

# St. Petersburg council member upset over 'rude' neighborhood newsletter

By [Michael Van Sickler](#), Times Staff Writer  
In Print: Saturday, June 26, 2010

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ST. PETERSBURG — A crude expression in a civic newsletter has touched off a feud between a prominent neighborhood group and City Council member Jeff Danner, pictured at right.

The June newsletter for the Council of Neighborhood Associations of South Pinellas County included a column penned by Travis Jarman that blasted the city for holding workshops with the billboard industry.

Jarman argued that the city isn't letting residents participate in workshops with billboard company representatives, resulting in proposed higher and brighter digital signs that don't have popular support.

"Without any significant discussion, (council members) bent over for representatives of Clear Channel and CBS outdoor," Jarman wrote.

Danner scrapped a Monday meeting with CONA, objecting to Jarman's wording, which many interpret as shorthand for a sexual act.

"Putting 'bent over' in a newsletter is kind of rude," Danner said. "You can agree to disagree, or be vehemently opposed to what I have to say, but name calling and bashing your elected officials is not a productive way to build relationships."

CONA president Will Michaels said Danner was "unduly offended" by Jarman's phrase, which he said was a typo. It should have read "bent over backwards," Michaels said.

"I don't think Travis meant any disrespect whatsoever," Michaels said.

But Jarman said it wasn't a typo. "I wrote that after we weren't allowed to speak at the last workshop," Jarman said. "In the light of day, maybe 'kowtow' would have been better. I don't think 'bent over backwards' sends the right message."

City Council member Karl Nurse, a former CONA president, said that while Jarman's phrase was inflammatory, sometimes that's the point of a newsletter.



"If you take the passion out of it, you won't engage people as much," Nurse said. "I thought his column was fine. He had a reasonable complaint. The nature of our job is we meet with people who disagree with us."

But Council Chair Leslie Curran sided with Danner.

"The newsletter was very insulting," Curran said. "Don't bite the hand that feeds you. They want to ask for our support, and then they insult us. It was completely unprofessional."

*Michael Van Sickler can be reached at (727) 893-8037 or [mvansickler@sptimes.com](mailto:mvansickler@sptimes.com).*

[Last modified: Jun 25, 2010 10:11 PM]



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## Does the phrase 'bent over' insult the St. Petersburg City Council?

By [Howard Troxler](#), Times Columnist  
In Print: Tuesday, June 29, 2010

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*Dear Mr. Arbiter of Everything:*

*My neighbor, Mr. Dover, and I saw in the paper that some members of the St. Petersburg City Council are highly offended because of the way they were criticized in a citizen newsletter.*

*The newsletter declared that the council had "bent over" for big billboard companies as it writes a new billboard law.*

*As a result, one council member canceled a meeting with an officer of the neighborhood group, and another warned the association not to "bite the hand that feeds you."*

*Please discuss and clarify.*

*Signed,*

*H. Jass*

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Dear Mr. Jass:

Delighted to be of assistance. The phrase in question occurred in the June 2010 edition of the *CONA Newsletter*, published by the Council of Neighborhood Associations of South Pinellas.

On Page 4, under the headline, "Billboard Industry 3, CONA 0," the article criticized council members for holding cozy "workshops" with the billboard industry to draft new rules, without permitting citizen comment.

"They *bent over* for representatives of Clear Channel and CBS Outdoor," author Travis Jarman wrote.

On the surface, of course, "bent over" and its conjugations are innocent: The old man was *bent over*. After the hurricane, the palm trees were *bent over*.

As a stand-alone verb, the phrase originally did bear a more vulgar context, distinct from the innocuous *bending over backward*.

As the Arbiter of Everything, however, I rule that *bend over* is now in acceptable common usage as a descriptor for being placed, or placing oneself, at a disadvantage.

For example, here is the entirely nonvulgar definition of the imperative use of "bend over" in the *Online Slang Dictionary* ([www.onlineslangdictionary.com](http://www.onlineslangdictionary.com)):

*A command ... implying that one is about to be taken advantage of, be in a bad situation, or fail miserably.*

Personally, and only as a matter of taste, the Arbiter of Everything seeks to avoid such phrases, preferring alternatives such as:

**Example 1:** *The City Council, as usual, is letting somebody else tell it what to do.*

**Example 2:** *The City Council sometimes acts like a bunch of small-town boobs.*

Just for example.

However, the A.O.E. cannot arbitrarily (!) ignore modern practice. Hence my ruling is that the City Council is making a *mountain out of a molehill*, or, in the alternative, is *straining at a gnat*.

This brings us next to the warning of council Chairwoman Leslie Curran not to "bite the hand that feeds you."

The Arbiter of Everything rules that on the contrary, it is the residents of the city who are feeding the City Council. According to a May 23 column by my colleague Sandra Gadsden, this is *literally* true, as the council refused to give up any of its own food budget.

In addition, the A.O.E. is quite surprised to learn from Gadsden's column that since 2003, members of the council have been eligible for a pension, a fact that leaves the A.O.E. *gobsmacked*, a term indicating astonishment.

Were I a member of the City Council, therefore, I would be a little less prone to sneer about Who Is Feeding Whom, and a little more thick-skinned about being criticized by a citizen association, especially if I was doing pretty much what the criticism said I was doing. This cheerfully concludes today's ruling.

[Last modified: Jun 28, 2010 06:34 PM]



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