



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on November 7, 2023

Illinois City Drops Harassment Charges Against Reporter Who Repeatedly Sought Comments From Officials

An Illinois city on Monday dropped municipal charges against a newspaper reporter the city claimed was harassing its employees by persistently seeking information and comment on a story he was writing.

Last week, the Chicago suburb of Calumet City sent three citations to *Daily Southtown* reporter Hank Sanders charging him with violating city ordinances against “interference/hampering of city employees,” the [Chicago Tribune](#) reported Thursday. The *Tribune* and the *Southtown* are owned by the same parent company.



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The story made national headlines over the weekend, with the [Associated Press](#) and the [New York Post](#), among others, reporting it.

Perhaps not coincidentally, Calumet City attorney Patrick Walsh sent a letter to the [Tribune](#) on Monday announcing that the charges against Sanders had been dropped.

Sanders, 23, undoubtedly rankled Calumet City officials when he [reported](#) last month that said “officials were informed the town’s stormwater facilities were in poor condition one year before historic rains in September caused significant flood damage to homes.”

Sanders’ persistence in seeking information for a follow-up story ruffled even more feathers. The journalist filed Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests and repeatedly called and emailed city employees for comment. One citation claimed that over a nine-day period, Sanders sent the city 14 emails regarding the flooding.

One of the officials who complained about Sanders’ dogged pursuit of the story was Democratic Mayor Thaddeus Jones.

“Despite all FOIA requests being filled, Hank Sanders continues to contact city departments and city employees via phone and email,” read the citation mentioning Jones. “Despite request from Calumet City attorneys to stop calling city departments and employees, Hank Sanders continues to do so.”

Of course, Jones, who is also a state representative, has much bigger things to worry about than a local cub reporter. The [Tribune](#) reported in April that federal “authorities are investigating tax issues stemming from the transfer of money between Jones and his campaign funds as well as other potential financial matters.”

Tribune Executive Editor Mitch Pugh, who also oversees the *Southtown*, stood by his reporter, calling Calumet City’s citations “outrageous.”

“They represent a continued assault on journalists who, like Hank, are guilty of nothing more than engaging in the practice of journalism. From places like Alabama to Kansas to Illinois, it appears public



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officials have become emboldened to take actions that our society once viewed as un-American,” Pugh said Thursday.

The AP noted Friday that the Sanders incident was

the latest of several recent First Amendment dust-ups involving city officials and news outlets around the country, following this week’s arrest of a small-town Alabama newspaper publisher and reporter after reporting on a grand jury investigation of a school district, and the August police raid of a newspaper and its publisher’s home in Kansas tied to an apparent dispute a restaurant owner had with the paper.

“You get used to it a little bit on the national scale, but now we’re seeing it in very small municipalities with mayors, and that’s a disturbing trend and we need to call it out when we see it,” Pugh told the AP. “A public official ought to know better than to basically use a police force to try to intimidate a reporter who’s just doing his job.”

Similarly, Illinois Press Association president, CEO, and general counsel Don Craven told the AP, “We’re talking about a reporter who is doing his job, and instead of saying ‘We’re working on the problem,’ the city’s response is, blame the reporter.”

Sanders, for his part, denied harassing anyone, telling the *Tribune* “he was reaching out to Calumet City officials to pursue stories and give them a chance to comment on his reporting.” He also said that, contrary to assertions in all three citations, some of his FOIA requests have not been filled.

City officials, it seems, want all requests for information and comment to go through Jones’ spokesman, Sean Howard. Sanders refused to take that route, telling Walsh in an October email, “I will continue to be reaching out to the correct department or employee for comment when I want a comment from that department or employee. To do otherwise is unethical.”

Ironically, when the *Tribune* contacted Howard for comment on the Sanders citations, he referred the paper to Walsh. The latter seemed to be caught a bit off-guard, telling the *Tribune* Thursday that while he was aware of “employee complaints” about Sanders’ persistence, he hadn’t yet seen the citations.

“I’ll talk to his attorney,” he said. “We’ll try to work it out.”

By Monday, having apparently had that conversation, Walsh announced by letter that the citations were being canceled. According to the *Tribune*:

In his letter, Walsh said city employees “have a right to refuse to speak with” Sanders. But, Walsh added: “I understand it would be Mr. Sanders’ position and your argument that he was not harassing anyone. As you know, I was not a witness and have no interest in bickering about it.”

In response, Pugh said the *Tribune* is “glad that cooler heads prevailed and Calumet City officials understood the error of their ways and dismissed these charges.”

“We’re glad to see Hank can get back to doing his job serving the readers of the *Daily Southtown*, and we’ll continue to be vigilant watching how city officials treat him in his capacity of reporter,” Pugh added. “We’ll continue to support our journalists’ right to do their jobs, whether in Calumet City or elsewhere.”



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