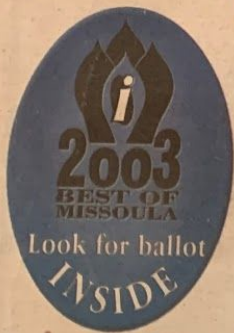


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HOLDING OUT HOPE



How an illegal campaign ousted Chet Hope from the Whitefish City Council and exposed the state's inability to control the flow of money into small-town politics.

by David Madison



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How an illegal campaign ousted Chet Hope from the Whitefish City Council and exposed the state's inability to control the flow of money into small-town politics.

by David Madison

On the last election day of his life, Chet Hope rose early, then decamped from his home on the banks of the Whitefish River. His son Jared and daughter Kendra came along. All three headed for the Wildwood Bakery across town. After a light breakfast, they moved on to City Hall, where the two kids cast votes for their dad.

Councilman Hope did no last-minute campaigning at the polls that day. In fact, in his nine-year career as a progressive force on the Whitefish City Council, he never campaigned. At least not in the official, glad-handing, money-pumping, back-slapping sense. Chet Hope's Whitefish was too small for that.

"You could not go to the grocery store with him," says his son-in-law Paul Sheehan. "That was his way of campaigning. And he didn't think, 'Oh, I've got to stop and talk to these peo-



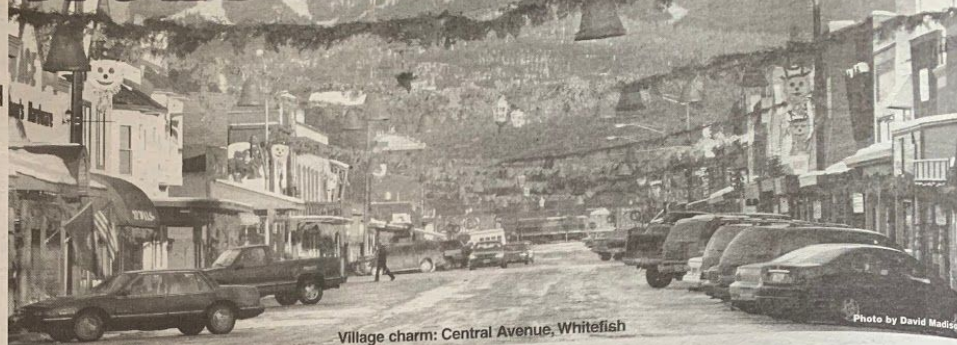
Photo by Chad Harder

Former Council member Jan Metzmaker recalls that during her time in office, "The rudest people we ever saw were in the audience."

ple because I'm campaigning.' He didn't have that machine mentality."

After casting his own ballot and departing City Hall, Dr. Chester Hope drove over to the Columbia Falls clinic where he practiced family medicine for nearly three decades. It was a place where patients sometimes waited

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Village charm: Central Avenue, Whitefish

Photo by David Madison

alone in the examining room for Dr. Hope to finish up a phone call with the mayor or some constituent.

When gaps appeared in his appointment book, Chet would don a wetsuit and take off for the nearby Flathead River. There, even in the depths of winter, he swam where the current kept the surface from freezing. He wore prescription goggles and between strokes he'd scan the river bottom for whitefish lures. Eventually, he'd collect enough to decorate a small Christmas tree.

After a vigorous swim, Chet would return to the clinic where his partner regularly noted signs of hypothermia. He'd help Chet strip out of his wetsuit and usher him into the clinic's steam room.

Chet needed this downtime—away from work and the Council and other community commitments. Everything in his political life was speeding up. His tenure as a city

At least that's the way Chet saw things, a little more than a year ago on election day 2001. When he awoke the next morning and heard the news of his defeat, he had little doubt who was behind the upset. Chet and fellow progressive councilor Shirley Jacobson had been publicly criticized by a group called Citizens For An Informed Public (CFaip) in the final weeks of the campaign. The last-minute blitz was orchestrated by a politically savvy camp of business and property owners, and it successfully helped to install a slate of three new candidates on the Whitefish City Council.

For the first time in anyone's memory, negative campaigning and political donations had influenced the outcome of a Whitefish City Council race. Councilors Hope and Jacobson were the targets this time, but CFaip vowed to take on the mayor and at least one other councilor in 2003.

With millions of dollars riding on an assortment of development projects in Whitefish, it's not surprising that a political action committee would form to protect the interests of the town's conservative business owners. What is surprising, say those who began researching CFaip following the 2001 election, is that the group knowingly violated state election laws in its efforts to oust a pair of progressive councilors.

When the violations came to light in the days following the 2001 election, a former council member and ally of Hope and Jacobson filed a complaint with the state's Commissioner of Political Practices—one that remains under investigation by the Attorney General's office.

In addition to filing the complaint, friends of Chet Hope also decided to sue Citizens For An Informed Public for campaign finance violations.

Just this past December, that lawsuit was scheduled to go to trial. But due to a variety of circumstances—including the tragic death of Chet Hope—the suit lost steam. As it fizzled, Whitefish and the state of Montana missed a chance to close an election loophole that gives political action

committees the ability to launch illegal surprise campaigns with impunity. Critics of the current law say PACs can do whatever they want, as long as they're willing to absorb the modest fines that come with playing outside of the rules, and Chet Hope's case supports the point.

Political war chests were never part of Dr. Chet Hope's career in public service. Now everyone in Whitefish knows he was one of a vanishing breed.

In the early spring of 1977, when Dr. Hope was wrapping up his residency in Lusk, Wyo., he and colleague Doug Pitman went looking for a place to start a practice. One of the first they considered was Price, Utah. The blue-collar coal mining town sits tucked into a crease of the Beehive state where a high alpine plateau descends into the red rock desert. It could have been a beautiful place, but years of mining and isolation had left it with the residual debris of hard use. Billboards line its approaches, and while downtown Price has a faded glimmer of charm, it's flanked by unsightly strip development.

Doctors Hope and Pitman decided immediately that Price didn't meet their shared vision of a dream town. Price lacked certain amenities—pristine skiing and fishing—and for that, it became the butt of their own inside joke.

The pair decided to make a home movie mocking the town. Viewers see Chet pretending to fish the trash-lined Price River, then watch as he hops down some mine tailings as if on skis. They titled their movie "Not At Any Price."

A few months later, Pitman and Hope made exploratory trips to Whitefish, a place they'd read about in cross-country ski magazines. At the time, a doctor in Columbia Falls was retiring, so the pair seized on the chance to assume his practice.

Commuting from Whitefish every morning, Dr. Hope left his home and drove out Highway 93 South before turning east toward Columbia Falls. Over the years, he watched as the two-

lane road ballooned into a five-lane swath of fast food restaurants, motels and auto lots. Maybe it started to remind him of Price.

"He was always concerned about 93 South," says Chet's daughter Kendra. "What got him into politics was trying to keep Whitefish the way it was—as nice as it was when he got here—or nicer."

Entering town from the south on Highway 93, motorists crest a rise just above Happy Valley to be greeted by views of the Whitefish Range. Big Mountain ski area and the kind of sky that sells a lot of real estate. In the bottom half of the picture, a bland strip of development unfurls like a highway exit. It's a landscape dominated by the apostrophe "s". Wendy's, Denny's, Taco John's.

Highway 93 South was so unlike Chet's favorite places, but he'd wind up spending a lot of time there. Especially last year, when business owners along the strip rose up to end Chet's political career.

Dr. Hope's volunteer service in city government began in 1993 when he was appointed to City Council by then-Mayor Ray Boksich. Up until then, Hope's only overtly political act in Whitefish was protesting the shipment of nuclear materials by train through town.

Chet came about his defiant streak from his parents, Dutch immigrants who during World War II hid a Jewish family in their attic. When Nazis came to question Chet's father, the elder Hope hid with the family while Chet's mother spoke to the soldiers at the door. They were never found out.

Chet probably told that story over beers at the Bulldog, a sports pub located just a few paces away from City Hall. That's where Chet and others went to talk shop and socialize at Council meetings. He'd sip beer and munch peanuts, and when the nuts were all gone, he'd suck the salt shells. All the while Chet would listen and debate, laugh and frown about it

incredible growth that was transforming his community.

There was no slowing the feverish pace of development that ramped up during Chet's time on Council. Amid the frenzy, Councilor Hope applied remedies and guidance to projects as they moved through the process. At Big Mountain, he pushed for the phased construction of Glacier Village, a project that could eventually triple the size of the resort. In the hills surrounding Whitefish, Chet participated in the annexation of Iron Horse; the colossal golf community expanded the town's borders by a third, which confused migrating grizzly bears used to woody crossings up and down the ridgelines.

Thanks partly to Chet, mountain bikers and hikers continue to cross through Iron Horse on their way to and from popular trailheads. Hope routinely supported public access at a time when the new neighborhoods of Whitefish were trying to close their gates.

From these new developments flow SUVs packed with second-home owners and plenty of disposable income. The newcomers are attracted by the shops and restaurants on Central Avenue, where pedestrian traffic drives a thriving local economy.

about City Council often revolved around Councilor Hope.

The man most upset with Hope was Gary Elliott, a partner in local real estate developments and former owner of the popular Bierstube bar. Elliott is a regular at local civic meetings. He's used to bending cars, and in the election season of 2001, he was busier than ever.

At Rotary meetings and over the phone, Elliott approached business owners up and down the Highway 93 strip. He blamed the Council for a lot, but one cinder smoldered hottest in Elliott's gut. It had to do with a complicated deal to extend sewer and water service to a business park. Elliott was helping to build—a business park that happened to be on Highway 93 South.

By 2001, the controversial sewer and water deal had degenerated into an all-out feud between Elliott and Hope. It cinder smoldered hottest in Elliott's gut. It had to do with a complicated deal to extend sewer and water service to a business park. Elliott was helping to build—a business park that happened to be on Highway 93 South.

Election rules are designed to give the public a window into the who-and-why driving the politics of the moment. That's why political action groups are required to file promptly with the state. No gray area allows PACs to wait until the election is over.

Elliott would have known this. According to newly elected Councilman Erik Garberg, Elliott and CFAIP sought advice about election rules from Whitefish lawyer Jack Quatman. The attorney was present at a meeting of CFAIP in October, less than a month before the 2001 election.

"There was an attorney there advising them on what they needed to do," says Garberg. (Quatman says he attended the meeting, but offered no advice regarding election rules.)

Soon afterward, Elliott called the Commissioner of Political Practices and was sent a packet of materials CFAIP needed to file. He looked over the forms, then—by his own account—decided it was "beyond, you know, something I wanted to deal with at the time."

Citizens For An Informed Public was not officially registered with the state as a political action committee, but that didn't stop it from going on

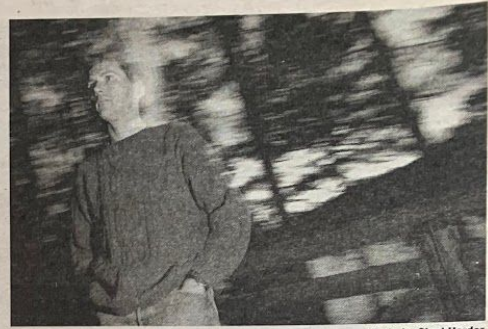


Photo by Chad Harder

Mayor Andy Feury: "Chet didn't care how you voted...we could all go to the Bulldog and have a beer when we were done."

Asked why he supported CFAIP with a \$200 check on Oct. 19, 2001, Republican state Sen. Bob DePratu says he "wanted to see a change on the Council."

DePratu, who owns DePratu Ford on 93 South, wholeheartedly welcomed the sight of three challengers in the 2001 Council race. The political newcomers—Erik Garberg, Mark Wagner and Doug Adams—received CFAIP's endorsement in their campaigns to fill

the final weeks leading up to election day, the advertising came in waves. There were radio ads and a full-page spread in *The Whitefish Pilot*. The ads accused the sitting Council of abusing taxpayer money and "rude behavior." (Elliott would later say he was called a "son-of-a-bitch" by Councilor Hope.)

CFAIP wound up spending \$3,100 dollars on its eleventh-hour campaign.

"If I'm Joe Developer and I can get a slate of friendly candidates on City Council and I can do that for \$3,000, plus another \$9,000 or so in political fines, that's a cheap expenditure."

At one end of Central stand the public library and the O'Shaughnessy Cultural Arts Center, two big-dollar developments that enjoy universal community support. Chet pushed both projects through with the help of others who feared the city was becoming distracted by the unprecedented growth on its outskirts.

"He understood that our economy in the Flathead is tied to the amenities," says Greg Sullivan, former chairman of the Whitefish City-County Planning Board. During the 1990s, development in Whitefish was occurring at a rate that was "higher than ever," says Sullivan. Local businesses boomed, but still some considered Councilman Hope an obstacle to growth.

"It was easy for people to say that, because they really didn't understand his perspective," explains Sullivan. "He was looking at quality of life issues and how people really live in Whitefish."

Hope won both friends and enemies as a champion for constructing a bike path along the Whitefish River. His backing of a restrictive sign ordinance—which he hoped would clean up the billboard clutter along 93 South—was equally controversial.

Leading up to the 2001 election, opposition to the sign ordinance was building among business owners who felt that it unfairly forced them to foot the bill for newer, smaller signs. The Whitefish Rotary Club became the center of discontent, where complaints

Elliott finally decided it was time to form a watch-dog group to videotape and broadcast City Council meetings on local television, seeking accountability through publicity. On Sept. 27, the group met to kick around names: Citizens for Politic Action, Citizens' Voice, Whitefish Speaks.

They settled on Citizens For An Informed Public.

When it came time to officially create CFAIP, Elliott was required by law to register with the Commissioner of Political Practices office in Helena.

the political offensive. In late October, CFAIP started making headlines in the local papers. At the time, Elliott told reporters his group was busy trying to set up regular broadcasts of Council meetings on local television. This was CFAIP's top priority, says Elliott's attorney, describing the group's mission.

But the group's accounting records show that from the beginning, CFAIP's main focus was the 2001 election. Of the \$3,600 raised by CFAIP, \$450 was spent on a line item described as "video taping of City Council (sic) Meetings."

three open seats. One sitting councilor was retiring and the terms of Jacobson and Hope were about to expire.

Chet's daughter Kendra says her dad had planned to leave the Council at the end of his term in 2001, but "then he saw the line-up of candidates and he decided to run."

For Hope, that meant filing as a candidate and going about the daily routines of life: chatting on the phone, attending meetings and stopping in the produce section at Safeway to answer questions from a neighbor.

Meanwhile, CFAIP was preparing to unload on Hope and Jacobson. In

Add the nearly \$5,000 in combined spending by Hope and Jacobson's opponents, and the 2001 election instantly breaks all records for campaign spending in a Whitefish city race.

That's no crime, says Sen. DePratu, wondering why money should be—by itself—an unwelcome addition to Whitefish politics. "Are you to say that small towns aren't to have campaigns? Is that what you think small towns should do?"

The arrival of money alone is one thing, says former Council member Jan Metzmaker. It's quite another for money to infiltrate local politics under the radar.

Before arriving in unique downtown Whitefish, visitors are greeted by "Anywhere, USA": the Highway 93 South strip.

