

## CASTO STANDS BY FIREBOAT PAINT JOB ACTIVIST SAYS COSTS WERE SPLIT TO BYPASS BIDDING PROCESS

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**Nitro** Mayor Rusty Casto said no rules were broken when **city** fire officials made arrangements to paint a town fireboat.

"I have nothing to hide," Casto said Monday. "I've done nothing wrong."

In November, town officials made arrangements to paint a fireboat the **city** had been given by officials in Charleston. Town officials cut a check for \$3,475 for Chris Turley to paint the boat out of a special fund set up from a court settlement from the 2006 **Nitro** tire fire.

Activist Wanda Carney said she got a phone call from someone within **Nitro city** government telling her the boat job had not been properly bid under **city** rules. Carney sent a Freedom of Information Act request to Casto asking for details about the painting deal.

Casto responded with a letter on March 23. Casto said Fire Chief Ernie Hedrick had asked one of the city's firefighters to get oral bids on the job. Casto reported that Chandler's Body Shop, in St. Albans, and Rocky Fork Enterprises, in Dunbar, each quoted a figure of more than \$15,000, while Turley said he would do the job for \$3,400.

Greg Chandler, of Chandler's Body Shop, said he was never asked to bid on the paint job.

A few days after the original letter, Casto sent Carney a copy of what appears to be a handwritten bid sheet. The sheet quotes Mark Roberts of Rocky Fork Enterprises with a \$15,957 bid for the boat, but has no quote from Chandler. The sheet also lists Tim McBurney having bid \$3,500 to strip it for painting and Turley \$3,500 to paint the boat.

On Monday, Casto was unable to explain the discrepancies in the two documents he sent Carney. "I just reported what I was given," he said. "Ernie [Hedrick] said he had the bids, and that's what he brought to me."

Casto said any **city** expense of more than \$3,500 must be officially bid and approved by **Nitro City Council**.

Carney thinks Hedrick knew what the cutoff for bidding out projects was, hence the split of the cost to paint the boat between two different bidders. She thinks he then made up documentation to make it look like proper bids were taken.

"There was no need for any of this," she said Monday. "There are procedures there for people to follow, and they're there for a reason."

Hedrick was in Huntington on Monday afternoon and not available for comment.

Carney presented her documents to Kanawha County prosecutors on Monday. Casto said he would welcome an investigation.

"If the State Police or [Kanawha County] Sheriff's Department want to come down here, I would welcome them," the mayor said. "I don't think they'll find anything wrong."

The boat bid is expected to be discussed at a **City Council** meeting today.

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