

Saint Paul Officials Bend the Rules at the Risk of Losing the Public Trust

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St. Paul STRONG is a nonpartisan organization dedicated to improving accessible and representative government in St. Paul. We do not take positions on issues, but support inclusive, transparent and accountable public processes. Public trust is the key to a stronger St. Paul. Only when everyone in the city is treated equally and public officials are held accountable for their decisions can trust in our city government be assured.

Recent stories in the St. Paul Pioneer Press and Star Tribune expose our city's uneven and unequal rules enforcement. The story about the St. Paul Conservatory for the Performing Arts' legal challenge of Gray Duck Tavern's liquor license highlights the city's disregard for the longstanding legal process for granting liquor licenses. Current city code specifies that liquor establishments must not be within 300 feet of a school, and the downtown school maintains that the Gray Duck Tavern is in violation of this code.

This issue is only the latest in a series of questionable decisions by city officials that seem to disregard codes, ordinances and rules. The decisions appear to be based on fuzzy or previously unknown criteria for granting variances. For example, weeks ago a new skyway was installed over Main Street between buildings in the Higher Ground project that ignored the longstanding St. Paul Skyway Design Guidelines that were adopted in 1980. The city ignored the legally binding Comprehensive Plan adopted on February 24, 2010, and its own resolution approved on May 27, 2015, which called for a public park on the former Pedro Luggage site, and instead allowed a private developer to purchase and renovate the former Public Safety Annex and in effect thwart the plan for the long-promised Pedro Park.

These are a few examples in downtown, but the problem extends throughout the city. Consider the change in measuring the required distance between liquor stores when Target wanted to expand in the Midway area, or changes in the city's longstanding practice in determining allowable signage or the ongoing dispute over right-of-way assessments.

St. Paul STRONG questions the wisdom of changing the rules depending on who is asking for the favor. While it may seem expedient in the short term, it becomes a major problem in the long term with a growing lack of trust in city processes.

Our city's codes, ordinances and guidelines are established processes that are meant to ensure fair and equitable government decision-making. Untold hours of staff time are devoted to planning documents and policy enforcement, and yet this financial investment by taxpayers seems to be overruled at the whim of our city's administration without transparency or accountability.

In the Gray Duck Tavern case, if the city now changes the rules to fit the needs of this particular restaurant, what message does that send to businesses that were denied licenses in the past?

What message does it send to businesses seeking licenses in the future? What are the criteria that businesses can work toward to ensure a fair process?

The city of St. Paul needs to ensure that rules are reasonable and consistent. Contrary to what some city leaders report, rules do not scare businesses away. It is the absence of standards or inconsistency in the rules that discourages new enterprise.

Only when city officials recognize the problems that are borne through a lack of transparency, fairness and good governance will they be able to address the resulting inequality and unfairness and earn the trust and respect of citizens. One need look no further than the recent petition to put organized trash on the ballot to realize the level of unease the citizens have with their local government.