

NITRO FALSIFIED DOCUMENTS ON PAINT JOB FOR FIRE BOAT, ACTIVIST SAYS

Publication: THE CHARLESTON GAZETTE

Published: Saturday, April 03, 2010

Page: 7A

Byline: RUSTY MARKS STAFF WRITER

An activist has accused **Nitro city** officials of falsifying documents after failing to get bids to paint a new **city** fire boat.

Nitro Mayor Rusty Casto said Charleston **city** officials gave the town a fire boat in November. **Nitro** officials then made arrangements to have the boat sandblasted and painted.

But Wanda Carney, who has taken **Nitro city** officials to task in the past over improper purchasing practices, thinks the paint job was not properly bid and that **city** officials had the work done without approval from **Nitro City Council**.

"I don't have a problem with the boat," Carney said. "I have a problem that they didn't follow the chain of command and go through **Council**. They didn't follow any of the procedures that were in place that got them in trouble the first time."

In 2007, state auditors released a scathing series of audits of Nitro's books, pointing out severe problems in the way **city** officials handled and spent money. Those problems have since been corrected.

But Carney is worried that **city** officials are doing it again. She said a member of **city** government told her the boat was painted without getting proper bids, so Carney filed a Freedom of Information Act request for records about the boat deal.

"I was told from someone within **City Council** that they were making the invoices and stuff up," Carney said. "I believe that after I filed my Freedom of Information Act request they made up the documents to meet my FOIA request."

On March 23, Casto sent Carney a letter saying that Fire Chief Ernie Hedrick has asked one of his firefighters to take bids on painting the boat. Casto said three "oral bids" were taken, one from Chandler's Body Shop in St. Albans, one from Rocky Fork Enterprises in Dunbar and one from Chris Turley in Hurricane. Chandler and Rocky Fork each quoted more than \$15,000 for the job, Casto said, while Turley quoted a price of \$3,400.

Later, Casto sent Carney a copy of a handwritten bid sheet that does not mention Chandler. Chandler said Friday **city** officials never contacted him about painting the boat.

The bid sheet lists a quote from Mark Roberts of Rocky Fork Enterprises to paint the boat for \$15,957. It also lists a quote from Tim McBurney for \$3,500 to prepare the boat and from Turley for \$3,500 to paint it.

Neither Mark Roberts nor Rocky Fork Enterprises is registered to do business in the state of West Virginia, according to the secretary of state's Web site. Neither is Turley, who was issued a **city** check for \$3,475 on March 8.

Casto hung up on a newspaper reporter when pressed about discrepancies in the two documents he provided Carney about the boat bids. "It will all be discussed at **City Council** on Tuesday," he said.

But Casto conceded it would have been better to have gotten **City Council's** approval before getting the boat painted.

Kanawha County Prosecuting Attorney Mark Plants said it is illegal for government officials to alter or forge public records. But he stressed he had not received any evidence that officials in **Nitro** have done anything wrong.

"I have an open-door policy, and anybody who believes a crime may have been committed can come and talk to my office," Plants said.

Carney said she is meeting with county prosecutors next week to talk about the documents.

Reach Rusty Marks at rustymarks@wvgazette.com or 304-348-1215.