

A School Official's Questionable Expenses, Wit Added

By Michelle O'Donnell

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School officials, be warned: Graham A. Kerby is looking for a new district to investigate. And the British-born Mr. Kerby, who is a data analyst retired from New York City Transit, has plenty of time and rapier wit to spare.

Mr. Kerby, 52, has just wrapped up a two-month investigation of the spending habits of the former superintendent of his Suffolk County school district. He posted the fruits of his labor on the Internet -- more than 150 pages of credit card charges that the former official, John W. Sonedecker, presented for payment to the Three Village Central School District, which includes parts of Stony Brook and East Setauket and the Village of Old Field. Mr. Kerby found the superintendent regularly used his district credit card for personal expenses (including visits to strip clubs), stays at expensive hotels (including the Breakers in Palm Beach) and rental cars with hundred of miles racked up on them in as little as two days.

Mr. Kerby's findings, complete with wry commentary, can be found at www.tvcsd.com/amex.pdf. And while his HTML skills may require some honing -- poor formatting cuts off some of his observations -- they have been effective enough to single-handedly bring about an official inquiry into Dr. Sonedecker's spending habits.

Mr. Kerby obtained the receipts in February by filing a request under the Freedom of Information Act last September. School board members, who had agreed to pay Dr. Sonedecker \$150,000 to leave the district the month before, said yesterday they had been unaware of the scope of his questionable spending until last week when they saw the receipts on Mr. Kerby's Web site.

Yesterday, a few hours after a reporter called about the Sonedecker case, a spokesman faxed a statement saying that the district had asked the Suffolk County district attorney to open an investigation into Mr. Sonedecker's expenses and had frozen the \$27,000 still owed to him.

The case of Dr. Sonedecker, 59, who ran up \$27,000 in expenses a year over a 25-month period, is far smaller than the case of Pamela Gluckin, the former assistant superintendent of business in the Roslyn School District, who is under investigation over allegations she stole \$1 million of district funds.

But now, in the wake of the Roslyn scandal, higher district taxes, defeated school budgets and other forms of taxpayer revolt, more and more people are paying attention to Mr. Kerby's findings.

The pages of Mr. Kerby's exhibit have been viewed more than 21,000 times in 3,300 separate visits to the site -- in a district of 8,000 students and 30,000 residents, said Bob Russotti, who operates the private Web site where Mr. Kerby's findings are posted.

Dr. Sonedecker now lives in the Cleveland area and could not be reached. A cellphone number, provided by his son, did not accept messages.

It was gossip around Mr. Kerby's East Setauket home that first piqued his interest in Dr. Sonedecker's spending. Mr. Kerby, casting about for a retirement project, requested the expense reports from the district shortly after Dr. Sonedecker's sudden departure. This spring, when school officials finally permitted him to see the reports, he felt he had stumbled upon something.

In hundreds of receipts, expense reports and memos, a picture of a peripatetic superintendent with an appetite for accommodations often far beyond the district's \$100 lodging per diem emerged, Mr. Kerby said. That was not all. A closer examination of receipts, checked against dates of various conferences, revealed that Dr. Sonedecker sometimes arrived before a conference started and left before it ended. One conference in Columbus, Ohio, had even been canceled, Mr. Kerby said, but Dr. Sonedecker went anyway.

There were receipts for car rentals in Dr. Sonedecker's name that showed the cars had been driven hundreds of miles in just a few days. There were several dinners for hundreds of dollars each (district rules are \$40 per person), purchases at airport and hotel newsstands and outings at two businesses that Mr. Kerby found were strip clubs. Those expenses were marked personal, but the district does not allow personal use of its credit card. A spokesman for the district said Dr. Sonedecker had repaid some of the expenses.

As interesting as Dr. Sonedecker's expense reports are alone, they are enlivened by Mr. Kerby's commentary scattered throughout the pages and pages of grainy receipts.

"W.H. Smith -- another well known supplier of 'professional' books to the educational world," reads one note pasted above an expense for \$85.56.

Mr. Kerby, perhaps to provide his dogged readers some visual relief, also posted photos of dancers from the two strip clubs. Mr. Kerby said the district failed to perform any oversight on Dr. Sonedecker.

"I think everybody knew what he was doing," Mr. Kerby added.

John K. Diviney, a lawyer who is one of seven members of the school board, said it was understandable that the board would not be aware of Dr. Sonedecker's spending. "That puts a lot of duty on board members," he said yesterday. "I don't think that's a practical thing to expect of unpaid volunteers. I'm being nice to answer your questions while I'm in my business office."

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