

OPINION

THE COURIER

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Amen! City's
Web site stinks

We admittedly have erred in the past by referring to the chief executive of our fair city as Mayor Beth Davis — after she married and became Beth Davis-Kavelman.

It's one of the biggest red-faced goofs a local newspaper, especially a smalltown newspaper such as ours, can make, getting someone's name wrong. If our memory serves us well, we recall the mayor pointing out the shameful error of our ways in at least one of those instances.

Now, it's time to point back. If you want to do some pointing along with us, log on to your computer, get on the Internet and call up this Web address: <http://www.cityoflincoln-il.gov>.

Now, give the page a few (several?) seconds to load, and you'll watch her honor's mug shot — starting out small and very distorted — come to the forefront full size and undistorted with the red caption underneath: "Mayor Elizabeth 'Beth' Davis." Not Davis-Kavelman, mind you, simply Davis.

Next exercise: Click on the "Members" button at the top of the page, again pause and yawn for the page to load, then follow the printed directions: "Place pointer over city official for contact information."

Start with Ward 1, and who shows up but none other than a photo and contact information for Benny Huskins, listed as one of the ward's city council members. Pardon us, but didn't Huskins leave the council on July 15?

Continue by moving your cursor over the city engineer and code enforcement buttons. Poor Mark Mathon (the engineer) and Les Last (of code enforcement fame). Their portraits are so distorted they could be mistaken for victims of pestilence and famine in some Third World country.

Click on the mayor and up comes a photo, so distorted her honor looks like someone headed down anorexia's path. But at least her name is correct; it's Davis-Kavelman here.

That's just a sample of the more obvious flaws of a Web site that the mayor, the city council (especially Alderman Wanda Rohlf, who has overseen its development, or lack thereof) and the citizens of this community surely take no pride in.

The site, <http://www.cityoflincoln-il.gov>, should be dumped, blown far beyond cyberspace's boundaries. Our Guest Column on this page offers one way to rectify the embarrassment. Surely, it's worth pursuing.

Guest column

City Web site is a disaster

BY LEIGH HENSON

An open letter to the residents, virtual citizens and officials of Lincoln, Ill.:

The growing power of the Internet greatly increases the importance of official city Web sites as tools of public service. These sites can provide key information to local citizens about government policies and procedures as well as community events and resources.

Additionally, these sites can make positive first impressions on potential tourists and newcomers — including prospective businesses — expressing civic pride and providing useful directories, links, etc. As someone who has studied Web site principles and marketing, taught them to master's degree students, and created the well-received community history Web site of Lincoln, Illinois, I urge the city of Lincoln to replace its current official Web site, which is a disaster.

A new Web site could present a much more inviting visual appearance and broader scope of information. The current site's weaknesses include a lack of substance on the homepage, many blank and incomplete pages, superimposed and unreadable text in places, and distorted photos.

Even the quality of the mayor's photo is as poor as the whole site, which has been online for several years without significant improvements. That site glaringly contradicts the homepage's claim that Lincoln is progressive.

In July 2008, according to The Pantagraph, "Mayor Beth Davis-Kavelman agreed the city's Web site needs an upgrade. 'We had a group of high school students work on a project to redesign the site and I thought some good ideas came out of that,' Davis-Kavelman said. 'Maybe we could take some of those ideas and tweak them a little.'"

In all due respect, the current site is an embarrassment seen by the entire world, but mere tweaking is not the solution. The site needs to be taken down and replaced — ASAP. Also, creating a respectable Web site is not a project for amateurs of any age, but the cost can be reasonable — a sound investment.

Now, the city of Lincoln has a great opportunity to replace its Web site with a far superior one through the virtual public service and expertise of Debra Seaman. She is an experienced graphic artist who runs her own small business, Seaman Graphics, and who works full time as Web designer for a community college in Leesburg, Fla. Her husband, Mark, is an IT/networking technician at one of the main banks in a prominent retirement community in

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— Leigh Henson

Florida.

Debra and Mark are former Lincoln residents who remain Lincolnites at heart.

For several months, Debra has tried to get some dialogue going with the mayor and other city officials about this matter without much success. I hope this apparent lack of response does not reflect the bias of "not invented here — forget about it."

I volunteered to write this plea in support of Debra's offer, and at my request, she describes it in her own words:

"Lincoln citizens and prospective visitors have been given a gift from my husband and I. The gift is an unauthorized (but proposed official) city of Lincoln Web site. Its URL is <http://www.lincolnil.org>.

"Initially the new design and Web site were offered to the city officials pro bono. My intention was to work with the city redesigning and making an aesthetic and functioning Web site for the residents and potential visitors. In today's world, a municipal Web site is not only the first virtual look into a community, but it is a place where the residents can do a finite number of tasks without ever leaving their homes. They keep current with crucial safety alerts, city calendars, and other news.

"Along the way in trying to get the city official's approval for the site, I met new allies, Leigh Henson and Jan Youngquist, as well as dear friends and family like Shelly Conley, my sister Sandy Vinyard, and many others who tried to do what they could to persuade the city to move on this free offer. After months of running into brick wall, I was just going to take the revised site and discard it, when my husband offered to purchase a domain name and set up one of his old servers in our spare bedroom. Thus the city's unauthorized site was born.

"I welcome better photos of the city municip-

pal workers, events or links. I do my best from my home in Silver Springs, Fla., and know things will improve as the residents start using the site. Businesses, too, are welcome to contact me for listings to be added to the business section. I track the site daily. The site has been online to the public two weeks, and to date has had over 300 visitors throughout the nation, even one from Belgium. It is still my hope that the city will realize the significance of the site and will want to make it the 'official' Web site for Lincoln."

Let me emphasize that I have found Debra very business-oriented, cooperative, and talented. Previously, she had asked for my critique of her site, and she promptly, skillfully applied my few suggestions to refine her original. Grade-A design. Clearly, Debra and her husband have mastered the computer tools of the Web far better than I have.

Now — and not later — the city claiming to be the first to live the Lincoln legacy deserves an official Web site worthy of the great man who excelled in public service. And the Seamans can deliver it. Contact Debra at damsan@cfl.rr.com.

If insufficient funds have been budgeted, why not immediately seek donations from Lincoln's service clubs and businesses whose information could be included in the new site? guess it would take only \$2,000 to \$3,000.

Just how difficult would it be to raise that amount for this vital cause?

Today, I have mailed City Treasurer Les Plotner a check for a modest amount designated for this cause.

If you agree with the need for a new city of Lincoln Web site ASAP, please let the mayor and city council members know. You will find contact information for them in both the current and proposed Web sites.

And consider writing a one-sentence letter — or send a postcard — if e-mails and phone calls don't get through.

Let all Lincolnites at heart pull together to get an official namesake city Web site that will fulfill our beloved song's promise: "If dear old Abe would return, I know what he would do. He'd say, 'Lincoln, we're proud of you.'"

Leigh Henson, a member of the Lincoln Community High School class of 1960, is professor emeritus of English at Missouri State University in Springfield.

He maintains an award-winning Web site about his hometown at <http://www.geocities.com/findinglincolnillinois>.