

**From:** [REDACTED]  
**To:** [Mary Gourley](#)  
**Subject:** Sebastopol Times Conflict of Interest and Election Coverage Public Comment 10/18/22  
**Date:** Tuesday, October 18, 2022 4:52:52 PM

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Dear Council Members,

I am writing to you concerning a conflict of interest regarding the *Sebastopol Times*, a substack blog written by Dale Dougherty and Laura Hagar Rush, which poses as a news source.

Laura Hagar Rush is a contractor with the City of Sebastopol. She is under contract to perform public relations and promotional work for the City of Sebastopol as part of the ReLaunch contract.

She is employed by the City with the seated Council approving her budget. In effect, the current Council approved her income.

Current Council Members Sarah Gurney, Una Glass and Diana Rich have publicly endorsed 2 candidates in our current election.

*The Sebastopol Times* writes election coverage.

Is it standard practice for someone who represents themselves as a journalist in one forum - *The Sebastopol Times* - and as a public relations person in another - The Relaunch Campaign - to create "news" articles which discuss candidates endorsed by their employer? Would these articles be considered a type of unacknowledged PR for the endorsed candidates?

I feel that there is a significant conflict of interest to the *Sebastopol Times* writing about the election unless there is a disclaimer which acknowledges the conflict of interest. I would recommend an alert for the reader that they are reading an article which might be a promotional, public relations piece and is funded by the current council such as , "Part of our funding comes from the City of Sebastopol. Seated Council Members have endorsed the following candidates, which might impact the information in this article."

A recent article discussed fundraising without giving any historic context such as the fact that Diana Rich raised \$18,491 for her 2020 campaign, more than double of any current Council candidate.

When the *Sebastopol Times* reports public comments, they never include written comments, which does not summarize the full extent of the public comment.

In addition, you cannot comment on the *Sebastopol Times* website unless you are a paid

subscriber which limits the ability for the public to counter their statements and add new information, which might be relevant to the general public.

I ask that the Council address this conflict of interest and create guidance for this conflict of interest between a City contractor, our current election and unbiased reporting to the general public.

Best,  
Kate Haug