

You are here: [Home](#) / [Government](#) / Richland County Council at Work

Richland County Council at Work

May 25, 2017 By Ron Aiken

Note: The following first appeared on Quorum.com, investigative journalist Ron Aiken's website. It is reprinted in The Voice by permission and will appear as a three-part series.

COLUMBIA – Throughout 53 pages of detailed testimony, evidence and correspondence submitted to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) in April 2015, Richland County documented the unfounded nature of every charge of racial and sexual discrimination brought by disgruntled former employee Justine Jones.

The EEOC reviewed the case and found there were no charges worth investigating.

Having already lost her internal complaint before a County grievance panel before appealing to the EEOC, the only option remaining for Jones was to sue, which she did in January 2017.

A month later, despite the county's official position for two years being that Jones' charges were completely without merit, County Council agreed to settle out of court with Jones, costing taxpayers \$175,000.

Why?

One reason, multiple sources tell Quorum: Richland County Councilman Norman Jackson wouldn't leave the room.

Since he was expected to testify against County Council on behalf of Jones (along with disgraced former Council Member Kelvin Washington), Jackson was an adverse party to the County's case when Council

met in executive session on Feb. 21 to receive a confidential legal briefing from Gignilliat Savitz and Bettis about Jones' suit.

Despite a clear conflict of interest, multiple sources have confirmed to Quorum that Jackson refused to recuse himself even when other Council members asked that he leave the room. When Council members then asked County Attorney Larry Smith whether Jackson could be made to leave, they were told he could not since he was an elected official.

With the opportunity to privately discuss legal strategy thus completely compromised, sources tell Quorum, the County's own lawyers then recommended it settle, which it did.

"It was obvious that the case was going to be a no-win situation," said a person familiar with events.

Justine Jones

Except for Jones, that is, who thanks to Jackson's ethically questionable behavior personally was awarded \$105,000 and had her attorney fees of \$70,000 paid by the County in March.

Jackson's extraordinary loyalty to Jones against both the County's (and his constituents') interests came as no shock to Council, however. Rather, it was merely the last act of devotion in an

CONNECT WITH US



Search this website ...



20TH ANNUAL Wings & Wheels AIR FESTIVAL
 May 10 • 10am-2pm • Fairfield County Airport
 Sponsored by the Fairfield County Aeronautics Commission
PLANES & AUTOMOBILES
 Food • Live Music by Ole Skool
 Skydiving Demos • Cruise-in Car Show
 Exhibitors • Artisans • Food Vendors • DJ
 Face Painting • Children's Amusements, bounce house & more
 Airplane Rides offered by S&S Aviation (fee)
 Law Enforcement & Emergency Vehicles • Vintage Aircraft
 FREE Train Ride at 2 pm (includes free transport to & from the SC Railroad Museum)

FREE PARKING
FREE ADMISSION

Fairfield County Airport • 1291 Runway Rd., Winnsboro
 Take US 321 S from Winnsboro, turn right onto SC 269 (sign). Continue 1.4 miles to Kelly Miller Rd. (sign), turn right 0.2 miles, turn right onto Runway Rd. Parking on your left.
 Fairfield County Chamber of Commerce • info@chamberfc.com • 803-635-4242

“Ms. Jones was chronically late in preparing the ROAs and had frequent, unnecessary mistakes,” Edwards wrote. “Most of these mistakes were preventable.

“While preparing the ROAs is not a complicated task, it is vital to the organization.”

“There simply was no excuse for shoddy work.”

Jones was not happy with reviews of her work. According to her lawsuit and County correspondence, after a difficult performance review on Jan. 30 Jones, who is black, immediately went to Jackson and other African-American council members (Washington and Julie Ann-Dixon, sources tell Quorum) claiming she was being racially discriminated against by Ancheta, who is white.

In her lawsuit, Jones states in February she “reported numerous threats of termination and other racially discriminatory and retaliatory treatment by Ancheta dating back to January 2013.”

From the County’s perspective, the allegations and their method of delivery were in keeping with Jones’ disrespect for authority, disregard for workplace rules of conduct and refusal to accept responsibility for careless, mistake-ridden work products.

“Rather than following the chain of command as required by County policy or requesting assistance from Human Resources, Ms. Jones apparently complained directly to several council members about Ms. Ancheta,” Edwards wrote. “This was highly unorthodox for a three-month, probationary employee.

“Richland County policy is that employees deal through the chain-of-command and/or Human Resources. Council members are not privy to the daily activities and do not get a complete picture when they hear only from one side.”

In her closing remarks to the EEOC, Edwards was succinct.

“I believe after you have reviewed the County’s position statement and the enclosed documents you will conclude there has been no discrimination or retaliation.”

Despite the fact that two years later the EEOC would agree that Jones’ claims were without merit, in March 2013, under pressure from Jackson and other Council members, McDonald met with Jones and removed her from Ancheta’s supervision, requiring she to only report to him in an unprecedented move for a probationary employee.

Rather than end the problem, the move was just the beginning of what quickly became a pattern of Jackson illegally interfering on Jones’ behalf with often-exasperated staff as she ran roughshod over County protocol and managed to offend directors in nearly every department, members of the general public and set off a war of words and racial accusations between Council members that has never been made public and which resulted in a coup against the chairman on Nov. 18, 2014, when a coalition of members scuttled Jackson’s plans to make Jones a department director at literally the last minute.

In March of 2013, however, none of that was known, nor was it known that contrary to Jones’ and the County’s timeline of events, the relationship between Jackson and Jones had began far earlier than February, when Jones said she took her complaints about Ancheta to Council — in fact it had begun the first week she reported for work.

AN UNUSUAL INTEREST

According to emails obtained exclusively by Quorum, the relationship between Jackson and Jones — one that neither County policy nor state law condoned — began immediately after she was hired and continued months after she was fired.

Jones started work as Research Manager on Dec. 10, 2012. The following Monday, Dec. 17, the two already were planning a lunch together at “Exclusive Restaurant – Broad River Road” for that Wednesday, Dec. 19.

Community Partners
VETERINARY CLINIC
325 S. Vanderhorst St.,
Winnsboro

Open Wednesdays 9 am - 4 pm

Open to everyone in Fairfield & surrounding counties
Scan QR code to make an appointment

LOW COST EXAMS, VACCINES & PREVENTATIVES

DHPP \$15	Osteoarthritis Injections
DHLPP \$25	Dewormer
Rabies	Proheart Injections
Bordetella \$25	Heartworm Prevention
Heartworm Test \$40	Flea & Tick Prevention
FELV/FIV Test \$40	Bloodwork
Microchip	Ear Cytology
FVRCP \$15	Skin Scrapes
FELV Vaccine \$25	Nail trims / Ear cleanings
Examination (Required) \$30	& much more!

803-766-6962

Thanks to our sponsors!

DR. ROBERT CHAPPELL

Winnsboro

This is the location where Jones and Jackson first met for lunch on Zimalcrest Road just off Broad River Road. Called “Exclusive Restaurant” then, it is now known as “Da River Reggae Bar & Grill.”

That date is significant because it was when Jones first major assignment — three ROAs — were due (the ones that “had to be redone”). According to the County’s letter to the EEOC, when Jones received an email alerting her to the problems with all her ROAs that Wednesday she “left at noon, claiming to be sick” and did not return to work until Friday, Dec. 21.

Emails also show the two scheduled a meeting again at Exclusive Restaurant the following week on Dec. 26.

The South Carolina Code of Laws Title Four, Chapter Nine, Article Seven regulates the council-administrator form of government under which Richland County operates. Section 4-9-660 clearly states that council members do not have the authority to give orders to staff or deal in day-to-day county operations regarding personnel.

“Except for the purposes of inquiries and investigations, the council shall deal with county officers and employees who are subject to the direction and supervision of the county administrator solely through the administrator, and neither the council nor its members shall give orders or instructions to any such officers or employees,” it reads. Only the county administrator may be “responsible for the administration of county personnel policies including salary and classification plans approved by council.”

Richland County Ordinance Section 2.88 adds additional language to that prohibition, stating that “council and its members shall deal with the administrative service solely through the county administrator, and no member thereof shall give orders to any county employee or subordinate of the county administrator, either publicly or privately.”

Email communications obtained by Quorum reveal that throughout Jones’ tenure Jackson routinely exerted illegal pressure on her behalf directly with staff, especially after Jackson was able to help Jones get a promotion to Assistant Director of the newly created Small and Local Business Enterprise office — an idea of Jackson’s — in December 2013. That promotion increased her salary from \$56,000 to \$74,000, a 24 percent raise that was against County salary guidelines at the time that limited promotional increases from between 5 and 15 percent but which sources say her supervisors were “made to sign off on” by Jackson. (Edwards’ letter to the EEOC would cite this promotion as “hardly an indication of discrimination.”) She would also be responsible to report to then-Procurement Director Rodolfo Callwood.

Read Part Two next week.

Reach Aiken at (803) 200-8809. Email him at ron@quorumcolumbia.org. Follow him on Twitter [@RonAiken](https://twitter.com/RonAiken) and [@QuorumColumbia](https://twitter.com/QuorumColumbia) and like Quorum on Facebook.