

Illicit recording reveals budding bromance between damaged Las Vegas pols



Clark County Commissioner Tom Collins (John Locher/Las Vegas Review-Journal)

By BEN BOTKIN ©2014 LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

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Two of the Las Vegas Valley's most colorful political figures bonded last month in a profanity-laced conversation aimed at Clark County commissioners, according to a recording obtained by the Review-Journal.

Each politician in the recorded telephone conversation has different reasons to be disgruntled with how things were going on the County Commission.

On one end of the line last month was County Commissioner Tom Collins, who often butts heads with fellow commissioners.

On the other end of the line was Las Vegas Township Constable John Bonaventura, who saw his political fortunes plummet when commissioners unanimously voted in March 2013 to abolish his office, effective at the end of his term in January.

Though Collins voted to close the constable's office, the two found common ground in complaints about common enemies, chief among them Commissioner Mary Beth Scow, whom Bonaventura hopes to unseat in the coming June 10 Democratic primary.

Commission Chairman Steve Sisolak came under particularly profane fire from Collins, who is heard saying Sisolak controls the commission through three "puppets."

COLORFUL EXCHANGE

The exact date of the conversation is unclear, but it appears to have been recorded before April 18, when Collins signed an affidavit in support of Bonaventura's lawsuit against the county seeking to save his office.

Collins on Thursday said he never gave anyone permission to record the conversation. Under Nevada law, it's illegal to record a conversation unless both parties are aware and agree to it.

Bonaventura denies he recorded the call, though on a copy obtained by the Review-Journal he is clearly heard telling someone he wants to play the recording for them.

"I wanted you to hear this thing," Bonaventura said in the recording, introducing a person to his conversation with Collins. "This is pretty funny, man. This is Tom Collins. You know he's one of the commissioners, right? He's talking about Scow, the lady I'm running against. You know all of them voted against the office. He's talking about Scow and (County Commissioner Susan) Brager and then I confronted him about why the f--- did he vote against our office and s--- like that."

At one point, Collins calls Brager a "no good (SOB)."

Collins later adds: "I think less of Brager than I do of Mary Beth."

“OK, well that says a lot,” Bonaventura responds.

Later, Collins offers that “Both of them are no-good (SOBs).”

Bonaventura complains about the commission’s action to close his office, saying no one asked him to change anything beforehand. He compares the decision to abolishing the office of the president because of a dislike of President Barack Obama.

Collins is sympathetic.

“I think it’s a sorry f— -ing deal,” Collins said. “I didn’t like it from the get-go. But it was gonna pass and I voted along with it when we were trying to all get along.

“Just run for County Commission,” Collins says. “Don’t bring up again anything about closing down the constable. Just talk about those people getting represented by somebody that’s not a puppet ... Steve Sisolak has been running that goddamn commission and he’s got three puppets.”

Collins names Commissioners Larry Brown, Scow and Brager.

“He just (expletives) me and Lawrence and Chris over all the time,” Collins says in reference to Commissioners Lawrence Weekly and Chris Giunchigliani. “He don’t give a s— - about us. He’s a no-good (SOB).”

Sisolak on Thursday said he has a “thick skin,” and noted that Collins is known to speak freely.

Collins, who is in his third and final four-year term in office, is known for off-beat antics. A neighbor called police in 2012 when Collins shot a tree in his own yard, and the commissioner’s colorful language sometimes makes headlines.

Commissioners at a meeting in April expressed disappointment in Collins for telling a Utah county official that Utahns are “inbred bastards” and saying anyone who wanted to join a protest against a Bureau of Land Management cattle roundup near Bunkerville should first make funeral plans. Collins later apologized to the commissioners. It’s unclear if he ever apologized to any Utahns.

Sisolak said Collins owes Brager and Scow another apology for the language used in the Bonaventura recording.

Sisolak also stressed that commissioners all vote their mind — not as puppets. Among the examples: Giunchigliani and Sisolak voted together against the More Cops sales tax hike proposal. When a fuel tax increase measure came up for a vote, Sisolak was the lone opponent.

“Nobody is anybody’s puppet,” Sisolak said.

After listening to a copy of the tape, Scow said in written statement that “I always try to do the public’s business in a civil, respectful way. The comments of my colleague are very disappointing.

“The more important issue is honesty,” she said. “I vote my conscience 100 percent of the time and my integrity has never been questioned.”

CONSTABLE’S RESPONSE

Contacted Thursday about the recording, Bonaventura was vague about its origin.

“Probably the one you’re talking about was a voice mail,” said Bonaventura, whose office is being abolished in the wake of myriad scandals, public misbehavior by employees and by himself, and financial conflicts with the county.

Even after being told both he and Collins are heard talking on the tape, and that he is heard offering to play the recording for another person, he continued to insist that he didn’t have a recording.

“Basically, it’s just a personal message he left me,” Bonaventura said. “I don’t have any recordings or anything. Anything I had was just for my own personal use ... It’s kind of like when you’re recording something to remember what’s being said.”

Bonaventura also said he doesn’t have the recording anymore.

“I deleted all my messages and all that,” he said. “I don’t keep things for very long.”

Asked about the foul language heard on the recording, Bonaventura said: “You can’t really say that to a media person because then it’s spun around.”

COLLINS: A PRIVATE CALL

When asked about the recording, Collins said: “The whole thing sounds like a recording of a conversation on a phone without permission, which is illegal for number 1. Number

2, conversations with someone that's your friend certainly is a confidential conversation.”

But Collins spoke freely about his commission colleagues.

“The four of them all vote together,” Collins said. “The four of them have a coalition.”

Collins did say he doesn't remember saying things about Brager and Scow, however.

He stressed that he never intended for the conversation to become public.

“All the commissioners privately say things differently than they do in public,” Collins said.

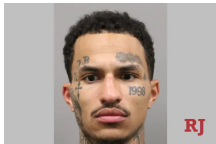
The Clark County district attorney's office on Thursday declined comment on the legality of the recording.

Commissioner Susan Brager, however, was not so shy. She called herself an independent when voting on county business and called the recording “shocking” and “appalling.”

“I really believe Commissioner Collins needs to go get the help he needs,” she said.

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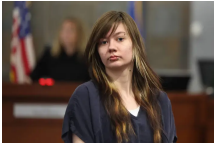
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