

Story 3: As I see the Fruitport Township Critter Café episode

By Ron Cooper

In response to Fruitport Township Supervisor Brian Werschem's second attempt to get rid of Christine and her rescue:

When I was township supervisor, Christine was given permission by the township, which I represented as zoning administrator and also township legal representative, to move her all-species rescue to the current address at 5818 Airline Road. When Brian Werschem became the township supervisor, he evidently had a problem with her and threatened to put her out of business. She was forced to hire a lawyer and they appealed to Zoning Board of Appeals who gave her permission to continue her rescue.

As time has gone on, he has found other people to pick on, but it's been a burr under his saddle. He doesn't accept losing well. Christine has operated a very successful rescue finding homes for thousands of abandoned, homeless, or injured pets. Her rescue has filled a very real need in our community evidenced by the fact that she was filled to capacity in a short period of time.

Several months ago, someone abandoned a number of black and white pet domestic rats without her knowledge in a protected corner of her rescue. Domestic rats don't move far from their home and they evidently liked their new home. By the time she discovered them, they had found ways into the walls of the building. She attempted to find homes for them and obtained and fed them birth control as best she could. The birth control was evidently taken off the market and was no longer available to her. She may not have fully realized the potential problems with their reproduction at that time but did, in time, come to realize it. She was putting extra effort to get on top of the problem and was seeming to be gaining ground when Brian decided to use the rat problem to put her out of business. This was evidenced by how few rats have been found compared to Brian's original estimate of 2,000 to 3,000 and increasing at 100 per day. I don't believe any rats left the property until the township became involved in trying to catch them.

Christine was given a week to vacate the property by Brian. (What law gave authority to do this and was Due Process followed?) That includes finding homes for all the animals and removing her possessions. The time period included Memorial weekend. A very difficult time period for finding a lawyer to protect herself and find homes for the animals and remove her belongings, cages, etc., some of which were built in. The home was condemned. (What law gave authority to do this and was Due Process followed?) It was a pitiful example of government abuse of power. I don't believe the laws supported Brian's demands but she was helpless to protect herself. At the end of the day Tuesday after Memorial Day weekend she was told by Ken Doctor, the police chief, that if she set foot on her property she would be thrown in jail! (What law gave authority to do this and was Due Process followed?)

Her first priority was trying to find places for the animals, adopting and finding people to temporarily provide a home for them and she was at her limit. She was

forced to leave cages, and other pet supplies and personal items like stove, refrigerator, washer and dryer, etc. behind. Mrs. Carr, the buildings' co-owner with her husband, asked the workers if they could do the garage first and then put Christine's possessions in the garage out of the weather. Mrs. Carr was ignored and everything of Christine's was put outside in the rain.

Brian used all the township resources trying to get rid of the pet rats with little success, from Tuesday through Friday. Every day, police department, fire department, cemetery personnel were there kicking the dirt. This was obviously not where their talent lies. At the end of the day Friday or early Saturday Mr. Carr, the landlord, was told he had to get rid of the rats by Tuesday, (What law gave authority to do this and was Due Process followed?) or they would hire Rose Exterminators to fumigate the premises at a cost of \$30,000 added to Mr. Carr's taxes. (What law gave authority to do this and was Due Process followed?) Mr. Carr proceeded to build barrel traps to begin trapping. His close neighbor to the East helped also with a couple traps. It took some time to get the materials together but some traps were operational by the end of day Sunday which gave him one day to meet Brian's deadline. By Monday morning he had caught over 50 rats and at that rate it would take a couple weeks to trap them all.

On Monday I was talking to Mr. Carr in front of his home on adjoining property, and Brian drove up and told Mr. Carr that:

- 1) the rats were invading the neighborhood and the neighbors were poisoning them and killing them.
- 2) he also made the statement that 100 were being born every day and Mr. Carr was losing ground on them even though he had just barely gotten his traps operational.
- 3) he also said that Pound Buddies and some other group were pushing this and he was just trying to be helpful.
- 4) he also told Mr. Carr that if he didn't have a crew there by Wednesday to start tearing the inside of his house apart to get at the rats, he indicated he would have to call in the \$30,000 remedy. (What law gave authority to do this and was Due Process followed?) This would also destroy the house because the animals would die in the walls of the house.

In response to the #1 statement, I went to his neighbors, Mr. & Mrs. Hart on the corner of Stringer and Mt. Garfield, and they said they hadn't seen any rats. Their son-in-law lives between Mr. and Mrs. Hart and the rescue, and is the closest neighbor and Mr. Hart said that family hadn't seen any either. Mr. Carr, the next closest neighbor had not seen any either.

#2 - According to the workers that I talked to while they were doing their job of tearing the walls and ceilings out of the house said they found between 200 and 500 rats depending on who you talked to. Obviously there were not 2,000 to 3,000 increasing at 100 per day.

#3 - Pound Buddies does not have authority or jurisdiction to condemn and tear apart buildings in Fruitport Township.

#4 - To expect Mr. Carr to hire people to come in and tear his house apart was a hard one, especially when it looked like he could trap them without doing that. Mr.

Carr did agree to pay \$3,000 for it if Brian would find somebody to do it. Brian hired his campaign manager, Dave Farhat and some of his Texas Hold'em dealers and others to do the job to the tune of about \$5,000 and they went to work tearing Mr. Carr's building apart.

They started to put Christine's possessions in the two big dumpsters that the Carrs were also paying for, and Mrs. Carr asked if they would put Christine's stuff aside since she did not have time or the ability to remove them before she was forbidden from the property by the township.

She managed to get the message to Christine, who was now homeless, to pick up her belongings, but Christine was afraid of being thrown in jail if found on the property. Christine said that she called Assistant Police Chief, Lt. Bruce Morningstar three times for permission, but did not get a return call. Finally Christine got a letter from the township attorney Tuesday, June 16, saying she could get her stuff if she made an appointment with Lieutenant Morningstar and was escorted while on the property. Trying to coordinate this with volunteers willing to help her was a challenge. By this time most of her pictures, papers, and other personal possessions were destroyed or stolen.

Brian and others were telling people that she had been told several times that she can pick up her stuff. Because the workers tell her through another person that its okay, does not mean it's okay with the police who threatened her with arrest. And the police seemed not in a hurry to let her retrieve her possessions. Of course, they work for Brian, and he seems more interested in completely destroying Christine. In the meantime, pictures, papers and other precious personal items were out in the yard in the rain. Also, witnesses had seen a truck loading her stuff and driving off. Brian did not seem concerned about her possessions being stolen. What effort did the township make to keep that from happening?

This is not the first time Brian has picked on someone who he figured could not defend themselves from his abusing power. I can give examples, one of which the stress he inflicted probably contributed to the man's death.

He has a habit of threatening criminal charges to add to the stress of the person he is doing in.

In regard to Christine, Brian said to Becky Vargo from the Grand Haven Tribune, that, "Once and for all her Critter Café here in Fruitport is done." This statement is very telling. It indicates that he has wanted to get rid of her for a long time and has finally succeeded. It also indicates that he expects the Zoning Board of Appeals to rubber stamp his actions by taking away the zoning.

Christine is a victim, along with Mr. and Mrs. Carr. Our local government should be protecting victims. In this case our government has added to the tragedy. A little effort to help her with the rat problem and she would still be providing her service to our community. Instead, Brian used the rat problem to do her in and he expected the Board of Appeals to support him in it, which they did.

This is an example of blatant government abuse perpetrated by the township supervisor.