

Vines shows true colors with attack on reporter

Until last week, I considered Isle of Wight County School Board member Michael Vines to be an unimportant side show — loose-lipped, quick-tempered and beleaguered, but mostly well-intentioned and undeserving of recall from public office, as his critics have sought.

Then came Thursday night's School Board meeting, where Vines revealed a deeper flaw and rendered himself, in these eyes, unworthy of elected service to the important cause of public education in this community.

Vines' attack on the integrity of this newspaper — and one of Virginia's best journalists, Stephen Faleski — might rate as the most shameful performance by a public official I've ever witnessed. And, in four decades of editing and publishing community newspapers, let's just say I've seen some doozies.

Under the glare of the political spotlight and the prospect of a defamation lawsuit by his chief critic, Windsor resident Lewis Edmonds, Vines showed his true colors, throwing Faleski under the metaphorical bus to try to save his own hide.

Confronted by Edmonds about his comment in last week's edition attributing Edmonds' latest, unsuccessful recall effort to petitioners' contempt for

Black board members, Vines claimed he didn't say it. In other words, that Faleski, for whom fabrication would be a career-ending offense, just made stuff up.

"I believe The Smithfield Times misquoted me," Vines said in response to Edmonds' public comments at the end of the School Board's Aug. 11 meeting. "They wrote a lot of things that I did not say. And I apologize for them misquoting me, and for that very reason that's why I declined to, not to give them an interview this entire year. But Mr. Faleski, Stephen Faleski, came to me, called

me on the phone while I was at work. And he took key words, and he put his words to those words. I don't believe you are a racist. I never stated that. And if it's an open apology what you want, I will apologize for The Smithfield Times for what they wrote. But I did not say that, what they wrote."

For the record, the Times doesn't need anyone, especially Vines, to apologize on our behalf. We own our mistakes when they occur, as evidenced by occasional corrections and clarifications published prominently on this page. In this case, there were no mistakes. Faleski reported what Vines said.

Now that Vines has publicly defamed him, here's what you should

know about Stephen Faleski. Many of you already know, because you stop me on the street, call me and send me emails to tell me so. Faleski works tirelessly to keep the citizens of Isle of Wight and Surry informed about the activities of their local governments and the people who lead them. His journalism is regularly recognized among the best statewide by the Virginia Press Association. He is meticulous and, like the best journalists, values accuracy above all else.

I've employed dozens of journalists over the years, and Faleski rates right at the top. I also know him to be a man of impeccable moral character who is appalled by racial bias of any degree. Knowing just how much racial hatred exists in this world, he'd never fabricate someone's allegation of racism.

What Vines didn't mention Thursday night is that Edmonds sent him an email last week seeking a public clarification or retraction of his racism claim. Such a request is a prerequisite to a slander lawsuit under Virginia law.

Instead of manning up and taking responsibility for his words, Vines took the coward's way out and falsely blamed a journalist who was simply doing his job. The citizens of Isle of Wight deserve better representation on their School Board.

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Dispatches from Wharf Hill

By Steve
Stewart



Smithfield voters send strong message

Watching hundreds of dejected, angry citizens file out of the Smithfield Center on a hot July night in 2021, this scribe, then a new observer of local politics, pondered two possibilities.

Either Mayor Carter Williams had amassed political capital unlike anything I'd seen in four decades of covering small-town politics, or he was in deep trouble come the next election.

As the council ignored massive opposition and approved an 800-unit housing development on the eastern edge of town, Williams, who wielded the gavel during a contentious meeting, personified what many in the crowd saw as town leaders' indifference

to, even disdain of, the will of the people. The mayor was gruff, impatient and disinterested as one speaker after another fretted about the potentially harmful effects of the housing development on their way of life.

It's been said that voters have short memories, and Election Day was still 16 months away that fateful night. This time, they didn't forget.

Williams finished dead last in a five-candidate field, a cruel ending to a distinguished tenure in public service. Between the Mallory Scott approval and the election, Williams

was honored by the Rotary and Ruritan clubs as Smithfield's Citizen of the Year,

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evidence of his loyalty and love of his hometown. It could be argued, reasonably, that he deserved better than what the voters inflicted on Nov. 8.

A common characteris-

tic of small-town leadership like Smithfield's that's been in power a while is paternalism — the notion that they have the town's best interest at heart, uniquely understand what's right and what's wrong and don't really need to know what the commoners think. When that mind-set creeps in, transparency is its first victim. Why should we make government more acces-

sible when we already have the answers?

No one I know was surprised that Steve Bowman, a beloved and respected former town police chief and lifelong lawman, claimed

one of the election's four seats on the Town Council. That he torched the rest of the field and was the runaway top vote-getter following a campaign focused on openness and transparency sent a strong message, though, reinforced by voters' selection of newcomer Jeff Brooks, who's lived in Smithfield about as long as I have. Brooks, like Bowman, promised a new era of responsiveness in town government.

It wasn't a coincidence that Councilman Wayne Hall, who opposed the Mallory Scott project, was the top vote-getter among in-

cumbents on the ballot.

None of this is to suggest that elected officials should always be constrained by public opinion. There are rare cases in public service (perhaps Mallory Scott was one) that require a vote of conscience rather than of expediency. But when you cast it, you best not be smug and dismissive of your constituents. They'll remind you just who's in charge.

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Correction

School Board turnover was predictable

You could see the shakeup of Isle of Wight County's School Board coming from a mile away.

Or at least a year away.

I wrote in this space in October 2021 that newcomer John Collick's upstart bid to oust then-School Board Chairwoman Jackie Carr in that fall's election would be a bellwether for 2022.

"If Collick, who moved to the county in January, defeats Carr, a lifelong county resident, beloved former principal of Carrsville Elementary School and five-year school board member, it will signal a revolution that will in short order reshape the school board and hasten the departure of Superintendent Jim Thornton, whether by his choice or the board's," I predicted at the time.

Carr didn't make it to Election Day in 2021, bailing out of a race that was fast tilting Collick's way. Thornton followed suit a few months later, blaming critics of the school division's equity and inclusion initiatives for his early retirement.

Carr and Thornton, after initially underestimating their critics, saw the handwriting on the wall: a voter backlash in the fall of 2022 that would give Collick two like-minded colleagues and an ideological majority on the five-member School Board. The reshaped board, including Jason Maresh and Mark Wooster, who trounced their incumbent opponents last month, convenes for the first time this week with a clear mandate for change.

Those lamenting a "conservative takeover" of Isle of Wight County Schools can direct much of the blame to Thornton, Carr and other School Board incumbents, who incorrectly assessed 2021 grumbling about equity and inclusion efforts as the work of a few malcontents trying to inject national politics into local schools. The IWCS contingent wasn't alone. Terry McAuliffe did the same in the simultaneous gubernatorial race and blew an election that nobody thought he could lose in a state that had seemingly "gone blue."

McAuliffe's declaration during a debate that "I don't

think parents should be telling schools what they should teach" started Republican Glenn Youngkin on his way to the massive upset.

There's an honest debate to be had about the role of educators in thorny topics like race relations and gender identity, but the public education bureaucracy, personified by McAuliffe and Thornton, was dismissive, defensive and indignant. Centrist and conservative parents, who are a solid majority of the state's electorate outside Richmond and the northern Virginia suburbs, didn't like being told that instruction topics and student reading materials were none of their business. That was especially true here in Isle of Wight.

New Superintendent Theo Cramer understands the dynamics much more astutely. Early in his tenure, he's listened intently to any stakeholder with a concern -- and acted quickly when they make a good point, such as the inappropriateness of sexually explicit instructional content linked on a middle school's website.

His relationship with the overhauled School Board will be interesting to watch.

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