

Winlock Weekly Not Found to Have Violated Election Coverage Laws After Resident Claimed Bias

Of Winlock's Lewis County News, PDC Says Line Between Ads and Stories 'Not Clear'



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The Washington State Public Disclosure Commission (PDC) has closed an investigation involving a Winlock-based publication, Lewis County News, and its coverage of the 2022 elections involving Lewis County sheriff candidate Tracy Murphy, Public Utility District commission candidate Mike Hadaller and county commissioner candidate Harry Bhagwandin.

Following a report from a Toledo resident alleging biased election coverage, the PDC opened investigations into all three candidates concerning possible paid political

advertisements not being properly disclosed to the public. The candidates, however, said they were simply editorial pieces and not paid advertisements, and the investigation was closed.

The PDC then opened up a new investigation looking into the interview practices and editorial guidelines of Lewis County News.

Ultimately, this was also dismissed as not violating state law concerning paid political advertising. However, Lewis County News received a warning from the PDC concerning its election coverage as the PDC believed Lewis County News treated some candidates differently from their opponents and was not making it clear to readers what was editorial content and what was political advertisement.

The complaint originally came from Toledo resident Elizabeth Rohr, who was concerned with Lewis County News' coverage involving the three candidates.

She believed articles and letters to the editor published in Lewis County News, formerly known as the Town Crier, showed bias toward certain candidates in the three races the aforementioned candidates were running in. In Rohr's original letter to the PDC, she called for transparency in the paper's funding as she believed the articles in question were actually paid political advertisements.

In an email to The Chronicle, Rohr said she never intended for the candidates to be investigated, just the newspaper.

According to a Jan. 12 email to the PDC, Lewis County News Publisher Pat Myers, of Flannery Publications, stated the pieces published by Lewis County News in question were simply guest editorials.

"Per our policy, we have always had an open invitation to the public to submit letters to the editor or guest editorials to the paper for consideration and publication provided they adhere to our policies," read an excerpt from Myers' email.

Myers admitted newspaper staff made no effort, aside from one attempt to contact the other sheriff candidate, Rob Snaza, to see if the candidates' opponents had any interest in publishing their own editorials.

At the end of January, the PDC closed the case with a reminder to Lewis County News and suggestions for how to better cover future elections.

Following the case's closure, a headline on the Feb. 1 edition of the Lewis County News read, "Rohr loses claim — No evidence of violation with Lewis County News and three Republican candidates."

Lewis County News published selective excerpts from the PDC's final ruling, including quotes stating the PDC found no evidence of any violations that would require conducting a more formal investigation, but failed to mention the reminder and suggestions.

Instead, the article simply ended quoted the publisher, "Myers commented, 'This was a good waste of a lot of good people's time and taxpayers money.'"

The excerpts left out that while no evidence was found requiring a more formal investigation, there were still issues with the paper's 2022-election coverage.

PDC officials stated it appeared Lewis County News displayed favoritism between candidates when seeking interviews.

"It seemed candidates Murphy, Hadaller and Bhagwandin were made aware of the opportunity to have their candidate information published as 'guest editorials' and in at least one case were assisted with drafting the 'editorial,' when it does not appear that candidates (Scott) Brummer, Snaza and (Kevin) Emerson received a similar offer," read an excerpt from a Jan. 24 letter from the PDC announcing its findings, later adding, "It was not clear to PDC staff and likely the public whether the information published in the (Lewis County News) about candidates Murphy, Hadaller and Bhagwandin was editorial content or paid advertising."

The PDC encouraged Lewis County News to clearly identify when a piece published in the paper was editorial content to avoid readers thinking an editorial might be a paid political advertisement.

The Chronicle reached out to Lewis County News employee Lynette Hoffman to ask if the publication planned to implement the PDC's suggestions and if she would alter her candidate interview process. Hoffman did not respond.