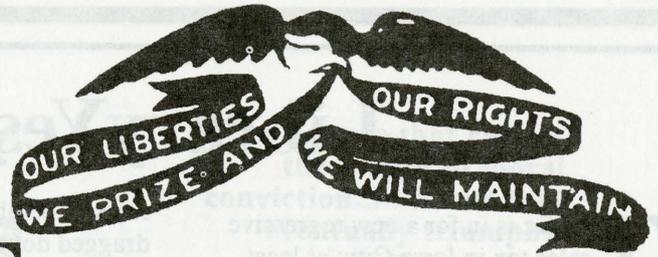


# THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE



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Spring 1998

*A NEWSLETTER FOR IOWA'S DEMOCRATIC LEFT*

## Citizens Taken for a Ride

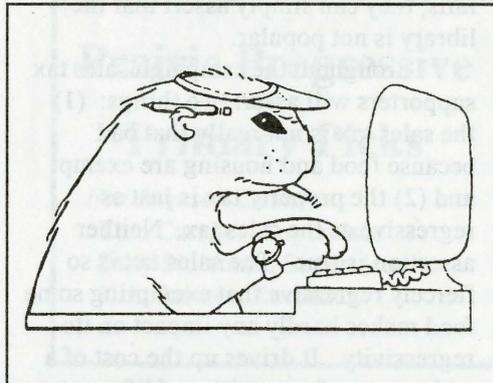
"SEATS is a drain on the city."  
—Iowa City councillor  
Dee Vanderhoef

\$49,000. That's the amount that the city of Iowa City is whining about in the SEATS affair. It's the amount of "surplus" in Johnson County's paratransit budget. We need to hold Johnson County accountable, huffed one city councillor.

Accountability is a flexible standard in Iowa City. For a decade the city has gladly contributed \$50,000 annually to Iowa City Area Development. ICAD director Marty Kelly has never provided data showing that the city gets its money's worth. The city is equally eager to give \$40,000 to Oral B, a business that has already located in Iowa City, and one that once turned down economic development funds from the city because it did not want to disclose its finances. The city also bestows \$85,000 on elementary schools for DARE, the so-called anti-drug program that produces no reliable evidence of its effectiveness.

Yet, when it comes to a 23-year old paratransit system that effectively serves elderly and disabled citizens, city councillors insist that they're being "ripped off by the county." In fact, the city SEATS contract for 1997 required it to pay for only 65% of the costs, even though city ridership was 80% of the total service provided by the county. Accountability is a flexible standard.

It was a SEATS employee who dared to confront city council members on their own accountability. At a recent council meeting, driver Steve Singer looked councillor Dean Thornberry in the eye and began to detail the hundreds of thousands of dollars in public money that's been poured into improvements on and near Boyrum Road. Boyrum is a new little



road off Highway 6. Its largest occupant is Burger King, owned by Dean Thornberry.

As Thornberry reddened, Mayor Ernie Lehman scolded Singer for "a personal attack" which "doesn't help your cause." Singer's facts were a matter of public record, but his insinuation of self-interest on the council cut too close to the bone. Lehman, newly-elected members Mike O'Donnell and Connie Champion, and Dee Vanderhoef all own local businesses. That's 5 out of 7. They all tend to squirm at suggestions that they have benefitted from tax expenditures.

But SEATS, in their eyes, is a "subsidy" the city has to crack down on, to the tune of \$49,000 (0.003% of the city's \$160 million budget). Accountability is a flexible standard.

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Senator Harkin & Congressman Boswell are cranking up their attacks on the tobacco industry. This would be a good move for Iowa's Democratic gubernatorial candidates, too. Republican front-runner Jim Lightfoot has pulled in thousands of cigarette dollars for his campaign. Pointing this out isn't likely to jeopardize support from Iowa tobacco farmers.

Democrats will never be able to out-bluster Lightfoot, but they can nail him for accepting money from the world's biggest drug cartel. And maybe it would spare us the sight of Tom Vilsack posturing on the alleged but unproven threat of a methamphetamine epidemic in Iowa.

The tobacco boys are so powerful, maybe they're behind Kenneth Starr's leaks, Saddam Hussein's threats, and even the current hysteria about "meth babies." Which tail really wags the dog?

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THANKS! to the 43 Prairie Progressive readers who have contributed \$783 since the first of the year. A special thank-you to the 4 generous supporters who took us up on our lifetime subscription offer. Where are the rest of you? ☞

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# Library Yes – Sales Tax No

The fix is in for a new regressive sales tax in Iowa City; at least, that's what city council members and top city staff hope. Ever since becoming city manager, Steve Atkins has promoted a local option sales tax. But his referendum of the late eighties turned out to be a fiasco. Atkins toured Iowa City civic clubs predicting disaster without the new tax, which was supposed to give property tax relief and head off a million dollar deficit in the city budget. The tax was defeated, but the million dollar deficit never materialized.

This time Atkins and the conservative majority on the council are using the library as a battering ram to push through a sales tax. Since the conservative take-over of the city council in the early eighties, the Iowa City Public Library has suffered from hostility and neglect from council and city manager alike. When library advocates pressed for a special library levy in the late eighties, the library board itself almost refused to act on behalf of the library because of the negative attitude of the city manager and city council. After a small group of people who understood the popularity of the library persuaded a reluctant board to put the library levy on the ballot, it passed easily. Iowa Citians are willing to raise their own property taxes to fund the library.

We need a new library now, and we can afford to build it with a simple yes-or-no bond issue. But Atkins and the council have linked the library to a new sales tax, and intend to prevent a clean vote on a new library. Instead the library is included in a complicated downtown revitalization package that includes a multi-purpose Arts Center and various programs of street improvement and beautification. The result is to make the library bond issue far more expensive than necessary at a time when citizens are resentful of the massive increases in water and sewer

rates. The library is in danger of being dragged down by the proposal for an unfamiliar Arts Center.

Unless the city council loses its nerve, we will probably face two ballots next November. The first will authorize the sale of bonds for a downtown revitalization package including both library and arts center. The second will authorize a new sales tax. A new library could be paid for out of property taxes, but there will be endless scare talk about the extent of the property tax increases. This will probably drive most library supporters into the pro-sales tax camp, doing the political dirty work for Atkins and the council majority. If the sales tax passes, the conservative majority will have succeeded in shifting the tax burden to working people and the poor. If the multi-purpose library/arts center fails, they can simply assert that the library is not popular.

Throughout the campaign sales tax supporters will assert two things: (1) the sales tax is not really that bad because food and housing are exempt and (2) the property tax is just as regressive as the sales tax. Neither assertion is true. The sales tax is so fiercely regressive that exempting some food makes hardly any impact on its regressivity. It drives up the cost of a wide range of necessities of life, including water, home heating, diapers, paper towels, shoes, books, radios, televisions, lamps, light bulbs, stoves, pots and pans, furniture, cooking utensils, tools, locks, keys—almost all of the basic items that are required to live. It is impossible to shower, wash dishes, buy clothes, or watch television without paying a sales tax. Many categories of food are taxed, including fast food, candy and pop. The sales tax targets things purchased by and for children, including all of their clothing. Even the poorest people will be hit

hard unless they are homeless and prepare all of their own food over open fires using scrap lumber.

Some people assert in good faith that a property tax increase on commercial property, apartment buildings, and private homes is just as regressive as a tax on disposable diapers and kitchen utensils. It is difficult to measure the regressivity of the property tax without making wild guesses about how much of the tax is "passed on" to the consumer, but there is no reason to assume that it is all passed on to consumers and renters. Even rental property is subject to competition; some property owners will be better able to pass a property tax increase on to renters than others. Only monopolies like TCI and Mid-American Energy will be able to pass on the whole property tax increase to the consumer, but they will administer a sales tax increase in exactly the same way. There are reasonable objections to many aspects of the property tax, but there is no good reason to believe that it is as regressive as a sales tax.

The city manager and council have succeeded in muddying the waters by linking the library to a regressive tax. Amidst all the conflicting claims about the relative merits of the sales and property tax, keep two things in mind. The driving force behind the sales tax is a desire to shift the burden of government services away from those who own property and on to wage-earners, consumers and the poor. Furthermore, we do not need a new regressive tax to build a new library, which can be paid for within the current taxation limits in city government. What we need is a city council that does not regard the Iowa City Public Library as a waste of public money. ☞

— Jeff Cox

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# The Lens of Sustainability

I joined the Iowa City Green Party last year. I am one of sixty people in the area who joined this new independent party in the last twelve months. I still belong to the Socialist Party, USA. Both parties allow for joint membership. There are 49 elected officials nationwide who are members of the Green Party.

In late February, I participated in the First U.S. Green Officeholders Conference in Santa Monica, CA, along with elected and appointed officials from California, Missouri, Minnesota, New Mexico, and Colorado.

Some of the topics we covered included sustainable communities, how to effectively govern as a Green, social and economic justice, and democratizing our communities. This was not just talk about theoretical ways to move to a different vision of how communities operate. These discussions centered on practical and positive strategies that local governments can enact to live out the values of the Green Party.

For example, cities across the country invest their citizens' money. Some states allow localities to invest in stocks. Responsible cities may choose to discuss how they want their money to make money by creating criteria on socially responsible ways to invest. Tobacco, nuclear weapons, and union busting companies may be stocks cities want to avoid investing in, while companies promoting energy efficiency, sustainable agriculture, and recycling may be stocks cities want to gravitate towards.

In Iowa, cities cannot invest in this way, although we certainly invest in CDs. Iowa's cities may want to look at the financial institution's Community Reinvestment portfolio before deciding on where to invest public money. We may decide to invest more in locally

owned and controlled financial institutions, where you and I then go to get loans for our homes and small businesses. These institutions are currently re-investing in our communities by way of volunteerism, contributions to area

**“Will the new development pay for itself, or is the community subsidizing the new area? If there is a subsidy, is the community getting something back for its investment?”**

non-profits, and affordable housing programs. They could be asked to do more as the investment increases. All of these responsible investments can be made within the framework of the needs of cities to have a certain degree of liquidity, rate of return and flexibility.

Three areas need to be explored when trying to develop sustainable programs and policies: economics, the environment, and equity. These areas can be used as guides to create indicators of quality of life and as measures of sustainability. If a new area of town were to be developed, cities could use these three guides to determine if the development is sustainable. Will the new development pay for itself, or is the community subsidizing the new area? If there is a subsidy, is the community getting something back for its invest-

ment? A new park, walkable neighborhoods, or a new commercial area that decreases the need for driving for everyday purchases or employment? Does the new development accommodate the wildlife currently living in the area? Does it protect sensitive areas such as woods, ravines, or wetlands? Is the new development part of the landscape or is the terrain destroyed for the development? Is the new development putting a burden on any particular group of people? Will there be lower-cost housing? Will transportation become a daily challenge? These are the types of questions raised when looking at a project through the lens of sustainability.

At times I feel isolated and frustrated trying to be a progressive elected official in local government. It is as if I am speaking a different language than my colleagues. This gathering was refreshing because it helped remind me that my work is part of a larger movement across the United States.

If you would like to get involved in the movement, please contact me at (319) 338-1321. If you would like more information about the Iowa City Green Party, contact Coordinating Committee members Jacque Gharib at (319) 354-8784 or Don Arenz at (319) 354-8921 ☞

— Karen Kubby is a member of the Iowa City City Council

# Hollywood not as Shipshape as Oscar Thinks

Time again to reflect on what the Oscar nominations have to say about the ship of state. And what a year for such an analysis, when two of the movies in the Best Actor and Best Picture categories hit uncannily close to reality, as if lifted straight out of the oval office: *Wag the Dog* and *The Full Monty*.

Times are too good, so we are told, even for this puritanical nation to be bothered by scandal. A headline in the local paper said it all: "Economic expansion benefiting everyone." It's the economy, stupid, not the sex.

A general sense that this is as good as it gets has upped the feel-good quotient in this year's nominations for best picture. Two of them even have "good" in their titles. Has the industry ever worked harder for happy endings?

By the end of *As Good as It Gets*, the obsessive compulsive Jack Nicholson takes his medication and finds love and friendship. The jobless steelworkers of *The Full Monty* manage to get their act together, and, to the delight of their community, show it all. In *Good Will Hunting*, Matt Damon gives up his dead-end life with his South Boston buddies and the promised riches of a corporate job to be with Minnie Driver. At the end of *L.A. Confidential* one of the lead cops moves up in the department, the other survives major bullet wounds and leaves for Arizona under the care of Kim Basinger, while the honor of the Los Angeles Police Department is saved. And thanks to the frame story, even *Titanic* ends warmly, with Rose and Jack re-united in an afterlife curtain call.

A pervasive theme of last year's nominations was women nursing men, most notably in *The English Patient*. This year it's the men coming to the rescue. Will Hunting is not the only

good guy. Most come off as genuine saviors. Jack Nicholson may be a total jerk who writes romance novels in private and practices hate speech in public, but he finds a doctor who makes house calls for a sick child, comes to the aid of a broke and battered neighbor (and his dog), and, of course, saves himself in the process. Peter Fonda saves his family in *Ulee's Gold*. Robert Duvall saves souls,

**"Has the industry ever worked harder for happy endings?"**

mostly his own, in *The Apostle*. And Dustin Hoffman saves the presidency, and possibly the republic, in *Wag the Dog*. (An early *Good Will Hunting* draft had the genius Matt Damon character break a government code and save the world.)

But art mirrors life this year, as major segments of our population are left bobbing in the cinematic waters, just as in the backwaters of the booming economy. African-American actors and movies were totally shut out of the nominations. There were two big movies about ships this year—one a luxury liner, the other a slave ship—and the Academy gave each about the same degree of recognition that history has.

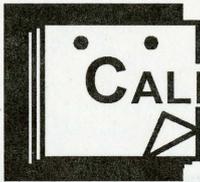
And Hollywood shortchanged its women actors as usual. To fill out the Best Actor category in this year of mediocre movies, the Academy simply named a couple of American legends:

Nicholson and Hoffman. But since the studios don't create female legends like they used to, Oscar had to rely on the British for four of the five Best Actress nominees. The glass ceiling in Hollywood's star firmament has never been so obvious.

The studio bosses are smiling, though. They survived last year's domination by independent films and are salivating over the soaring revenues from a sinking ship. The most expensive movie ever made is shattering all box office records and restoring hope for the return of the grand Hollywood epics. This can only mean that more and more dollars will be going to fewer and fewer movies. *The Full Monty* could be made 57 times over for the price of one *Titanic*. Already last year the average cost of a studio film reached a record \$53.4 million, 34 percent higher than 1996. The *Titanic* could go down in history as the ship that sank studios.

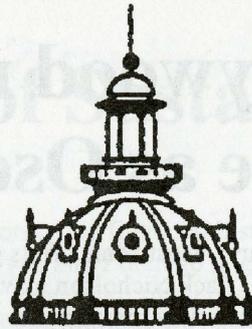
For me, *Titanic* was so weighted down with cinematic cliches that it's a miracle it ever got out of port. But the movie has its positive points: 1) There will be no toy spinoff, and 2) it's not as bad as what will follow in its wake. We get a taste of what's to come in the testosterone-driven action flick *U.S. Marshals*, that came within \$1 million of knocking *Titanic* off the top-grosser throne its first week out. A plane goes down in that movie, but only as a plot device to free the fugitive for further showdowns and shootouts. We could all soon be longing for another schmaltzy disaster epic. ☪

— Jae Retz



# CALENDAR

- April 4, 1968  
Martin Luther King, Jr.  
assassinated
- April 19, 1993  
Branch Davidians attacked by  
federal agents
- April 23  
Holocaust Remembrance Day
- May 9, 1998  
Iowa Civil Liberties Union  
annual dinner Iowa Memorial  
Union, Iowa City  
  
More info: 515-243-3576 or  
319-351-2973
- May 9-10, 1998  
National Federation of Lesbian  
& Gay Democrats founding  
convention, Kansas City  
  
More info: 515-244-9202 or  
gaylawyer@aol.com
- June 2, 1998  
Primary Election



The vote that carries  
the weight of moral  
conviction...is a vote that  
eventually triumphs.

– US Congressman  
Henry B. Gonzalez  
(D-Texas)

### Iowa State Representatives Who Voted Nay To Legislation Banning Same-Sex Marriages:

- ✎ Bernau
- ✎ Burnett
- ✎ Chapman
- ✎ Doderer
- ✎ Fallon
- ✎ Grundberg
- ✎ Mascher
- ✎ Myers

### Republican State Representatives who voted Nay to the Employee Drug Testing Bill

- ✎ Mike McCormack

## Prairie Progressive Primary Picks

*For Johnson County*  
Tom Carsner, Supervisor  
Sally Stutsman, Supervisor  
Kim Painter, Recorder

**“Our only hope  
today lies in our  
ability to  
recapture the  
revolutionary  
spirit and go out  
into a sometimes  
hostile world  
declaring eternal  
hostility to  
poverty, racism,  
and militarism.”**

– Martin Luther King, Jr.

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# Newton's Medium Security Prison is Not Theresienstadt!

In the Winter 1997 issue of the *Prairie Progressive*, Jean Basinger of the Criminal Justice Ministries wrote about her visit to the new medium security prison near Newton. She movingly wrote of the harsh conditions. Unfortunately, she ended the article: "In spite of its state-of-the-art, high tech trappings, seeing this unit gave me a feeling of *deja vu* and I remembered Good Friday in 1987 when I toured the concentration camp in Traizen, Czechoslovakia."

Theresienstadt was established by the Nazis as a "model ghetto" where tens of thousands of Jews from (primarily) Czechoslovakia were herded and crammed into barracks built for 7,000 people. Over 30,000 people died in Theresienstadt from disease, starvation, torture, execution. But there were no gas chambers at Theresienstadt. So the Nazis used it

as a showpiece for Red Cross visits to show the world that the death camps didn't exist. But what the Nazis didn't tell the Red Cross was that Theresienstadt served mainly as a transit point for Jews bound for Auschwitz.

From November 1942 to April 1945, 87,000 men, women and children were deported from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz. Unspeakable tortures awaited the Jews at Auschwitz, followed by the gas chambers. Fifteen thousand of those who rode the cattle cars from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz were children. By war's end, of the 139,000 people deported to the "model ghetto" of Theresienstadt, some 117,000 perished.

Let's bring this back to the medium security prison at Newton. If every hour of every day around the clock a

prisoner were sent to the gas chamber, it would take the state of Iowa 13 and one half years to execute the number killed from Theresienstadt. And if we could hear men, women and children screaming as they were being tortured, raped and gassed, then Newton might bring to mind Theresienstadt.

But the medium security prison at Newton is not Theresienstadt. For a writer to stand at the Newton prison and allude to Theresienstadt fills me with rage. If the Holocaust is to continue to have meaning—unspeakable horror and massive systematic murder on a scale unknown in human history—then let it stand alone without constant comparisons and allusions to events in our own time and in our own world. Let the Nazis' victims rest in peace. ☪

— Gary Sanders

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Box 1945

Iowa City, IA 52244

**Inside!**

- ★ Karen Kubby  
on the Green Party
- ★ Jeff Cox on the Sales Tax
- ★ Jae Retz on the Oscars