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The R-G and the Ramp

GSA charges daily with 'deliberate misinformation.'

Jon Kvistad, regional head of the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA), charged that *The Register-Guard* engaged in "deliberate misinformation" in editorials pushing for a wheelchair ramp at the new federal courthouse.

"Some in the community were confused and misinformed," Kvistad said of proponents of the ramp during an Oct. 24 press conference in which the GSA announced it would build a ramp. He charged that that confusion was "fueled by what I believe was deliberate misinformation by some at the local newspaper."

"It was the editorials that really drove them up the wall," said Jack Wilson, editorial page editor for the *R-G*, in an interview with *EW*.

Wilson said *R-G* editors had several "unhappy" meetings and communications with the GSA complaining that editorials pushing for the ramp were not even handed. But Wilson said the editorials were urging the government agency to do the right thing. "I make no apologies for that."

At the press conference, Kvistad declined to elaborate on his allegation of "deliberate misinformation" from the newspaper. "Far be it for me as a public official to criticize our media," Kvistad said, but referred to a complaint letter he sent *R-G* Editor and Publisher Tony Baker. After checking with Baker, Wilson provided a copy of the GSA's letter.

"I find the editorial board's actions unacceptable, irresponsible and unethical," Kvistad wrote Baker on Sept. 16, charging that the editorials were engaged in "misinformation and politically correct posturing" in criticizing the GSA for providing an elevator at the front of the building instead of a ramp.

Kvistad appeared particularly

tioning public support for the project. The *R-G*'s news coverage of the announcement focused on speculation by ramp advocates that the building was hung up on the wheelchair access issue.

But Kvistad said at the news conference that the ramp wasn't the cause.

"There's just no way" the ramp would have shut down the \$70 million building, Kvistad said. "The timing is coincidental," he said. "The hold is not related to the ramp."

The project was put on hold to urge the city to guarantee money for construction of infrastructure to serve the courthouse, according to Kvistad. "We cannot build a \$70 to \$80 million public building in an area where the public infrastructure, and that includes the transportation infrastructure, is not settled."

Construction of a new \$8 million highway through the courthouse district near the river has been a controversial issue in the City Council and in the community for years.

The GSA's abrupt turnaround on the ramp issue appears to illustrate the power of the *R-G*'s editorials on the issue. But Wilson downplays the impact of his work. "I wouldn't want to put our editorial at the center of this."



JON KVISTAD

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bothered by a Sept. 16 *R-G* editorial inviting Kvistad and other federal officials on a wheelchair tour to demonstrate the importance of disabled access to public buildings.

"I consider the editorial to be irresponsible and unacceptable and I would like a retraction and clarification to that effect," Kvistad wrote. "Given your editorial board's past rhetoric, I am doubtful that the tour would be informative or balanced and I am just as certain that they publicly announced the tour — without having made any effort to learn if the invited guests could participate — so as to be able to get a photo of three empty chairs and further inflame some in the community."

Three days after the Sept. 16 letter was sent, the GSA announced that it was putting the courthouse project on hold, ques-

The *R-G* editorials did not "single-handedly turn them around," Wilson said. The paper was just part of "a really united community telling the GSA that we wanted to do this right," he said.

"There was near unanimity of support for a fully accessible building," Wilson said. "If we had any part in that, that's great."

Reading the GSA's letter, it's apparent GSA saw the *R-G* as having a major part of "inflam[ing]" public opinion for the ramp. "Your editorial board's public baiting will not sway our process nor adversely influence my decision," Kvistad vowed Sept. 16. On Oct. 24 he announced, "We have decided to add this additional entry option for this select project in order to meet strong Eugene community demand for ramp access."

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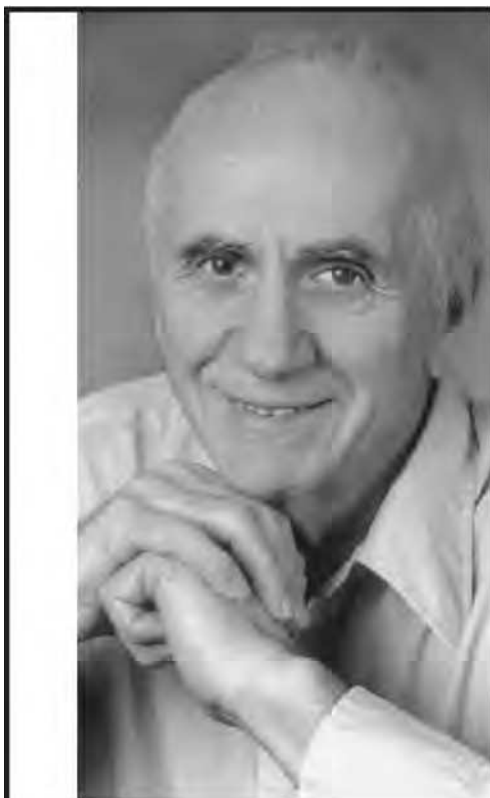
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