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The Southwest Portland Post

Southwest Portland's Independent Neighborhood Newspaper

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Volume No. 19, Issue No. 10

www.swportlandpost.com

Portland, Oregon

Complimentary

August 2011

Former SWNI employee Virginia Stromer indicted on 11 counts of theft by deception

By Lee Perlman
The Southwest Portland Post

In July, the Multnomah County District Attorney's office indicted former Southwest Neighborhoods, Inc. Operations Manager Virginia Stromer on 11 counts of "theft by deception"



Virginia Stromer (Multnomah County Sheriff booking photo)

relating to her work with SWNI. The indictments covered Stromer's employment from 2003 to 2010, and the funds involved amounted to \$130,000.

The indictment capped a nine-month investigation by the Portland Police Bureau following Stromer's abrupt resignation after 15 years on the job.

After an arrest warrant was issued, she surrendered to authorities, pleaded not guilty to the charges, and was released on her own recognizance. No trial date had been set as *The Post* went to press.

SWNI Executive Director Sylvia Bogert told *The Post* that her first indication of problems occurred on October 5, 2010 when a check drawn from a SWNI account bounced because of insufficient funds. A quick check revealed other financial problems.

Bogert left a phone message for Stromer after work hours saying the matters needed to be discussed. The next day Stromer sent an e-mail saying that, on the advice of a lawyer, she was resigning due to "some major errors and me." Stromer later sent one of her sons to take her personal property from the office. Bogert said she hasn't spoken to Stromer since then.

Stromer worked in the office since 1995, and had responsibility for book-

keeping, the SWNI newsletter, *The Southwest Neighborhood News*, and communications with neighborhoods. "For most of those years we were a three-person team" (with Leonard Gard, program manager) Bogert recalled.

"Ginny was a very hard worker, always the first one in the office. She seemed to love her job and the people she worked with. She had first-hand knowledge of how hard volunteers worked to create a better community. She seemed very excited about the projects we were working on."

She had no indication, Bogert said, that Stromer had a desperate need for funds. "What I saw was a hard-working mother of two," Bogert said. "She took on a paper route in addition to her job here to bring in extra money. But I had every indication she was a trustworthy employee."

At times in tears Bogert, who herself has worked for SWNI for more than 30 years, said of Stromer, "It was inconceivable to me that the individual I knew and trusted could betray not only my trust and the office's, but the community's, that someone who saw firsthand how hard people worked to raise funds could be involved in something like this."

In addition to reporting the matter to the police, SWNI consulted with a lawyer, Katherine Heekin, and a forensic accountant, Bill Douglas. The two have also been working on seeking a theft insurance claim on SWNI's behalf.

This was complicated by the fact that SWNI changed its insurance coverage during the period in question. On SWNI's behalf, Heekin is seeking a claim of about \$72,000. "We went back as far as our policy would allow and the data could support," Bogert said.

Bogert shared the revelations with her board and, although it wasn't as personal for them as it had been for her, they too were shocked. Lee Buhler of South Portland said, "I knew Ginny personally, and I would never have expected this." Don Baack of Hillsdale said his dealings with Stromer were "very pleasant. There was no reason to suppose there was a problem at all."

The board quickly mobilized to deal with the situation. They set up an ad hoc Finance Committee to make the best use of remaining resources. Their actions "allowed us to pay all our bills and meet all of our obligations," Bogert said. "All of our scheduled events came off

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Public officials pose at the groundbreaking of the new Portland to Milwaukie light rail line. (Post photo by Lee Perlman)

Groundbreaking ceremony kicks off Portland to Milwaukie light rail line

By Lee Perlman
The Southwest Portland Post

With some funding details still to be worked out, TriMet and its partners officially began work on the Portland to Milwaukie Light Rail project.

The \$1.5 billion venture will extend the existing Green Line from its current terminus at Portland State University through downtown into the South Waterfront to a station at Southwest Moody Avenue and Porter Street.

From there it will cross the Willamette River via a new bridge serving rail transit, buses, bikes and pedestrians to a station at Southeast Sherman Street near the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry (OMSI).

It will continue southward through the inner southeast into Clackamas County. It will have 10 new stations.

The project was delayed to some extent by some late second-guessing about the location of the bridge.

It was initially proposed to cross at Caruthers Street. However, there was strong lobbying to bring the west terminus further south, near the Oregon Health and Sciences University's proposed aerial tram and its proposed future development.

Another issue occurred when the Federal Transit Administration agreed to provide funding to the project, but at only 50 percent of its cost rather than the hoped-for 60 percent, leaving a gap of more than \$100 million.

Since then TriMet and its partners have both identified new funding sources – including a new charge on new development near the line – and cuts to elements of the project. One of these is a connection between the terminus of the new streetcar extension at OMSI and the new bridge.

Proponents are seeking to restore this to the budget, arguing that it would cost twice as much after the bridge is completed.

The project began life in the 1990s as the South-North Line, a single project linking Vancouver to Clackamas County. A series of statewide public

votes on both sides of the river killed this venture.

However, persistent lobbying by transit advocates kept the concept alive. Today the Yellow Line extends north from downtown to the Expo Center near the Columbia River. The link to Vancouver is an element of the proposed Columbia River Crossing Project.

At the June 30 groundbreaking ceremony at OMSI, near the east side approach of the bridge, several speakers mentioned the project's history.

Metro Councilor Carlotta Colette, who lives on the edge of Milwaukie, said her neighbors have been calling for light rail since she began her career as a neighborhood activist and, quoting Jerry Garcia, said, "What a long, strange trip it's been."

Mayor Sam Adams said, "The route is pretty straightforward, but the route to get here took a lot of twists and turns. It's taken persistence. We were required to come up with more resources at the end, it put the project in jeopardy, but we came through."

Congressman Earl Blumenauer, referring to the project's history, said, "Build no line before its time. There were bumps along the way, but it meant that when it happened, the community was ready."

Congressman Kurt Schrader, referring to redistricting processes then under way, said, "Welcome to the other side of the river, which I represent – for now. I wondered when the south side would get its turn."

He credited State Rep. Mary Nolan with securing state funding for the project. "It was not at the top of the list of most people's things to do, but this was a critical project," said Schrader.

"There were occasions when (former Gov. Ted Kulongoski) pushed back pretty strongly, but we prevailed. I hope this will show that infrastructure spending is not just spending, but creating the future."

Gail Acterman of Oregon Department of Transportation noted that her agency is no longer just concerned with highways. "We will really build (Continued on Page 3)

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