

EDITORIALS

SLAPP-HAPPY SPOKANE

The Cowles family, owners of 'The Spokesman-Review,' lets a property controversy cloud free-press principles

IN EASTERN WASHINGTON, THE Cowleses don't just buy ink by the barrel. Family businesses also manufacture newsprint by the ton and grow forests by the hundreds of acres. They own a good chunk of downtown Spokane, a city they blanket with their media operations: the only daily newspaper, *The Spokesman-Review*; the weekly *Journal of Business*; the NBC affiliate KHQ-TV; and the Web portal Spokane.net.

Despite having this giant megaphone to voice their point of view about Spokane's development, the family has chosen a sneaky legal strategy to hamper the coverage of their business affairs by a struggling alternative weekly and an online "magazine" that can't even afford to come out in print. Last month, Cowles attorneys subpoenaed not these news organizations — but an advertiser and, through it, some obvious news sources. It's all part of a lawsuit against public officials and businesspeople who have been critical of the public/private financing of the River Park Square mall a Cowles family business built in downtown Spokane.

The lawsuit looks, feels, and smells like a SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation), a shameful attempt to cut off discussion on a controversial local issue. Developers, with depressing regularity, file SLAPPs to muzzle their critics. But it's particularly dispiriting to see one unleashed by a family whose business interests have flourished into the fourth generation precisely because of the free-speech and -press guarantees of the First Amendment.

The Cowleses should know that truth emerges by encouraging more speech, not less.

In addition to demanding details of discussions with public officials, the subpoena of Metropolitan Mortgage & Securities Co. Inc., an advertiser in *The Local Planet Weekly*, asks for records, going back six years, of "payments of any kind" to the paper, to the online "Camas Magazine," and to journalists Larry Shook — who won this year's Association of Alternative News-weeklies award for media reporting for his two-part article on how *The Spokesman-Review* covered River Park Square — and Tim Connor, author of a book about the mall project.

The insulting subtext, of course, is that the journalists are somehow on the take. Cowles attorney Les Weatherhead blandly told *The Spokesman-Review* that the subpoenas are "not an assertion of anything wrong," and don't impinge on news gathering: "I'm under specific instructions from my client not to trespass on that." Somehow, we doubt the attorney would be quite so phlegmatic if someone pulled the same stunt on *The Spokesman-Review*.

After four generations, the Cowleses should know by now that — even in the face of the "false" statements their SLAPP alleges critics are making about the mall — truth emerges by encouraging more speech, not less. With their daily, their business journal, their TV station, and their Web portal, the Cowles family has plenty of Spokane outlets to tell their side of the story. A century-old family legacy of exercising and preserving press freedom ought not be marred now by sending out lawyers to silence disagreeable speech.

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