



# Mr. Big Stuff

**The housing authority didn't just get a new director. It also got his family, his friends, and plenty of turmoil.**

**By Sarah Fenske**

**I**t started with the boss' brother.

Doug Lingner had been executive director of the Housing Authority of Maricopa County for just two months when he hired his brother to repair a carport at the agency's Seventh Street complex. Total cost: \$2,000.

Now, that wasn't such a big deal. Yes, state law should have stopped Lingner from hiring a family member for anything. (The agency, which works to provide affordable housing, receives much of its funding from the government, so nepotism is strictly verboten.)

But Lingner, a former Phoenix city councilman, was new to the position. And his brother was paid only \$2,000. Hard to get too worked up about that.

Then Lingner hired his teenage son and his nephew, paying them \$1,000 each to clear the housing authority's parking lot after a storm.

And then he hired an old friend, this time for a full-time job. And a former colleague from the city council, as a lobbyist.

Then he hired a public relations firm that not so long ago had supported his council campaigns. And he hired his brother again — this time for more money.

It got to the point where employees at the Housing Authority started making nervous jokes. "Next year we won't have a Christmas party," they said. "Next year, it'll be a family reunion."

Then Lingner hired his son, for a full-time temp job. The kid is 17 years old. Seventeen!

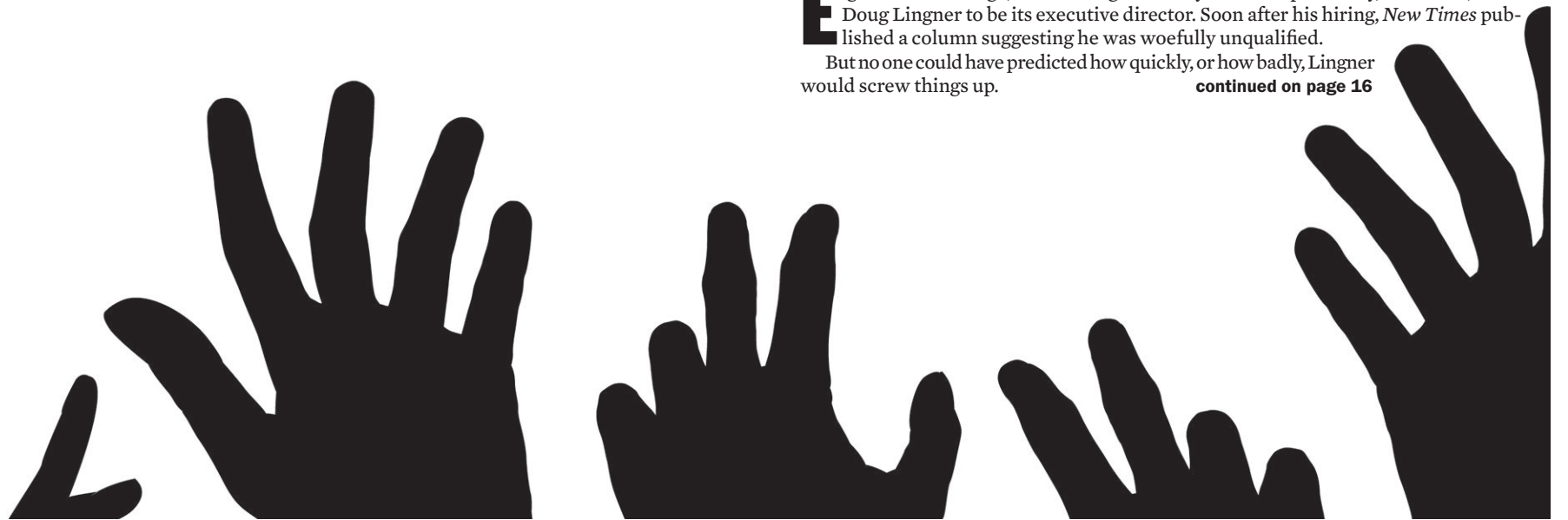
Even as Lingner hired him, he fired a single mother of two, telling her there simply wasn't enough money to keep paying her salary.

That's when people stopped joking. That's when people got mad.

**E**ighteen months ago, the Housing Authority of Maricopa County, or HAMC, hired Doug Lingner to be its executive director. Soon after his hiring, *New Times* published a column suggesting he was woefully unqualified.

But no one could have predicted how quickly, or how badly, Lingner would screw things up.

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The housing authority's complex on North Seventh Street (above and top right); Doug Lingner

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Our investigation shows that, in Lingner's 18-month tenure at the HAMC, he's repeatedly flouted agency bylaws and, in some cases, may have violated the law.

It's not just that the housing authority has become a stomping ground for Lingner's friends and family, although that's certainly the case. And it's not just that much of the federal stimulus money administered by the agency is going to Lingner's friends and political supporters. That's true, too.

And it isn't even only that Lingner has wasted tax dollars on perks for himself. (A *New Times* review of housing authority credit card statements shows that, even as government agencies across the country tighten their belts, Lingner has treated himself to lunches, valet parking, and travel to Las Vegas.)

It's all of the above.

It's that he's hired cronies rather than qualified people. He's wasted money. When the Reverend Oscar Tillman, who runs the local NAACP, asked Lingner to explain why he fired a young black woman to make room for his son, Lingner spent more than a month ducking his calls. The agency is now almost certainly facing a lawsuit over the woman's firing.

Lingner takes it all in stride. He agreed to answer *New Times*' questions earlier this week and appeared to have a ready answer for almost everything. (One notable exception: who selected firms for construction and development work. Lingner refused to answer, saying the matter is part of an internal investigation.) For the most part, he was friendly, chatty, and befuddled as to why anyone would think there's a problem at his agency.

He chalked up the issues identified by *New Times* to growing pains. He's trying to change the way the HAMC does business, he says. Of course he's ruffled some feathers.

But Lingner's management has clearly led to big problems at the HAMC — problems that can't help but affect the agency's mission of providing affordable housing.

The agency has an annual budget of \$20 million, although it's also picked up

additional millions recently, thanks to federal stimulus money. Its 50 or so employees manage nine low-income apartment complexes and work to counsel families into housing, be it Section 8 apartments or the purchase of a home.

This is a critical time for any housing authority.

"So many people are losing their jobs, not only in the cities, but also in the country," says Luisa Stark, chair of the Phoenix Consortium to End Homelessness. "We need to find a way to make housing more affordable to more people." Records show the agency's waiting list has thousands of names on it — and that list is only growing.

Yet instead of focusing on those very real issues, the housing authority under Lingner has attempted to establish itself as a big-deal developer, pitching ambitious programs for stimulus funds. So far, those efforts have failed, even as the agency has become engulfed in drama — much of it apparently caused by Lingner's poor decision-making and subsequent clumsy attempts to deal with the fallout.

*New Times* has been in contact with numerous people associated with the HAMC. They describe a climate of fear that took root when a soon-to-be-terminated employee threatened to expose Lingner's "corruption" to the housing authority's board of commissioners. Employees were instructed not to provide information to the former worker; one of her close friends at the agency, a temp, was told that his position was being eliminated. (Soon thereafter, a different temp was hired.)

When *New Times* put in a public-records request three weeks ago, the agency's deputy director immediately called a staff meeting and warned that no one was to talk to this newspaper. "We're talking about federal money here," the deputy director said, according to someone in attendance. "This is prison time!" (The deputy director also stressed to employees that the agency had done nothing wrong.)

The atmosphere became even more tense when a veteran employee was placed on paid leave last month and told he was "under investigation," without any reason given.

Weeks later, within a few hours of *New Times*' public-records request, Janet Belfield, the agency's grant writer, was also placed on paid leave pending an "investigation."

Belfield is believed to have attempted to contact the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development with concerns about Lingner's spending. She did not respond to requests for comment.

Jereon Brown, a HUD spokesman, says that the issues raised by *New Times* should trigger scrutiny.

Because housing authorities get so much federal money, HUD is quick to order investigations when it receives credible information about mispending or policy violations, the spokesman says.

"Generally based on what you're telling me, it looks like a practice," he says. "Sometimes, the perception could be a reality.

"We go in when a concern like this is raised."

**L**ike most housing authorities, the HAMC is something of a hybrid. It's not technically a government agency — but, because most of its funding comes from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, it might as well be.

Indeed, the HAMC used to be part of county government. At that point, it wasn't a stand-alone agency. It was simply the department that got Maricopa County's HUD funds and managed the county's Section 8 program and other low-income housing projects.

In 2004, however, the county spun off the department. Each county supervisor appoints a commissioner to oversee its operations, and a deputy county attorney signs off on procedures. But it's technically an independent agency, outside the control of County Manager David Smith.

*New Times* attempted to contact each of the agency's commissioners. Not one could be reached for comment.

It was the commissioners who chose Lingner. Two years ago, the agency's director of five years left the HAMC for a similar job in Alabama. The open position quickly drew 54 applicants.

And that's why it was so strange when the commissioners ultimately chose a can-



didate who didn't even meet their agency's minimum qualifications.

As *New Times* reported at the time ("Home Boy," September 25, 2008), the HAMC said it wanted a candidate with seven years of administrative experience, a bachelor's degree, financial acumen, and an "apolitical" nature.

Somehow, it ended up choosing a high school graduate whose only administrative experience was supervising a staff of four while a city councilman. And it wasn't just that Doug Lingner had no college education, little experience "administrating," or even that his personal finances were perpetually a mess. It was that he seemed about as political as it gets.

The main argument for his hiring seemed to be that Lingner needed a job — and that the developers who run this town were pulling for him.

On the city council, Lingner had been the developer's go-to guy. But he didn't start that way. When he first ran, he was a nobody: a "citizen activist" ranting about illegal immigration at City Hall and unknown to the developers who finance most council races. He won his first race — taking on the Hispanic incumbent — with a budget of just \$9,000.

Twelve years after he was first elected, that race would take on near-mythic proportions. The councilman would tell the *Arizona Republic* that he took a job delivering lost luggage at night to make time for campaigning. "He would campaign all day, take a nap, then wake up and deliver people their bags from 10 p.m. to 4 a.m.," the *Republic* dutifully noted.

Documents from the time, however, tell a different story. According to the financial-disclosure forms that Lingner filed with the city clerk during his first campaign, in 1994, his only source of income was his wife's pharmacy job — and his own long-term disability pay. On the form, he reported his occupation as "domestic engineer."

The Lingners' finances at the time were tenuous, at best. They'd already filed for bankruptcy, twice, according to court records. Just two years earlier, they'd lost their home to foreclosure, putting the family of four into a Lavean apartment. **continued on page 18**

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Once elected, Lingner proved to be nothing if not a canny politician. The former tile setter insisted on wearing Hawaiian shirts to city meetings, even as the other guys showed up in business attire. The message was clear: He was the populist in a sea of suits.

And Lingner pulled off his populist pose even as he was increasingly becoming one of the suits.

Almost from the moment of his first electoral victory, he began pulling in big campaign contributions from developers. "When I ran for the city council in 1994, nobody returned Doug Lingner's phone call," Lingner himself told *New Times*. "Once I got elected, suddenly I had 5,000 friends."

Lingner was unsuccessfully threatened with recall twice and re-elected twice; every time, he drew the support of the city's most well-connected players, from developer Steve Ellman to attorney Paul Gilbert to Phoenix Suns owner Robert Sarver. The guy who ran the shoestring campaign — with shoe leather and \$9,000 — managed to raise more than \$50,000 to head off the first recall effort against him.

And he didn't just schmooze the developers. He thought about becoming one of them. While on the council, Lingner got licensed as a real estate broker, got a job with a title company, and even started a company, D & J Ventures, to help developers with "land assembly."

Term limits forced Lingner's retirement in December 2007. And though he'd once planned to do some development of his own, by that time, the bottom had dropped out of the local real estate market. He told the *Re-*



The Reverend Oscar Tillman says Lingner was "so out of line."

*public* that he planned to keep working at the title company and to "continue to be involved at the city, speaking at council meetings like he did while a neighborhood activist."

He never did. Instead, eight months later, he got himself appointed the new director of the Housing Authority of Maricopa County.

The staff there liked someone else: a guy with a master's degree and extensive experience running a housing authority in another state. They thought Lingner "talked a lot, but didn't say very much."

The board of commissioners went with Lingner anyway.

Lingner says the board wanted a change. "They had two clear choices: me or the guy with the hardcore HUD pedigree. They went with me.

"They didn't want me to get involved in

politics," he continues. "But they wanted me to take advantage of my political connections to get things done and change the way the HAMC was perceived."

In the 18 months since Lingner has been running the HAMC, *New Times*' investigation shows, he has repeatedly violated agency policies to enrich himself and his family.

Housing authority bylaws state flatly that "individuals may not be hired if they have a member of their immediate family working at HAMC." Yet records reviewed by *New Times* show that Lingner himself recommended that his family members be hired in several instances:

- He personally requested that the HAMC hire his brother, Dwayne, to do \$2,000 in repairs to the agency carport in the fall of 2008.

- He personally requested that the agency hire his teenage son, Brandon, and his nephew to do \$2,000 in cleanup in the agency parking lot after a storm downed several trees in February 2009.

- Lingner hired Brandon Lingner for a desk job some time in late 2009. Brandon, 17, was a "volunteer," but he was eventually hired as a "temp," even as other temps were being let go. In January, he was sent to Las Vegas to be certified as an inspector, although his father says he's back to being a volunteer and that he personally paid for the training.

Finally, Lingner appears to have pulled strings to hire his brother, Dwayne, for more handyman work in June 2009. The agency needed new awnings, so staffers got a \$5,875 quote from a Central Phoenix company that manufactures and installs awnings.

Lingner, though, resisted the hire. "I'd like

to have Dwayne finish his quote and then we can make an informed decision," he wrote to a staffer in an e-mail obtained by *New Times*.

When Dwayne Lingner's quote came in just \$200 below the awning firm, he was hired, with his brother, Doug, personally authorizing the selection.

Doug Lingner says he never discussed the quote with his brother. After the fact, he says, his brother questioned why he didn't get inside information, telling him he could have used the extra \$200. "I didn't supervise him or have any conversations with him about the job," Lingner insists — even though records show he personally used the HAMC credit card to buy materials for his brother's work.

Lingner's penchant for hiring family members may be his most obvious potential legal problem. But *New Times*' review of records shows that Lingner also has displayed a penchant for hiring friends and steering stimulus money to political supporters.

In June 2009, Lingner hired former Phoenix City Councilwoman Peggy Bilsten and her husband, Tom, for \$2,500 a month to lobby federal officials on the agency's behalf. Though Bilsten was a close ally of Lingner's on the council, neither she nor her husband are registered as federal lobbyists, according to the Federal Elections Commission. They've been paid \$32,985 to date.

Tom Bilsten was also hired, at one point, to do "outreach" work for the HAMC, connecting the agency with the faith-based community, according to his résumé. And both Bilstens are listed as "consultants" on a grant application Lingner filed with the Arizona Department of Housing.

The HAMC hoped to get \$8 million in stimulus money to **continued on page 20**

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convert a Van Buren hotel to housing for veterans, and the former councilwoman and her husband were slated to “assist in the acquisition of property, coordinate issue resolution related to land use and permits, and provide other support,” according to the HAMC’s application.

Other than Peggy Bilsten’s time on the council, neither Bilsten lists any experience with land use, permits, or property acquisition on their résumé.

Lingner hasn’t hesitated to help other friends and supporters benefit from other stimulus opportunities.

In May 2009, the HAMC was awarded \$6.3 million to buy foreclosed homes in Buckeye, Goodyear, El Mirage, and Tolleson, rehab them, and sell them to qualified low-income buyers.

Under the system Lingner put in place, contractors — from real estate brokers to construction companies to housing counselors — had a brief window to submit qualifications. If their qualifications were good, they’d be added to the agency’s roster. Only firms on the list would get a piece of the work.

Lingner says it’s strictly coincidence, but most of the firms on the roster were big supporters of Lingner during his time on the city council or somehow have a connection to someone at HAMC.

Among them:

- Lingner personally recommended that staffers get in touch with Charter Home Alliance after being contacted by the company’s lobbyist. In an e-mail, Lingner told staffers that he knew the company’s owners and its lobby-



**Steve Ellman, not known for his interest in low-income housing, became the master developer for the HAMC’s \$99 million proposal for stimulus funds.**

ist from his time on the city council. Charter Home Alliance has since been selected for \$55,265 in remodeling projects.

- Some of Lingner’s top supporters during his city council campaigns were employees at Arvizu Advertising. Even as the company filed for Chapter 11 reorganization in the summer of 2009, the housing authority selected it to market homes to buyers. The firm has been paid \$74,255 to date.

- After Arvizu was under contract, Lingner hired Monica Gaynor to work at the HAMC. Gaynor is married to Emilio Gaynor, the vice president at Arvizu and the HAMC’s point

person for the marketing contract.

- Michael Huscroft & Associates was selected to do all appraisals for the \$6.3 million grant. It’s been paid \$10,125 to date. On its application for the job, Huscroft disclosed that he had a “current, past personal or professional relationship” with a commissioner or officer at the HAMC. That relationship is unclear, since Huscroft did not include a written explanation, which the form requires. Lingner says, to the best of his knowledge, the firm was just being careful because Huscroft knew him from his time on the council.

Records also show that Cherokee Develop-

ment, a real estate and development firm, has been selected to serve as one of the brokers on the project.

That firm’s principal, C. Scott Davis, was a big contributor to Doug Lingner’s city council campaigns. But that’s not his only tie to HAMC leadership.

Davis’ firm shares a North Phoenix office suite with attorney Richard Cole Jr. — the longtime chairman of the housing authority’s board of commissioners.

Cherokee did not disclose any “professional or personal” relationship on its application. Cole did not return calls for comment.

Lingner says Cole has made a point of recusing himself on votes that involve his clients. But Lingner has also refused to release evaluations of the firms submitting qualifications — or even tell *New Times* who served on the panel.

The matter is under investigation, he says.

**S**ome employees say that Lingner is a friendly, if hands-off, boss. He seems to delegate most day-to-day decisions to his deputies.

The agency’s central office is small, with just 26 workers operating out of two buildings that share a parking lot. But Will McFarland, who was hired as a temp, tells *New Times* that he worked at the agency for months before figuring out who Lingner was.

“I kept hearing ‘Doug’ ‘Doug’ ‘Doug,’” McFarland says. “I didn’t know who that was.”

Tania Huff initially had a better impression.

In the spring of 2008, Huff, who is African-American, had left a good job as a social worker to counsel the housing authority’s Section 8 clients. She liked **continued on page 23**

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the work, but the money was important, too: She's a single mom with two biological kids and one foster child to take care of.

Soon after Huff started at the HAMC, her brother was murdered. Huff went on leave, and by the time she'd returned, a few months later, the agency had a new executive director: Doug Lingner.

Lingner made a point of asking how family was doing, which she appreciated. Yes, he talked a lot — which is pretty much the first thing anyone will tell you about Doug Lingner — but they got on okay.

Until, that is, last December.

As Huff tells it, Lingner called her into his office and announced that he was terribly sorry, but the grant that funded her position had run out.

She was being let go.

Huff was shocked. According to the documents she'd been given at the time of her hire, she was a classified employee — she was supposed to be protected from grant cycles. (She would never have left her social work job, she says, without a guarantee of protection at the HAMC.)

She left the meeting in a daze. But the next day, she went back to see Lingner.

There isn't money, he repeated.

"You have your son working here," Huff responded.

By this point, everyone knew that 17-year-old Brandon Lingner wasn't just a volunteer, as his father had originally claimed when he started in August. Brandon often came to work with his father in the morning and didn't leave until his father left at the day's end. In October, he was given business cards — something that temps like McFarland never got. (The card, which *New Times* obtained, lists his title as "customer support.")

When confronted, Lingner didn't deny hiring his son, Huff says. He just repeated funding wasn't there.

But Huff had done her homework. Before being let go, classified employees are supposed to get a chance to apply for open positions at the agency, including jobs being handled by temps.

So why wasn't she given that chance? Lingner couldn't seem to answer.

"There's a lot of corruption here," Huff told Lingner. "I'm taking this as far I can go."

Is that a threat? Lingner asked.

"That's a promise," Huff responded.

And then Lingner asked her a curious question, she says. He asked her this: "What would you have done if you had an opportunity for your kids?"

That night, Huff began calling the commissioners, blowing the whistle on Lingner's nepotism. She says they seemed sympathetic, at first.

But nothing changed.

The very next day, in fact, Brandon Lingner's name was added to the employee roster.

And Will McFarland, the temporary employee who was one of Huff's good friends in the office, was let go, too. Lingner had promised him for months that they'd find funding to bring him on full-time. But now Lingner said there wasn't enough money.

And then Lingner said something else, McFarland recalls.

"I know you and [Huff] are friends," Lingner told McFarland. "Be careful who you talk to."

Lingner confirms that his son did work as a



**Peggy Bilsten**

temp for a five-week period in December and January. He insists there was nothing nefarious about the hire; thanks to his time as a volunteer,

Brandon knew the ropes, he says.

"He was just trying to help," Lingner says of his son.

**T**ania Huff's calls to the agency's commissioners may not have changed her situation, but they definitely got someone's attention.

On December 23, one week before Huff's position was to be eliminated, she was placed on paid leave. She was ordered to take her personal items and go.

Unbeknownst to her supervisors, though, Huff had already photocopied key documents. Among them: the papers she was given at her hiring, which clearly state that her position was classified.

Armed with those documents, Huff contacted the Reverend Oscar Tillman, president

of the Maricopa County chapter of the NAACP. Tillman says he immediately began calling Lingner, hoping to talk to him about correcting the mistake and taking Huff back.

But Lingner wouldn't return Tillman's phone calls. His assistant told Tillman that Lingner couldn't meet with him until after the holidays.

Tillman would have none of that. He began calling the board of commissioners. And that's when, he says, suddenly Lingner was available for a meeting after all.

The meeting was awkward, to say the least. Lingner kept trying to make assertions — only to have Tillman respond with documents that showed he was incorrect. "He didn't know what he was doing," Tillman tells *New Times*.

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became even more awkward when Lingner apparently tried to establish rapport by telling Tillman about a friend who made racial comments in front of a black employee — but “he wasn’t like that,” or so Lingner explained awkwardly.

“It was so uncomfortable,” Tillman says. “I started looking around thinking, ‘Is this guy okay?’ It was so out of line . . . something I would have heard guys talking about when I entered the Air Force in 1960.

“Maybe he was trying to endear himself to me, but he did not succeed at all,” Tillman says. “He succeeded in looking like a fool.”

At that meeting, Lingner promised to look into Huff’s situation and get back to Tillman. He never did. Tillman estimates that he contacted the housing authority 20 times in January and early February.

Either Lingner wasn’t there or he couldn’t talk. Tillman would get transferred to the human resources person, who’d say they were

“We’re concerned  
that people are  
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than someone dining  
out too much.”  
— Jereon Brown,  
HUD

working on it. When Tillman called the chairman of the board, Richard Cole, Cole would call back on Lingner’s behalf and report that Lingner was out sick.

Last Thursday, Tillman got some credible information that Lingner was, in fact, working on agency business. So he called Cole and demanded to know why he kept getting the runaround.

Cole called back, apologetic. He’d finally gotten the straight answer from Lingner: Lingner’s attorneys had told him not to talk to Tillman.

Tillman is now talking to his lawyers about filing suit on Huff’s behalf.

Tillman says Cole has been straight with him, but he’s fed up with everyone else at the housing authority — particularly Doug Lingner.

“These people have to be some of the dumbest people in the world,” he says.

In January and February, even as Oscar Tillman kept dialing the agency in vain, the HAMC was dealt a few crippling blows.

In addition to documents obtained through a public-records request, *New Times* received an anonymous packet of information last month: monthly statements from the agency’s credit cards.

Those documents show a raft of questionable purchases made by Lingner. Among them:

- An average of \$200 a month on meals at restaurants, including hotspots like the Valley Ho Hotel, Portland’s, My Florist, and the Orange Table.

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- Travel, including \$1,629 for meals and hotel rooms in San Antonio, \$609 for meals and a hotel in Sacramento, and \$1,071 for two stays at the Treasure Island Hotel in Las Vegas.

- A \$212 charge at the Pinewood Country Club in Munds Park. The “private, member-owned club” boasts an 18-hole golf course.

Those expenses are troubling, especially in these tough economic times. (The purchases, undoubtedly, were subsidized by taxpayers.)

Jereon Brown, the HUD spokesman, says his agency will likely have its Phoenix office take a look at HAMC operations — and potentially make a referral to the Office of the Inspector General.

“We’re concerned about the proper expenditure of funds,” Brown says. “We’re concerned that people are getting a roof over their heads, rather than someone dining out too much. We’ll definitely take a look at this.”

But what might be a bigger problem in the agency’s immediate future is its failure to get more stimulus grants.

The first round of stimulus funding will expire in a year. The HAMC had hoped to get two major grants in the second round.

It failed in both attempts.

First was the agency’s grant application for \$8 million to rehab a hotel on Van Buren and Ninth Avenue as housing for veterans. Despite the work of former councilwoman Peggy Bilsten, the project’s consultant, the Arizona Department of Housing recently announced that the project did not qualify for stimulus funding.

According to a letter from the Department of Housing, the errors in the HAMC’s proposal were big ones. Projects chosen for grant money were supposed to include the purchase of property that’s been foreclosed or abandoned. The housing authority’s proposal did not. Projects were supposed to include demolition of a blighted structure. The housing authority’s did not.

And buildings being purchased were supposed to be sold for at least one percent below the appraised market value. The HAMC, oddly, had agreed to pay the full appraised price.

The Department of Housing also pointed out that the HAMC had overstated the per-unit value of the project by a staggering 400 percent.

The project, the department concluded, “does not meet either federal or state program requirements.”

Second, and even bigger, was a proposal for a \$99 million project in South Scottsdale. That, too, was rejected — this time by HUD.

The HAMC’s proposal was extremely unusual. The housing authority covers all of Maricopa County except Phoenix and Scottsdale — those municipalities have their own housing authorities. Yet Lingner decided to apply to purchase, rehab, and then resell a condo complex in South Scottsdale.

Once again, his team included all the usual suspects: Arvizu Advertising was to market the project. Michael Huscroft & Associates would do the appraisals. Cherokee Development — the real estate firm with ties to board chairman Richard Cole — would broker the units.

Lingner also brought in two new companies that he’d worked with on the city council. Developer Steve Ellman isn’t known for his work on affordable housing, but he was a supporter of Lingner’s going back to that first attempted recall. He and Reid Butler, another familiar face

at City Hall, were being pitched as the master development team.

For the construction, the HAMC selected SKR Construction. Once again, the firm’s principals, Allen and Sean Rice, had contributed to Lingner’s council campaigns. Lingner had also used the company for some small rehab jobs around the agency.

HUD, apparently, wasn’t impressed by the pitch. It turned down the project, giving its grants to Phoenix, Pima County, and Chicanos Por La Causa instead.

But that might be for the best. Because, as *New Times* has learned, the HAMC’s proposal contains a serious misrepresentation.

HUD asked applicants to show that they were contributing some capital to the project other than the expected stimulus windfall. The HAMC didn’t have much to offer, but it did note that it was in line to get \$1 million from the Industrial Development Authority of Maricopa County, which issues low-interest bonds for construction projects.

“Doug Lingner, executive director of the Housing Authority of Maricopa County, appeared before the [Industrial Development] Authority and received verbal assurances that they will provide \$1 million for the [Scottsdale] endeavor,” the proposal notes.

But that simply wasn’t true, as even Lingner now admits. (He tells *New Times* it was an error made due to haste, not deceitful intent.)

Lingner did visit the Industrial Development Authority, as director Tom Manos confirms. But when Lingner was there in March, the minutes show that he was pitching an entirely different property — the hotel for veterans on Van Buren.

And Manos certainly didn’t receive an assurance of anything. The minutes say only that Lingner would be getting more information for the authority’s board. Manos says that’s pretty much how he remembers it.

“There are hard commitments and soft commitments,” Manos says. “I would say we’re not even close to a soft commitment.”

Did Lingner ever say anything about a project in Scottsdale?

“No,” Manos said. “I would remember that if he had.”

Getting rejected by HUD — twice — has put an already nervous agency on the edge. All those calls from Tillman didn’t help, either. Everyone knew that Tania Huff had threatened to expose Lingner’s “corruption” — what would that mean for the agency?

Lingner made a move in January that only increased the antsiness.

The executive director announced that he was moving his office from one of the buildings on Seventh Street — where mostly top managers work — to the other, which shares a parking lot with the manager’s suite but contains mostly lower-level employees.

The idea was apparently to restore relations with workers who were turning mutinous — or maybe just keep an eye on them.

But no office in the employee building was quite big enough for the boss. That meant more expenses. Lingner hired his go-to guys at SKR Construction to renovate his office, at a cost of \$1,814.

He also had his office repainted. And, when he didn’t quite like the color, he had it repainted again. His assistant’s office was painted, too.

This time, Lingner didn’t hire his brother, or his son. But he didn’t have to look too far to find a painter.

He hired his assistant’s daughter.

E-mail [sarah.fenske@newtimes.com](mailto:sarah.fenske@newtimes.com),  
or call 602-440-1130.

*The Housing Authority of Maricopa County is pushing Doug Lingner out — but that may not be enough to solve its problems.*

S A R A H F E N S K E

# Another One Bites the Dust

Last Thursday, the board of directors of the Housing Authority of Maricopa County voted to accept the resignation of its executive director, Doug Lingner.

The only problem? There was no resignation for the board to accept — not on Thursday, anyway. The board was voting optimistically, in hopes that Lingner would sign an agreement with it in the next five days: He would agree to quit; the board would agree to stop the investigation of his actions.

Now, usually in cases of “resignations,” everyone takes pains to stress their mutual cooperation. Oh no, they’ll tell reporters. No one is being forced out.

Not so at the housing authority.

By accepting Lingner’s resignation before it was offered, the board, I think, was making a point: It wanted Lingner out of there, ASAP. But Lingner wasn’t working on anyone’s schedule but his own, as he stressed when I sent him an e-mail asking for comment on a story about his resignation.

“You are a very creative writer,” Lingner wrote. “It should be an interesting story since I haven’t resigned.” Really, one has to concede the point. And by press time Tuesday, Lingner still hadn’t signed the agreement, even though the board’s deadline had passed. He’s objecting to the treatment he’s received.

I couldn’t help marveling at the refusal to play nice on the part of both the board (which clearly wants Lingner gone), and Lingner himself (who clearly doesn’t get why he needs to go). And I couldn’t help wondering what else is going on.

I broke the story of Lingner’s transgression six weeks ago. Lingner was a longtime Phoenix city councilman, until term limits forced him out of that job in December 2007. After a few months of unemployment, he landed a surprising new gig as the housing authority’s executive director.

I say “surprising” because local housing authorities are funded almost entirely by the federal government. The regulations governing their work, which involves managing low-income housing, are extremely complex. Lingner had absolutely no experience in that area. A former tile setter, his chief source of income at the time of his election to the city council was a disability check.

Yet the housing authority selected Lingner over dozens of qualified applicants, even as it expanded its mandate and tried to secure federal funds to go into the development business. That combination of bad decision-making and ambition ended in disaster.

Indeed, Lingner had been on the job less than two years when *New Times* published its investigation. The story (“Mr. Big Stuff, February 11), detailed how Lingner had hired at least three family members in violation of agency bylaws. In 16 short months, he’d used his agency credit card for travel to Las Vegas, San Jose, and San Antonio. He’d also rung up bills at the Pinewood Country Club, outside Flagstaff, and at the Hotel Valley Ho and the Orange Table in Old Town Scottsdale.

And, under Lingner’s watch, the housing authority funneled federal stimulus funds to the same firms that had supported him on the city council. He refused to answer my questions about how those firms were selected — saying it was the subject of an ongoing “investigation.”

After *New Times* published my story, that investigation was shifted to look directly at Lingner. And that’s when things got weird.

Maricopa County Manager David Smith, wisely, pushed the agency’s board to take action. After Smith wrote a letter on behalf of the county supervisors, saying he “trusted” that Lingner had been placed on leave, the board voted to put Lingner on leave and investigate his actions.

The board specifically ordered Lingner to stay away from the office and have no direct contact with staffers. But even though the board meeting concluded in the early afternoon, Lingner continued to hang around the office until well after closing time. And, the next day, he actually showed up at a staff meeting and stood next to the interim director as she announced that he’d been placed on leave. So much for staying away from the office!

In light of all that, I suppose I shouldn’t have been surprised by Lingner’s non-resignation. This whole story has been screwy. I should hardly expect that to end now.

And Lingner — and the board — should hardly expect investigations into the housing authority to end simply because they’ve signed an “agreement.” Rebecca Flanagan, field office director for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in Phoe-



SOCIAL EYE MEDIA

The board accepted Doug Lingner’s resignation before he even offered it.

nix, confirmed that her agency is conducting a “review” of the agency; that review will continue regardless of who’s in charge.

Meanwhile, the Reverend Oscar Tillman, who heads the Maricopa County NAACP, tells me he remains concerned. (Tillman represents Tania Huff, who was dismissed by the agency for, she was told, a lack of funds — even as Lingner hired his 17-year-old son.)

“This takes care of the problem he created,” Tillman says of Lingner’s resignation. “But there’s a bigger problem here. Who’s minding the store? The characters who brought him in there are still in charge.”

The board of directors, after all, hired Lingner. It stood by him even as Tillman telephoned members incessantly.

And as I reported previously, Lingner may not be the only issue. The board’s longtime chairman, Richard Cole, actually works out of the same North Phoenix office suite as Cherokee Development, a real estate firm the housing authority selected for stimulus work.

Working out of the same suite? Wayne Howard, who serves as a political point man for many developers in Phoenix. (Howard’s “breakfast club” meetings are a major source of campaign cash for local politicians.) Howard partnered with developer Reid Butler to pitch a major project in downtown Phoenix last year — right around the same time that the housing authority chose Butler, along with developer Steve Ellman, to be “master developer” on a project seeking \$97 million in federal stimulus funds.

No one is accusing these developers of wrongdoing, but the whole thing is a little too cozy for me. And it’s even more troubling because the paper trail is incomplete.

The housing authority under Lingner used a “qualifications-based selection process” to select contractors and developers for stimulus work. That’s how Cherokee Development, the firm that shares an office with Cole, was chosen: in response to a call for contractors, it submitted its qualifications and was found by agency evaluators to pass muster.

But so far, the agency has been unable to produce any such proposal from Butler or his partner.

In January, in fact, I used the public-records law to request all “qualifications-based” proposals received by the housing authority. I got a pile, but nothing from Ellman or Butler.

I immediately put in a second request asking whether that was an oversight. I have yet to get a response, other than Lingner’s vague reference to the matter being under “investigation.”

Butler didn’t respond to my request for comment, and Cole has not responded to repeated e-mails and phone calls. And so the question remains: Was Lingner a fool? Or was he a useful fool?

I can’t imagine anyone hired Lingner thinking he’d thumb his nose at the agency’s bylaws. I’m sure no one wanted him to do something so stupid as to give his son a job, even as experienced workers got the boot.

But someone, clearly, wanted Lingner running the housing authority. Lingner was famously the developers’ go-to guy on the city council. Did those same developers think that, now that private funding has dried up, Lingner could be their entrée into the low-income housing game?

I have to wonder whether they overestimated Lingner’s usefulness, even as they underestimated his stupidity. That may explain why he’s being hustled out the door.

Unfortunately, though, the housing authority’s organization makes such shenanigans all too easy. Maricopa County was in charge of the agency until, in 2004, it became a stand-alone entity.

Most board members today are surely well meaning, but they’re busy. That forces them to rely on the good intentions of staffers. And they may have been far too trusting: Last August, Chairman Cole signed a resolution (apparently on the board’s behalf) allowing Lingner to authorize contracts up to \$100,000 without board approval.

Oscar Tillman is now calling for the county to take back the housing authority. It’s the only way, he says, to give employees the protection they deserve.

He may be right about that, and I hope the powers that be in Maricopa County give that idea a hard look.

And I hope, in the meantime, that HUD takes a hard look at the agency’s operations beyond its director. They might want to start by figuring out who lobbied for Lingner’s hire — and whether they (or their friends) benefited from agency funds during his tenure.

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*Scathing reports blast the housing authority's procurement policies, credit card use — and former executive director Doug Lingner.*

S A R A H F E N S K E

# House Cleaning

**D**oug Lingner finally quit his job as executive director of the Housing Authority of Maricopa County last Tuesday, not quite two years after he was hired — and not quite two months after he was put on leave following a *New Times* exposé detailing his mismanagement and penchant for nepotism.

The housing authority's board of commissioners had been trying to force Lingner's resignation for weeks. In exchange for his quitting, and promising not to sue, they agreed to give Lingner three months' severance pay.

That's three months fewer than he demanded in a letter to the board just a few weeks ago. But Lingner was clearly wise to fold when he did.

That's because the truth is now coming out — the truth about operations at the housing authority, and the truth about Lingner.

It isn't good.

Indeed, at the very meeting in which the commissioners signed off on Lingner's severance agreement, they were treated to a report from Barbara Gallegos, the program center coordinator for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's field office in Phoenix. And after Gallegos' evisceration of his operation, Lingner was lucky the commissioners didn't come after him with pitchforks.

HUD's review of the housing authority — which was also triggered by my February cover story — isn't finished yet. Gallegos told the board she wanted to speak because of the magnitude of the problems her staff has already identified, including an overall lack of documentation, internal controls, and checks and balances. Employee evaluation has been nonexistent and disciplinary action inconsistent, she told the commissioners. There's no policy for use of the agency's vehicles or credit card.

And, as Gallegos' report made clear, my story was correct in identifying Lingner's credit card use as a problem. HUD policy says that meals should be paid for by the agency only if they're "tied to a specific training session or meeting where technical information is displayed." Yet Lingner had been treating himself to several meals each week on the housing authority's dime — averaging roughly \$500 a month in dining expenses.

"Based on the receipts we're seeing, the

receipts don't tell us that they're eligible," Gallegos said. "In many cases, there are no receipts."

Gallegos also pointed to numerous problems with the agency's contracts. Staffers seemed to believe that they didn't need to get three bids, so long as contracts were below \$25,000. But Gallegos says that federal laws are far stricter: The housing authority should have obtained quotes from at least three vendors for any contract larger than \$2,000.

And, in some cases, the agency seemed to be trying to get around even the \$25,000 threshold.

"It appeared that contracts were arbitrarily divided into smaller amounts so as not to go over the \$25,000 limit," Gallegos told the commissioners. In other cases, she said, HUD investigators simply couldn't find any documentation whatsoever.

In her presentation, Gallegos didn't identify specific contracts. But a lack of supporting documentation has led to the cancellation of an entire set of contracts, as I confirmed last week.

I reported in February that the housing authority had been awarded \$6.2 million in federal stimulus funds via a county grant to buy and rehabilitate foreclosed homes. The housing authority had asked firms to submit their qualifications — for construction work, real estate brokerage, and appraisals — rather than make a bid for a specific job. Firms found to be qualified were then selected for work as it arose.

But there were some odd coincidences in the list of "qualified" firms: Almost all their owners had been donors to Lingner's campaigns during his tenure on the Phoenix city council. Another "qualified" firm operates out of the same North Phoenix office suite as Rick Cole, the longtime chairman of the housing authority's board of commissioners.

In a public records request, I asked to see any score sheets or other documents used by the evaluation panel. But Lingner refused to even tell me who served on the selection panel, saying the matter was under investigation. And though such documents are clearly public record under the law, my requests were ignored for two months.

It took a strongly worded letter from *New Times*' attorney to get to the truth last week: The agency can't find any such documents. It has no score sheets, no explanations of

how firms were selected, no minutes from the panel that chose them. (I did get a list of three panelists, apparently from Lingner's memory.)

Ben Chao, director of the agency's Neighborhood Stabilization Program, tells me that the firms had already been selected by the time of his hiring last June.

Indeed, it appears Lingner inked the contracts just one week before Chao started work. Chao says he learned recently that no evaluation sheets or other documents exist. The agency also failed to save the shipping boxes that firms used to submit their qualifications.

In light of that, the housing authority canceled the contracts earlier this month, Chao says. For the remaining \$2 million or so left on the grant, it's been soliciting new firms for work.

This time, instead of having a brief period for firms to submit their qualifications or miss out entirely, the housing authority will leave the process open.

"Whoever is interested, as long as they have a business license, they'll be included on every solicitation for bids," Chao says. Already, a half-dozen new firms have applied.

At their meeting last week, housing authority commissioners were clearly blindsided by the scope of problems identified by HUD.

Rick Cole has been chair of the housing authority ever since it was spun off from county government in 2004. He's recently come under scrutiny for his ties to the developers and contractors chosen for stimulus work during Lingner's tenure, and he announced to the board Tuesday that he won't be reapplying for his seat when his term expires in June.

He seemed shaken by the blistering report from HUD.

"We've been having all these audits," he pleaded to the commissioners. "They're telling us we're compliant." In a brief break during the four-hour meeting, he approached HUD's Gallegos to reiterate that point. (The housing authority's last audit from HUD's Office of Inspector General was in 2005, records show.)

But it surely wasn't just the report from HUD, or the cancellation of the stimulus contracts, that had the board in a sour mood last week.

In March, the housing authority hired Kate Baker, an attorney with Green & Baker, to look into the allegations in my story. Baker issued her report to the board on April 8.

Baker writes that she made a conscious decision to limit the scope of her review to allegations regarding nepotism.

That proved to be bad enough. Baker's report, which confirms the allegations in my February story, is devastating.

In her report, Baker identified four instances in Lingner's brief tenure where he was directly involved with the hiring of his relatives:

- Lingner hired his son, Brandon, and nephew Joshua Long to clear the agency's parking lot after a storm. At least one employee believed that Lingner didn't bother to get any other bids until after the work had already been done.

- Lingner hired his brother, Dwayne, to repair a carport at the agency's main offices on North Seventh Street.

- Dwayne Lingner was also hired to work on some awnings, even though he didn't have the necessary contractor's license.

- Lingner's son, Brandon, then 17, was hired as an unpaid intern last summer at Lingner's direction. Later, he was put on the payroll as a temporary employee at Lingner's behest.

Baker found Brandon Lingner's hire as a temp particularly problematic. To keep Brandon's employment off the books, Baker found, Lingner's staff schemed to have him hired through a temp agency, even though it cost the housing authority more money.

Indeed, in November 2009, Lingner informed his human resources director, Laura Schreiber, that Brandon should be hired. But Schreiber was concerned that, because he was Lingner's son, the agency's nepotism policy forbade the housing authority from hiring him as a "regular" employee.

Instead of shutting down the idea, however, Schreiber found a way to make it work. The agency sometimes hires temporary workers through Goodwill — why not have them hire Brandon, then assign him to the housing authority? Schreiber e-mailed Goodwill with the plan.

But that proved expensive. Brandon was paid \$10 an hour, but Goodwill gets a markup for any employees it supplies, which apparently raised Brandon's cost to \$14 an hour. On top of that, Brandon apparently earned over-



time, even though that's unusual for agency employees. In some cases, raised his fee, with Goodwill's surcharge, to \$21 an hour.

In his last week alone, Brandon Lingner reported working a staggering 36 hours of overtime, on top of his 40-hour workweek, Baker found. Brandon Lingner apparently logged the time while helping move furniture into his father's new office.

Ben Chao, the neighborhood stabilization director, refused to sign off on those hours, since he knew the work wasn't for his program. At that point, Baker writes, Doug Lingner signed for it personally.

The lack of adherence to proper procedure on Lingner's part is staggering — as were his excuses when Baker confronted him.

As Baker writes, Lingner repeatedly tried to blame his subordinates. He claimed that it was Chao who urged him to hire his son. ("This needs to happen," Lingner claims that Chao told him.) Lingner accused the agency's grant writer, Janet Belfield, of suggesting Lingner hire his brother "as a way to set Lingner up." Finally, Lingner claimed he signed his own son's time sheet inadvertently, "in a stack of other documents."

But his excuses make no sense, as Baker writes. Again and again, everyone else in the agency contradicted him, and she found the others more credible.

In his interview with Baker, Chao said he was uncomfortable with Brandon Lingner's volunteer job because so many people were asking questions about it. Chao was even more concerned by the paid position, to the point that he intervened with the county and ultimately got it stopped in January.

Meanwhile, the housing authority's human resources director, Schreiber, said that she took Brandon's time sheet directly, and pointedly, to Lingner. She knew it was unusual because Chao had refused to sign off on it.

Finally, the other person Lingner tried to blame, Belfield, was also uncomfortable with his nepotism, as several employees would attest. In fact, when Schreiber got an anonymous packet containing the agency's conflict-of-interest policy last September, she showed it to Lingner and warned him that it was probably from Belfield.

"In the investigator's reasonable judgment, Doug Lingner was not being completely truthful during his interview," Baker concludes. "Based upon the facts gathered from various witnesses which conflict with Lingner's version of events, the investigator found Lingner to lack credibility."

Baker's report is fascinating, and not just because of its level of damning detail. The sequence of events it describes is also noteworthy.

As Baker makes clear, it's only *after* Schreiber warned Lingner about the anonymous packet that he arranged for his son's "temp" position. He knew people were talking, yet pushed the hire anyway.

Lingner himself admitted to Baker that the *New Times* story was "devastating" and something the housing authority should be concerned about. But it's clear from Baker's summary that Lingner never takes responsibility for a single problem that anyone has identified with his management.

He'd rather blame Chao, blame Schreiber, blame Belfield, and blame the media. That's easier than admitting his tenure was disastrous for the housing authority — and easier than admitting he completely screwed up.

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*Bad judgment prevails again at the Housing Authority of Maricopa County.*

S A R A H F E N S K E

# They Fired the Whistleblower

MICHAEL RATCLIFF



Janet Belfield

**I**t's not easy to get fired from the Housing Authority of Maricopa County. Just look at the agency's former executive director, Doug Lingner: He misused agency credit cards, hired at least three relatives, and steered work to political cronies, all in his first two years on the job. He still didn't get the ax.

Nope, even after those misdeeds were exposed (by this newspaper) and confirmed (by an agency-hired investigator), the housing authority's board of commissioners allowed Lingner to resign. They also gave him three months' severance, or roughly \$25,000.

Now, you might think that they're just nice guys. You might think that they let Lingner off easily because they didn't have the heart to kick a man on his way down.

You might think that, that is, until you see what they did to Janet Belfield.

Belfield, a longtime agency employee, is the one who blew the whistle on Lingner. And last week, she was fired by the housing authority. No severance. No chance to resign.

There's not a doubt in my mind that her treatment is directly related to her attempts to expose Lingner.

A 13-year veteran of the housing authority, Belfield declines to discuss exactly whom she talked to regarding Lingner and exactly what she said. She's still appealing her termination; she wants her written appeal to speak for itself.

But the record is clear on three points.

One: Last winter, Belfield reached out to a contact at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, which provides almost all the housing authority's funding. In recent months, that agency has been conducting an on-site investigation — and has publicly blasted housing authority operations under Lingner.

Two: Belfield was also providing information to Tania Huff. Huff had been laid off from the housing authority. Lingner had claimed there was no money to keep her, even as a paid position was being created for his 17-year-old son.

It's Huff who contacted the Reverend Oscar Tillman, president of the local NAACP. Tillman began to push for action from Lingner and then, when he resisted, the board of commissioners.

Huff also went on the record in my earliest

exposé of conditions at the housing authority ("Mr. Big Stuff," February 11). That cover story directly led to Lingner's being put on leave — and, ultimately, to his forced resignation.

The housing authority under Lingner knew Huff was a problem. And they wanted to know who was giving her information.

Three: By its own accounting, the housing authority terminated Belfield for reasons directly related to her contacts with Huff, HUD, and other outside parties.

The official word is that she was fired for "dishonesty." But here's what Belfield's "dishonesty" amounted to: Questioned by an investigator hired by Lingner, *at a time when he was still the agency's director*, she claimed she hadn't provided information to ex-employees such as Huff.

Just 11 days later, she came clean. In a meeting with that same investigator, Belfield admitted to all her contacts.

Never mind. She was fired for her initial "dishonesty" last week.

I'm sure I'm not alone in thinking that Belfield's brief dishonesty wasn't the problem. Not at all.

The problem, I think, was her honesty.

The problem was that she told the truth about Doug Lingner.

Janet Belfield's father was a captain in a small-town police department, a fact she's quick to volunteer. It explains how she sees the world. It also explains why she wasn't content to roll over and let Doug Lingner violate every policy in the housing authority's manual.

"The environment in which I was raised was to do the right thing, and follow the law," she explains. "I was raised to weigh in when speaking up, knowing that there will be consequences."

Belfield came to the housing authority almost 14 years ago. She was hired to be secretary to the director, back when the agency was still part of Maricopa County government. She quickly found herself handling all sorts of unrelated jobs. First, it was human resources, on a part-time basis in addition to her secretarial duties. Then, she became the purchasing agent. Finally, under Lingner, she was named grants writer.

In every case, her bosses sought her out for promotion. She wasn't ambitious. But she was a hard worker. "I loved it," she says

simply. "I loved it."

All that started to change in the summer of 2008, when Lingner was hired as the agency's new director. He hadn't been the first choice of staffers — as I reported at the time, they preferred a man with experience in HUD regulations and housing authority work. But thanks in part to Lingner's political ties, the board of commissioners chose him anyway.

Today, people at the housing authority have been trying to dissociate themselves from Lingner, and with good cause: His brief tenure was disastrous.

But while Lingner was director, he got his way. When, for example, he decided to get his 17-year-old son a paid position at the housing authority — in clear violation of the agency's anti-nepotism policy — employees raised only nominal concerns, according to a report from the agency's investigator.

Rather than complain to commissioners, in fact, the agency's human resources director actually figured out a scheme in which the teenager could be paid off the books. That cost the agency more than it would've had Brandon Lingner been hired outright, because his hiring came through a temp agency — which tacked on its surcharge to his hourly rate.

The board of commissioners didn't seem interested in interfering anyway. When Huff was let go to make way for Lingner's son, she tried desperately to interest commissioners in her plight. No dice; even the Reverend Tillman couldn't get them to intervene.

As an employee who depended on the housing authority for her livelihood, Belfield was understandably nervous about open rebellion. But she made her distaste for Lingner's methods clear — to the point that when he got an anonymous letter criticizing his nepotism, he told other employees it must have come from Belfield.

Sure enough, Belfield soon began supplying information both to Huff and other contacts. "I was hoping that it would light a candle, and some sort of movement would happen," she says.

That did happen, eventually. But first, Lingner came after Belfield.

In January, Belfield was placed on paid leave. She was given no information about what she'd supposedly done for nearly five months.

Today, the facts are clear. Lingner trumped

up a reason to investigate Belfield — and hired both an attorney and a forensic computer analyst to dig deeply into her work habits. And though Lingner's initial allegation was found to be meritless, by that point, they'd dug up enough dirt to get her on a technicality.

In January, documents show, Lingner hired attorney Kate Baker to investigate whether Belfield had steered work to favored contractors. He also used agency funds for a full forensic analysis of her hard drive.

The first investigation turned out to be a deplorable waste of money. Baker found no evidence that Belfield had done anything unethical.

Lingner, Baker wrote, "admitted he did not have the facts to prove it." Baker's investigation yielded nothing, either. "The evidence gathered to date does not establish the truth of that allegation," Baker concluded.

But the forensic analysis did turn up a few useful tidbits, including the fact that Belfield had once browsed Facebook while at work. (That's not exactly shocking, but it's still a policy violation.)

More importantly, she'd also forwarded e-mails about housing authority matters to her personal account — and, from there, to several contacts.

To me, there's a question of pettiness here. Who hasn't forwarded work-related documents to personal accounts or to friends? Equally importantly, each e-mail generated by the housing authority is, technically, a public record.

More to the point, Belfield had a higher purpose in her forwards. It wasn't just that she disliked Lingner — although that's clear from the paper trail. She was also intent on making a written record of the shenanigans she was witnessing.

On March 5, Baker confronted Belfield about her e-mail activity.

At the time, a current of fear ran high through the office. My story about Lingner had just been published, and though Lingner had been placed on paid leave, he was still the executive director.

The acting director, Karen Mofford, made that clear to employees. At a staff meeting, she explained that the commissioners had placed Lingner on leave, but he stood by Mofford's side at the meeting. Employees tell *New Times* that she made a point **continued on page 13**

of saying he was still the director and still in charge. (Mofford denied the allegation.)

And even though the commissioners had stipulated that Lingner was to have no contact with employees, several of them called *New Times* that day to report that he lingered on premises for at least four hours after the meeting. He was also reported to be on-site that weekend.

It was hard not to be paranoid.

So when Baker questioned Belfield about whether she'd been in contact with former employees, and whether she'd complained about Lingner, Belfield initially said no.

When Baker pressed, Belfield said she didn't want to talk without legal representation.

Two weeks later, though, on March 16, Belfield returned for an interview. She came alone, and she admitted the truth.

She had forwarded e-mails, she said. She was, in fact, in contact with various former coworkers, she acknowledged, although she declined to identify Huff specifically.

Baker's report shows that she'd asked Belfield about the owner of an e-mail account identified as "soulsistah254." Belfield wouldn't confirm it, but Baker reports that the handle belongs to Huff.

Baker's report also notes that Belfield had forwarded e-mails to Sanford Prouty, an employee at Phoenix's HUD office.

Belfield had no contact with the housing authority, or its attorneys, for months.

In April, Lingner was allowed to resign. His former deputy, Mofford, became interim di-

rector and was given a raise for her troubles.

Then, out of the blue last month, attorneys representing the housing authority summoned Belfield and allowed her to peruse Baker's final report.

And though the report clears Belfield of the more serious allegations of steering contracts, it does delve into her initial dishonesty and Internet use. She "misused the e-mail system" by "sending and receiving personal e-mails, using the e-mail system to disparage HAMC employees and spread gossip, bring discredit to the HAMC, and breaching confidentiality regarding ongoing personnel matters," Baker wrote.

At that point, Baker added a defensive footnote: "The issue is not that she held unfavorable opinions about Lingner and others, but that she used work time, HAMC computers, the HAMC e-mail system, and HAMC information — some of it confidential — to further her personal agenda of disparaging Lingner and the entity."

Given a chance to respond, Belfield tackled the footnote head-on.

"Any ridicule brought to Lingner or the agency was brought on by Lingner through his actions," she wrote, "and his denigration of the entity continues by those that remain in contact with him to support his personal mission to dismiss me, which, in my opinion, is retaliation in a most deliberate form."

Indeed, it's hard to imagine a more clear-cut whistleblower case.

And yet, last week, Mofford, the interim director, fired Belfield. Mofford's letter did not mention her Facebook surfing. It only dealt with her supposed "dishonesty" on March 5.

"Your dishonesty during Ms. Baker's initial interview cannot be tolerated," she wrote.

Pardon my cynicism, but that's bunk, and Mofford knows it.

It's not Belfield's brief dishonesty they can't tolerate. It's that her honesty led to Lingner's ouster, to HUD's on-site visit, to the housing authority being forced to clean up its act.

It's funny to me that the board tiptoed around Lingner's resignation, trying desperately to save itself from a lawsuit, even when it was clear that he had no real ability to fight back.

Yet by firing Belfield, Mofford has acted in a way that almost guarantees the housing authority will have a legal mess on its hands. If Belfield wants to sue, I'm confident that she has one hell of a case.

Federal law clearly protects whistleblowers. Meanwhile, a 13-year veteran with a clean record has been axed for something this petty? A good lawyer would have a field day with this one.

But I'm not actually all that confident that Belfield wants to sue. What she really wants, she says, is change.

It's clear that problems at the housing authority go far beyond Lingner. We now know that they extend to the deputies who enabled him, to the interim director now doing his dirty work, and to the mindset that it's somehow a crime to forward public records to people who might bring about much-needed reform.

"Anybody that runs on government funds on any level, there's supposed to be transparency," Belfield tells me. "That's a given. It's my tax dollars. It's yours!"

"The HAMC has lost all sight of why it exists," she says. "They exist to assist people." But it's hard to focus on affordable housing when you waste six months trying to help your former director cover his ass.

**SO LONG, FAREWELL**

In case you haven't heard, I'm leaving Arizona to work as the managing editor at *New Times*' sister paper in St. Louis, the *Riverfront Times*. And it's fitting, I suppose, that my final column in Phoenix is about the Housing Authority of Maricopa County.

To me, this story exemplifies everything I hate about Phoenix — as well as everything I've grown to love. I don't think there's anywhere else in the country where con men prosper so quickly, where rules are broken so casually, where the rule of law is something that's enforced only on the poor and the alien.

In almost any other big city, a guy like Doug Lingner would still be setting tile, not given the keys to a major nonprofit organization. In other places, people would be up in arms demanding Joe Arpaio's resignation. (Say what you will about immigration, but this clown has squandered \$45 million in lawyer fees and insurance payments! \$45 million!) In other states, too, a guy facing a credible threat of disbarment — ahem, Andrew Thomas! — would not be considered a viable candidate for state attorney general.

Let's face it: Shysters thrive here. Too many people are transplants who don't care. Too many people hew too closely to ideology and have no interest in getting at the truth.

And yet, I've met more brave people in this state than anywhere else I've lived. It's been easy to be a reporter here. For every con man, there's someone willing to turn him in. For every Doug Lingner, there's a Janet Belfield.

I may not miss the dry white heat of Phoenix summers. But I will miss having this weekly soapbox. And I'll miss the brave people of Arizona, too.