

NAACP

Blair County Branch

Public Service Announcement / Press Release

Blair NAACP Raises Concerns with DA Conduct

Private Account, OOT Checks Raise Law Enforcement Integrity Questions

November 15, 2023

After 2 years of investigating, the Blair County NAACP has found evidence suggesting misconduct in the local District Attorney's office. Branch President Andrae Holsey announced his preliminary findings at a meeting on Wednesday.

Holsey told attendees he had been "reviewing all cases handled by this association during (Don Witherspoon's) 30-year tenure." "We found dozens of examples where public officials stonewalled civil rights investigations in Central Pennsylvania over the decades," he continued. But, a 2012 memorandum by Witherspoon, challenging the way Operation Our Town (OOT) funds Drug Task Force operations, caught the attention of the current administration.

OOT, a local crime-fighting non-profit whose motto is "Taking Back Our Neighborhoods," began fundraising to support local law enforcement and fight drug abuse in 2006. Since then, OOT executives have spent more than \$4 million to achieve that mission, maintaining that operational money goes to the Blair County General Fund.

However, a September public records release showed more than \$260,000 in checks over the last 4 years to a First National Bank account titled "County of Blair Office of DA." Under Pennsylvania Law, financial distribution decisions are made by County Commissioners, not OOT executives Michael Fiore and Joe Sheetz, whose names appear on the checks.

In a voicemail recording played at Wednesday's meeting, Blair County Controller A.C. Stickel is heard saying that the account number on deposit slips associated with the checks "does not belong to the County of Blair." Stickel continued that "I don't know what they're doing but... it's not part of the general ledger... it's not related to our Employer Identification Number." Calls to Blair County Treasurer Jim Carothers and County Auditing Firm Zelenkofske Axelrod, LLC confirmed that the account has never been reviewed by their offices.

In response, the Blair County NAACP "demands that the District Attorney's First National Bank Account be brought into the General Fund, and that all records since its inception be subject to public scrutiny." The branch further indicated that it would "send appropriate, formal requests upon compliance with this demand."

In addition to demands for transparency, the branch lays out possible criminal, civil, and ethical violations associated with money from Operation Our Town to the County. Investigative documents contain conclusions that "District Attorney Pete Weeks more likely than not violated the Pennsylvania Code of Judicial Conduct... [and] Pennsylvania's Act 130." The report indicates that NAACP officials plan to report these "inconsistencies to municipal, county, and state officials."

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