a discussion with Mr. Dickens.

SPECIAL PRICE: I approached him with the idea of the owners working with the county to acquire up to fifty acres. I pointed out that the owners could consider a special price or donation if the County could consider naming the park in memory of his late father, a prominent landowner and Oconee County Citizen. There would also be appreciation from improvement of the dirt road access.

In our last conversation, he knew I was leaving office. He had been supportive of the selection of Melvin Davis as my successor. (Their wives are fellow employees in the School Administration Offices). He told me he thought that he and I should not pursue it in view of our relationship as cousins, "Folks might accuse of us of wrongdoing". I wrote a letter for the files generally outlining our proposals and the process and shared it with Doug and my successor, Melvin Davis. I have a copy of that two page letter.

DIFFERENT RECOLLECTIONS: In later news on the county purchase of the whole Dickens tract, I read some public comments that I had started the whole deal while still in office. That was partially true. My response was and still is that I was talking about 50 acres and less than \$15,000.00 an acre.

In my opinion, the County did not have funds to pay \$ 2 Million cash for land for recreational purposes and maintain its other needs. My strongest objection about the park is not necessarily the land purchase, although it was done with borrowed funds, but more so with the massiveness of the entire project with all the infrastructure needs of the county. In my opinion, it cannot be completed with the funds allocated and at the same time take care of the other parks. Time will tell on that issue.

AVOC DEFENSE: I normally do not want to talk about family or personal issues in a public forum. However, in view of this unusually angry and broad-sided inaccurate attack on my personally on June 1 (and rumors of others though less public), I feel some reasoned public and factual response is necessary.

Because of some apparent mis-addressed emails by a citizen (whom I have seen twice in my life), some have alleged that I am responsible for all the citizen questioning at BOC meetings and Open Records Requests. That is flattering to me but insulting to the intelligence and capabilities of interested citizens in Oconee County. From time to time, I request and pay for copies of documents for AVOC. I recently inquired about the status of litigation involving the County- and particularly the Trinity Sign case the county recently lost in Federal Court. I had heard some rumors and sought the facts. 6-5-04 Oconee County Loses Sign Case in Federal Court

CONSULTATION: With my long-time experience as an elected official I am frequently asked about governmental issues. Other jurisdictions have paid me for dealing with governmental matters as a consultant and as a mediator. Because of AVOC, I do get many messages and forwarded information. Some I use and some I don't. Before it is used, I want to have

reasonable confirmation of the information. With the frequent Executive Sessions in Oconee County without any record of the matters discussed, it is sometimes difficult to confirm or disprove a rumor. Sometimes, an Open Records Request can settle the matter.

I have always been supportive of citizen groups who are interested in our community. I have assisted at least three to be organized. My involvement seldom lasts past the organization stage unless asked to speak on some subject.

CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT: It is the height of arrogance and ignorance to think or imply that all zoning and BOC discontent in this county originates with or is instigated by me or AVOC. I believe this is a not well disguised arrogant attempt at intimidation of me and some citizens.

It is true that we want to spur interest and inquiry of issues with AVOC articles. With AVOC Articles, we use many records and sources of information. Along with my 30 years experience and insight into local government, AVOC can provide a truer picture of what is happening than often appear in media reports or county commission public information. (Executive sessions, with selective leaks, and no record help fuel rumors and speculation).

We need more and not less citizen involvement and inquiry than has been provided by the current commissioners. With more public input and scrutiny, they possibly could have avoided the mess they have made with MPDs and residential sewer policies.

DEVELOPER INFLUENCE: It is high time that citizens regain control of the county government and its resources from the domination and heavy influence of the development industry. The County cannot afford too much of the kind of "altruism" provided by some of them.