

Informer wins court battle

Written by Lafayette Barnes
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The largest African-American newspaper in the District recently won the right to keep its designation to be considered for government contracts.

The Washington Informer Newspaper in Southeast announced a settlement with the Office of the Chief Financial Officer in maintaining its status with the District government as a newspaper of general circulation and a Certified Business Enterprise. Informer Publisher Denise Rolark Barnes expressed her satisfaction with the settlement.

"I am pleased with the OCFO's decision but I am still baffled by the unwarranted decision which got us here in the first place and its negative implications," Rolark Barnes said before a crowd of supporters on Monday, Nov. 5 in the plaza of One Judiciary Square in Northwest. "However, this settlement is not only a win for the Washington Informer, but it will apply to every D.C.-based newspaper that is a Certified Business Enterprise or that serves a target market. That was the purpose of appealing the decision."

In June, the OCFO's, Office of Contracts issued a solicitation bid for the publication of the city's unclaimed property listing to a "newspaper of general circulation" that is "widely distributed in the District of Columbia." The Informer responded along with other publications.

The \$30,000 contract went to the Washington Times.

Rolark Barnes received notification of the decision by email, stating that "The Washington Informer was found non-responsive based on the fact that the Washington Informer serves a specific ethnic group and does not meet the requirements of a newspaper of general circulation" that was written by OCFO contractor Joseph Giddis.

Rolark Barnes hired noted District attorney Johnny Barnes to represent the newspaper and his efforts paid off. Johnny Barnes said that while he's pleased that the OCFO has decided to change its practices in the future, he said that the fight wasn't necessary.

"This is a victory for the Washington Informer, but it is unfortunate that it has to be this way," said Johnny Barnes, 63. "Someone got it all wrong but we commend those in the OCFO's office who understand the law and recognize the broad reach and respect for the Washington Informer. This whole thing didn't make sense."

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He's not alone.

It didn't make sense to D.C. Council member Tommy Wells [D-Ward 6], who sent a Sept. 10 letter of support for the Informer to Marc Loud, chief administrative judge for the D.C. Contract Appeals Board.

"I am astonished that the Office of Contracting and Procurement could describe the Washington Informer as anything other than a "newspaper of general circulation," said Wells, 55. "In addition, that the Office of Contracting and Procurement would award the contract to the Washington Times – a newspaper whose ownership does not live in or operate in the District of Columbia – is disappointing."

Letters of support also came from Hazel Trice Edney, president of the Capital Press Club in Northwest, Prince George's County business and civic leader James Dula, Jim Haigh, government relations consultant-MidAtlantic Community Papers Association of Emmaus, Pa., of which the Informer is a member and Sylvia Cyrus, executive director of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History in Northwest and D.C. Mayor Vincent Gray.

D.C. Council member Vincent Orange [D-At Large], who chairs the committee that deals with small businesses and government contracts expressed support, as well. The Informer was established in October, 1964 by the late Calvin Rolark, father of the publisher and the late D.C. Council member Wilhelmina Rolark.

The Informer has published various advertisements including the Unclaimed Property Advertisements and the Tax Sale Advertisements for the D.C. government. In Sept. 2009, the newspaper published the unclaimed property supplement and in June 2011, it published the tax sale listings.

Rolark Barnes said that the settlement will have a wide-ranging effect.

"This settlement agreement is a victory that affirms efforts to include weekly newspapers among newspapers of general circulation which opened the door for many newspapers to advertise public notices in the District, including the Washington Informer," she said.