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# THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE

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*a newsletter for Iowa's Democratic Left*

*December 2023*

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## 2023 in review

The issue you hold in your hands is the sixth of the year, a new record for Iowa's oldest progressive newsletter. Prairie Dog salutes **Adcraft Printing** for its impeccable service, and **Paul Deaton**, **Jill Wenger**, and **Wendy Robertson** for their patient technical support. Paid subscriptions are at an all-time high, courtesy of our generous readers, who are equally generous with their compliments, corrections, and occasional complaints.

Here's what the *Prairie Progressive* team provided to our readers in 2023:

**Nate Willems** lives in Mt. Vernon and practices labor law in Cedar Rapids. He set the pace for Prairie Progressive writers with five articles; all were reprinted in the Cedar Rapids Gazette or the Des Moines Register or posted at [www.bleedingheartland.com](http://www.bleedingheartland.com).

**Kim Painter**, Johnson County Recorder since 1999, graced our pages with four articles, one of which was posted at [www.poustopedia.com](http://www.poustopedia.com). Her specialty is contrasting Iowa's mean-spirited Governor and a "skulking, conniving" Republican-led legislature to a state "full of warmth and natural beauty and love of the land."

Prairie Dog's 2022 Honor Roll lauded the efforts of the **City of Iowa City** efforts to make public transit more affordable and accessible, predicting that "a once far-fetched goal of a no-fee bus system may well be the next stop." Six months later the city instituted a two-year pilot program making every bus ride free for everyone. Ridership since then has increased by more than 50 percent.

Prairie Progressive's Senior Sports Correspondent **Stephanie Fawkes-Lee** wrote about the National Football League "feigning concern for player safety and mental health." **Carol Thompson** contributed a personal remembrance about life for pregnant women before Roe v. Wade. **Laura Bergus** gave her city councilor's perspective on police funding in Iowa City, advocating for a "shift [of] resources... into other ways of building community safety."

Former ACLU of Iowa lobbyist **Marty Ryan** blasted the "so-called Christians in the Iowa legislature;" his article on labor unions was also posted at [www.bleedingheartland.com](http://www.bleedingheartland.com). **Clarity Guerra** reported on the Iowa City Bike Library, a growing nonprofit that believes the act of learning how to repair your bicycle helps "foster a stronger, more resilient community." In addition to Prairie Dog's annual Reading List, PP readers were treated

to book recommendations by **John Kenyon**, Executive Director of the Iowa City UNESCO City of Literature.

**Larry Baker**, self-appointed Prose Laureate of Iowa City, gave us a preview of his latest novel, *Harry and Sue*, available at Prairie Lights Books. **Abigail Sheppmann** provided a barista-eye's view of Starbucks unionization, strikes, and management's refusal to negotiate a contract. **Trish Nelson**, administrator of [www.blogforiowa.com](http://www.blogforiowa.com), called out Public Broadcasting's *Iowa Press* for its moderators' softball questions, shallow follow-up, and overall deference to state leaders: "Republican lies and distortions are happening weekly...with only the lamest attempts to challenge them." (See Page 2 of this issue for an update.)

Johnson County Supervisor **Rod Sullivan** attended and reported on the annual Netroots Nation conference in Chicago, a progressive gathering splintered this year by generational tension and disagreements on Israel and Palestine. Prairie Progressive editor **Dave Leshtz** was in Chicago the same weekend and reported on the 35th anniversary celebration of the Jesse Jackson for President campaign—"a call to action and

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# Confronting Republican disinformation

Iowa Press is a respected news source in Iowa. Nevertheless, it usually ends up being a platform used by Republicans to cover their undemocratic plans—from voter suppression laws to school vouchers, book banning, taking away women’s rights, sponsoring legislation to weaken Social Security, targeting transgender kids, on and on.

As I have written on BlogforIowa, the panel clearly favors Republicans over Democrats, treating Democrats with skepticism and contempt while consistently failing to challenge Republican disinformation. Don’t believe me? Watch for yourself. Comments I have received: “I quit watching long ago.” “I have tried to watch Iowa Press each week—not worth watching anymore.” “I guess I’m not the only one who’s been disturbed by what that show has failed to delve into.”

I agree with these comments but turning it off is not the point. I don’t watch the program for fun, either. I watch so I can try to shine a light on the harm it does to Iowa by not confronting Republican disinformation. My hope is that public pressure and feedback might help them improve.

Let’s look at the numbers. I did a head count of every Iowa Press episode so far in 2023, up to December 1st. I counted 17 Republican guests during that time, compared to 9 Democrats. Of those, twice when there was a Democrat on the show, there was also a Republican. Of the 9 appearances by Democrats, 2 of those were shared with a Republican, so Democrats had 7 programs to themselves, and Republicans had 15 programs to themselves.

You may argue that they have more Republicans on the show because Iowa has more Republican electeds than Democrats. So why not give the other side a fighting chance? You can bet if the situation was reversed, they would go out of their way to make things “balanced.”

There are plenty of Democrats Iowa Press could invite on the show. When was the last time State Auditor Rob Sand was on the program? Not since 2022. Governor Reynolds has been on the attack to restrict the auditor’s access to information, causing Sand to launch a campaign to inform the Iowa public of just how corrupt this is. Is it a coincidence that the state auditor, the only statewide elected Democrat, has not been invited on the show this year? Hardly.

My count did not include issue episodes where the party of the guest was unknown; I also did not count reporters’ roundtable episodes (another topic).

Issue programs are better, but when they have a guest representing a point of view that Republicans wouldn’t like, they pair the person with a conservative counterpart or worse, an industry rep. For example, an Iowa Sierra Club representative was on the show to talk about C02 pipeline issues; they paired her with the Vice President for Public Affairs for Navigator, one of the pipeline companies. Another time they invited a representative from Planned Parenthood to be on the show and, paired her with the Executive Director of Pulse Life Advocates. Two weeks later Bob Vander Plaats, President and CEO of the ultra-conservative Family Leader, got his very own show and was able to talk about his opinions on abortion unimpeded.

One program had two mayors on to discuss local issues. Both were Republicans.

Mike Owen, deputy director of Common Good Iowa, was paired with Chris Hagenow, president of Iowans for Tax Relief. Come on, Iowa Press, give democracy some breathing room.

There were two good programs. Two school superintendents were on the program and had an honest and informative discussion of school vouchers. Another excellent program was on water quality. CEO and general manager of Des Moines Water Works Ted Corrigan, and David Cwiertny, professor of civil and environmental engineering and director of the Center of Health Effects of Environmental Contamination at the University of Iowa, were on together. Their excellent discussion on Iowa water quality was so rare a commenter said, “The information these gentlemen provided was clear and unpolluted by the noise of politics. Iowa’s water sources are too precious to politicize.”

Iowa Press programs are available to watch on the PBS/Iowa Press website or on the Iowa Press YouTube channel.

*—Trish Nelson is administrator of [www.blogforiowa](http://www.blogforiowa) and writes frequently about media issues.*

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# Stop saying “affordable housing”

Iowa City is good at talking about affordable housing; it is less good at providing it. This fall’s introduction of amendments to the zoning code is a case in point. Though in the city staff’s own temperate words, a goal of the amendments is only to “encourage affordable housing,” news headlines about the process announced and reannounced affordable housing as the center of the changes.

Over months, as affordable housing continued to lead reporting of the zoning changes, I repeatedly heard in my head a line from the Netflix teen romance series *Heartstopper*. When the lead, Charlie, tells his parents and older sister that he now has a boyfriend, the dad blurts out, “Whoa. When he is in our house, I want that bedroom door open. There will be no hanky-panky in this house.” To this, his daughter replies, “Don’t say that word.” But the dad is lost in his narrative and repeats “hanky-panky” several times in a matter of seconds. Each time he does, his daughter deadpans, “Stop saying that.” “Stop saying that” affordable housing is the core of the zoning changes; let’s not get lost in our narrative.

The other two announced goals of the zoning changes are to “improve housing choice [and] increase housing supply.” The changes will increase the number of residences in the city, making some neighborhoods more dense. The changes will reduce the city’s carbon footprint some by enabling more duplexes and zero-lot-line, new structures and auxiliary dwelling units rather than just single-family houses on individual lots. More housing generally is needed, say the projections. And climate change mitigation of all kinds is definitely needed. I’m not against these changes. But

leaning into the words “affordable housing” to characterize the zoning amendments distracts all of us from considering ways to provide housing for households with moderate or low income—including some UI students—that really could make a difference at a scale that is needed.

Amidst the months-long zoning code discussions, manufactured home residents called a press conference to inform the media and public about a different issue: yet another round of greed and mismanagement by out-of-state corporate owners of the land beneath the mobile homes individuals own. One resident said of her home, “*This* is affordable housing,” and those words “affordable housing” rang like a bell in that context. Mobile homes are one of the few opportunities for people of modest or fixed incomes to own their homes in this county, in this state. But the exponential increases in rents of the land on which the homes sit jeopardize this affordability. If laws had allowed the mortgage on my house to rise at the rates of increase facing these mobile home park residences and some other renters in the city, I would not be sitting under the roof now firmly fixed above my head. Mobile home residents need immediate support in their efforts to achieve state legislation that will protect them from eviction and lowball buyouts—to protect affordable housing, not the words, the structures.

The recent city zoning amendments purport only to “encourage affordable housing,” because they tweak market-based solutions, that is, they offer incentives to private developers for some inclusion of affordable housing in their projects, following established

precedent. A tour of the city’s built environment offers one little hope that encouragement of this sort will succeed in the future, on the necessary scale, where it hasn’t in the past.

Can we do more than encourage affordable housing? Can we actually provide it at scale? Can we—the city—buy land for a mobile home park in a rent-controlled space that the city manages? Can we learn from the Brickstone project in Cedar Rapids that offers apartments to residents at below 60% of area median income, at below 30% of area median income, and to young people who have aged out of foster care? Can we forge a public/private partnership that does not have the university student market squarely in the middle of the frame? Can we fund public, affordable housing?

If we don’t pull apart some people’s profit and other people’s affordability, I’m not persuaded we will ever actually address the severe shortage of reasonably priced housing in Iowa City at the scale that is necessary. I’m heartened to hear County Supervisor Rod Sullivan repeatedly say the same thing and to be joined by Iowa City Planning and Zoning Commissioner Billie Townsend. *Prairie Progressive* readers who agree can contact Iowa City council members at [council@iowa-city.org](mailto:council@iowa-city.org).

—Barbara Eckstein is President of the Johnson County United Nations Association and a proud supporter of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals.

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# The virtue of discretion; or, I don't want to know

Some time ago, I received a *Prairie Progressive* edition that seemed a toke or two over the line—a young woman confidently sounding off about not being able to display a Gay Pride flag in the restaurant (Starbucks?) where she works. I began considering something I abhor—canceling my subscription, a personal action that contradicts the right of free press, because if press is free to say what it wants, aren't we obligated to at least entertain the ideas? (Freedom has responsibilities, no?)

Upfront let me state unequivocally that I don't care who or what you sleep with. I don't even want to know. That is your *private* business, but when you make it public, you do yourself the biggest disservice. Ditto, the rest of society.

As I mull it over, I am beginning to conclude that flaunting is the real source of polarization in America. (Donald Trump has only given us lessons in executing my-way-or-the-highway intolerance.) It goes without saying that no one should lose a place to live, their livelihood, or any other human right over what they do in the private space of their lives. Get an abortion if you want: the onus is on you but keep it to yourself. If an action is not against moral law, and feels right for you, then go for it and be discreet.

In short, as we all know, we have sects of conservative Christians and others who take a dim view of gay sex and marriage. I am not against either; I am only against labeling it marriage, because "same" is an anathema when it comes to sex for a hefty percentage of the population. Sorry, but the historical fact is these folks got there first, got it down in black & white or

chiseled in stone (or whatever), labeled it "The Bible, and we are, unhappily, stuck with that. Let's get conversant with reality here.

One reads there were ancient societies—indigenous groups, mainly—tolerant of homosexuality, which the tribe of Abraham apparently wasn't. But how many people are there in a tribe—750 or 10,000? So what we are talking about here is governability, a quality American

...We're heading  
toward an abyss.

society is daily becoming notoriously deficient in, to the benefit of almost no one.

America has over 335 million people, a far vaster number that entails a whole lot more variability, causing us often to be pulled in diametrically opposite directions. Should we be surprised we can't come to an agreement to fund the government, support the war in Ukraine, or oppose the one in the Middle East? Or so much else.

The business response to the LGBTQ dilemma has been quite revealing. Initially, I suppose they thought they would widen their customer base by endorsing progressive issues. However, early last summer NPR's news program "All Things Considered" reported that Bud Light, Target, and others had pulled back, having received

blowback for taking such stances.

I would also argue they own the business; it is their right to decide the stance that suits them, the flags to display. If you don't like their attitude, don't go there—have your wedding cake made someplace else. I am still flabbergasted the Supreme Court forced someone to perform a service for someone they disparage or disagree with.

Companies, let's face it, don't give much of a tinker's damn about right, wrong, fairness, unfairness, rights, or any of the rest of it. They are happy to go along with anything as long as it doesn't have negative implications on the bottom line. At the end of the day this arrangement strikes me as copacetic—we can righteously despise them for their equivocating about our favorite causes, their avariciousness, and count our blessings when they maintain it!

Meanwhile, simply in the interest of governance: don't ask, don't tell. Don't wear your yarmulke or headscarf because we don't want to know. Cultivate the virtue of discretion.

If not, we're heading toward an abyss.

—S. Keyron McDermott is a freelance writer in Cascade, Iowa.

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# The abyss already engulfs us

*“Discretion is the polite word for hypocrisy.”*

– Christine Keeler, famously indiscreet woman

I’ve been presented a task, to respond to another column appearing in this issue of the PP. Mission accepted, and here we go.

The premise of the writer I am to rebut is that discretion is the key to re-civilizing our horrid world. If you are pained to observe we are overly polarized, lacking in respect for others’ viewpoints, and increasingly violent, she offers this relief: “Don’t ask, don’t tell. Don’t wear your yarmulke or headscarf because we don’t want to know.” Her assessment of our intolerant country? “I am beginning to conclude that flaunting is the real source of polarization in America.”

I don’t know how you read that, but I define this notion of flaunting as the simple exercise of personal liberty. And any argument that liberty is fine as long as it remains private flies in the face of several truths. 1. It is arguable that privacy, as formerly understood, no longer exists. 2. Any private act, if it takes place outside the confines of one’s own home, can be attacked as public, and therefore flaunting. 3. To blame ‘flaunting’ for America’s lack of civility and even outright hostility is to explain away that hostility (and any acts following from it), by blaming it on the person who simply exercised personal freedom. As Americans do.

The very phrase life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness implies something you enjoy broadly throughout society. It is bedrock to American life. By definition, it is not private, or something to hide from others. Yet our writer posits in various ways that we are too enamored of our personal liberty. To save America, we need to rein it in.

Stop defining your marriage as a marriage if it offends another, she says. Stop wearing items that link you to a specific religious or cultural heritage. Ultimately, her reasoning would expand to include American flags, team logos, and other hideously incendiary tokens of affiliations and loyalties. But for publication, she sticks to same-sex marriage, or racial/cultural heritage or affiliations. In the “interest of governance,” she claims, we must set aside our yarmulkes and “headscarfs.” Headscarfs! Apologies. I am at my wit’s end with this assignment. Punching down is not my forte, and there is no up to aim for in rebutting this diatribe.

Our Miss Manners says we must “cultivate the virtue of discretion” to dodge the horrors of “the abyss.” I am here to tell you, the abyss already engulfs us. There is no way out of it except to get through it. And how do we do that? Most certainly not with discretion or an absence of flaunting. No! We are Americans. Let us sound the Whitmanesque barbaric yawp to announce our presence and our intent to live fully.

I would remind our columnist that, at the time just before the Stonewall riots, there were many closeted LGBTQ folk trying to simply ‘hide’ away in their small, discreet bar. The police still busted in to beat them and haul them away. You see, there is no discretion discreet enough for the likes of anyone who would write, “I don’t care who or what you sleep with. I don’t even want to know. But when you make it public, you do us and yourself a huge disservice.”

One cannot make oneself small enough, or exercise enough self-disgust, to meet the requirements

of such a hideous demand for self-erasure. Her words are dreadful. They ring of a cold, self-righteous ability to demean the humanity of others. Such words are beneath the ethical stature of anyone who would stand upon the earth and call herself an American citizen.

In fact, we can point to the concrete end of a philosophy that calls for ‘not flaunting’ one’s essential self. It already exists and has had awful effects. I give you the legal monstrosity of “the gay panic defense.” While the American Bar Association hastens to clarify it is not an affirmative defense, they add the following: “...it is a tactic to strengthen the defense by playing on prejudice. It has ... been used to not only explain a defendant’s actions, but to excuse them as well.” And predictably, in a raft of states with such laws still on the books, the gay panic excuse has worked. A murder occurred, such arguments go, because an LGBTQ+ person was too queer, too obvious, flaunted too much. So the defendant panicked. And a fellow human being died.

I would say to our columnist that, for America to thrive and avoid the abyss, failures of ethical citizenship must be viewed far more harshly than a mere lack of ‘discretion.’ That is, after all, simply a polite word for hypocrisy.

—Kim Painter has lived indiscreetly in Iowa since 1981.

# A safe way for outsiders to get richer

In Iowa City, when our city government needs to pay for something, one option is to “take out a bond.” For example, if we want to build some roads but we don’t want to raise taxes or cut services, we might decide to take out a bond to pay for the roads instead.

Not all cities can do that in the same way. There’s a global company called “Moody’s” that regularly awards Iowa City their highest rating, but other cities get worse ratings, and that means it’s harder for those cities to get money this way.

When I talk to leaders around town, it’s common for them to bring up Moody’s rating as a sign that the City Council and City Manager are doing a good job managing our finances. The Gazette quoted former Mayor Matt Hayek saying, “[Moody’s high rating] demonstrates our respect for financial resources and our commitment to sound planning.”

But the bond ratings that Moody’s generates are not designed for us or for our benefit. Moody’s exists for investors around the globe who might like to profit off us, and their bond ratings are designed to tell those investors that we’re a pretty safe bet for making money. I’d like us to start thinking, “Moody’s Aaa rating demonstrates that Iowa City is a pretty safe way for outsiders to get richer.”

I’m concerned with how often Moody’s rating comes up in my conversations with Iowa City leaders. When we use an outsider’s rating to judge ourselves, we give them power over the way we think and what we value, and we might not notice when their goals are misaligned with our own. Many of our neighbors live in terrible apartments with

hostile management; that is part of why Moody’s gives us an Aaa rating! I think we should consider using other metrics, designed by us and for us, as our primary progress indicators.

There are examples across the country that inspire me. In New York City, the City Council started measuring tree cover across the city, and they set clear

goals for their staff towards increasing it. Jersey City decided to focus on eliminating traffic deaths by rating their performance against traffic deaths! In Lawrence, Kansas, they agreed to track how much public land they use in sustainable

ways, and center progress reports around metrics like that. All these different things reflect those cities’ values much more clearly than Moody’s ratings and help them focus their conversations on the things that are really important to them.

I believe there’s a lot of opportunity in interrogating the way we talk about success as a city, and deliberately creating new ways of understanding ourselves. I think with concerted effort we could promote healthier conversations throughout town. I’m trying to find folks to work with on this. If you’re interested, please contact me at [riley@rsfic.org](mailto:riley@rsfic.org)!

—Riley Eynon-Lynch lives with his wife and son on the mighty Ralston Creek in Iowa City.

Bond ratings are not designed for us or for our benefit.

## 2023 in review cont’d from Page 1

a charge to never give up.” Your editor was honored to have *The Nation* publish his commentary on unionizing efforts at Starbucks in downtown Iowa City; his personal remembrance of the legendary Hamburg Inn restaurant was posted at [www.bleedingheartland.com](http://www.bleedingheartland.com).

All this and more. Sundown towns, slavery and genocide in America’s history, and citizens banding together to overturn Waterloo and Cedar Falls city council stances opposing a Pride Month proclamation and a ban on Conversion Therapy. Carbon dioxide pipelines, the financial challenges faced by nonprofits, life and death in prison. The importance of storytelling to unite communities, criticism of the Iowa Democratic Party for paying more attention to national Democrats than their fellow Iowans, and heart-felt eulogies for stalwart community activists by people who knew them well.

Above all, we especially thank the writers who make every issue an informative and inspiring barometer of politics and culture in the Midwest and beyond.

—Prairie Dog



# Iowa can do better

While many states have closed their institutions for people with severe disabilities, Iowa continues to lag in its efforts to develop community services. Too many of our citizens don't have the opportunity to become part of the fabric of our society instead of living as segregated outcasts far from their families and communities.

In April of 2022, Iowa Department of Health and Human Services Director Kelly Garcia announced that Glenwood Resource Center on the western edge of the state would close its doors. Garcia stated, "This notion that you are admitted at age two and you live eighty years there is no longer the way we as a society would want to support a human being." Governor Reynolds agreed, saying that "our best path forward to achieve [the standards of the US Department of Justice] is closing Glenwood and reinvesting in a community-based care continuum that offers a broad array of services."

Advocates for people who have disabilities applauded with hopes that Iowa would finally—after more than a century of neglect—protect the constitutional rights of its most vulnerable citizens and develop opportunities to live as independently as possible. Serving people close to home, where oversight is easier, decreases the chances of abuse, neglect, and mistreatment documented by the DOJ. It would also save or redirect a good chunk of the nearly \$400,000 in state and federal tax dollars spent annually per resident.

How's it going a year and eight months later?

A report issued this past October by a state monitoring team found Glenwood to be out of compliance with fifty of sixty-five standards of medical care. It was out of compliance with thirty of thirty-four standards for transition into community settings. The deaths of residents while at the institution have not been adequately reviewed. Eight deaths of residents who died after transitioning have not been reviewed at all. Staff training on transitioning was found to be inadequate. In the last fifteen months eighteen residents were moved to Woodward Resource Center—not a community-based provider. As is typical with the Reynolds administration, no information is available to the public on whatever progress has been made toward the shuttering of Glenwood.

Iowa can do better. If you care about government transparency, more efficient use of tax dollars, and equal citizenship for all Iowans, contact:

- Governor Kim Reynolds, 515-281-5211
- Kelly Garcia, Director, Dept. of Health and Human Services, [director@dhs.state.ia.us](mailto:director@dhs.state.ia.us)
- Bobby Kaufmann, Chair, Iowa House Oversight Committee, [bobby.kaufmann@legis.iowa.gov](mailto:bobby.kaufmann@legis.iowa.gov).

—David Leshtz

"One of the things we see today is sort of a sleepwalking into dictatorship in the United States... he's told us what he will do. It's very easy to see the steps that he will take. People who say 'well, if he's elected, it's not that dangerous because we have all of these checks and balances' don't fully understand the extent to which the Republicans in Congress today have been co-opted."

—former US Rep. Liz Cheney (R-Wyo.)



**Dec 15**  
Bill of Rights Day

**Dec 16, 1773**  
Boston Tea Party

**Dec 25**  
Federal Holiday

**Jan 1, 1959**  
Castro's rebels stormed into Havana

**Jan 1, 1994**  
NAFTA went into effect; millions of US jobs eventually sent to Mexico

**Jan 12, 2004**  
Abu Ghraib abuses exposed

**Jan 15, 1929**  
Martin Luther King, Jr. was born

**Jan 15**  
Iowa caucuses

**Jan 18**  
Johnson Co Dems Legacy Club  
Coralville Public Library  
Guest speaker: Chris Jones,  
author of *The Swine Republic*  
Info: [wm.gerhard@gmail.com](mailto:wm.gerhard@gmail.com)

**Feb 12, 1934**  
Bill Russell, first Black manager of a major pro sports team, was born

**February 21, 1964**  
Malcolm X was assassinated

**THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE** is Iowa's oldest progressive newsletter, founded by Jeff Cox in 1986. It is funded entirely by subscriptions from our readers. Editor: Dave Leshtz. We appreciate your support.

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