

The Sunday Times
Perspective

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SUNDAY CONVERSATION

Paige Gebhardt Cognetti

SUNDAY TIMES FILE

Paige Gebhardt Cognetti is in her first full term as mayor of Scranton and her second term overall. The Beaverton, Oregon, native is the first female mayor of the Electric City and the first person not from the region in the modern era to be elected mayor. She recently gave an interview to Times-Shamrock's News Engine podcast. These excerpts have been edited for space but the entire, two-part interview can be heard at thetimes-tribune.com/blogs/news_engine

On being from somewhere else

Gebhardt Cognetti: I actually am friends with the mayor in my hometown, Beaverton, Oregon. I saw her a couple of weeks back and we laugh because she's the mayor there. I'm the mayor here. We're both mayors. Having that different perspective, from Beaverton, Oregon, and all the other places I've lived, to bring that to the city of Scranton, I think is very valuable. And what's great about being able to build a team is that the team we have at the city is a mix of people born and raised in Scranton, and a group of people that aren't from Scranton.

When you have a mix of people and perspectives, that's how you make good decisions.

That's how you go around the table. You disagree, you come to the plan that fits the moment and does the best for the most people and is the most responsible. You have a much more robust process if you have people that have a mix of viewpoints.

Scranton's legacy of corruption

GC: It doesn't have to be this way. If people do vote for good government, I think we're seeing a lot of that now.

I think people are hungry for authenticity and good government and people that are going to look out for them and not forget them. And it's a story here in Scranton of energy and a positive outlook for the future. In spite of the past —

we don't have to dwell on the past, right, we need to just learn from it — (let's) make sure that we are building a foundation for a future that is good for everyone.

As we go on, we'll keep recruiting good candidates that want to do the same thing, want to work with us, and keep proving to people that government can work for them. Because it's not just the people that run for office, it's also about people getting out to vote, it's about people building their community, feeling invested in their community.

The better we do serving people at the local level, the better people are going to feel invested, the more they'll give back to their community and will be stronger for it.

Getting Scranton on track

GC: We're on the right track. It's an interesting battle, because it's not just about local government, right? It's state government, it's federal level, where you have varying degrees of trust.

I think that the trust level goes up as you get closer to home, which is great for us at the local level. But right now, we're in this moment where

the national headlines, really kind of rule over everything.

So as much as we work hard at the local level, and we're going to keep doing that every single day, you're still fighting some of those forces of people not trusting at the state level, or not trusting at the national level.

But we have to focus on what we can control. And what we can control is how well we're serving the people of Scranton. And if we keep doing that, well, if we keep taking those phone calls, and then going out and ticketing that house that's not cutting their grass, if we go out, and we keep finding the people that have been hoarding tires in their backyard, and actually take them to the magistrate.

These are very specific examples. If we keep doing a good job, we keep supporting our public safety departments that are excellent, the best in this region, we keep supporting our DPW and making sure that they are safe out there and that they are able to maintain our flood-control areas as best they can. We're gonna keep fighting for funding for them.

We're doing the things that are the right thing to do for

our community, for our people in our future. We keep doing that, I think that trust is going to be there. So try to focus on the things you can control.

American Rescue Plan funds

GC: A couple of weeks ago, council passed our American Rescue Plan spending plan. So we have an outline of the \$68.7 million. We have the 34 and a half million dollars. Now the second payment will come to us over the summer. So we are out of the gate. And we're pretty shortly going to be releasing the grants for small businesses, for startups, for nonprofits, for grantees to apply for education catch-up and financial literacy for recovery, addiction recovery services for public health, for violence prevention.

There's a host of things that we'll be putting out for people to apply for those grants over the summer. And a lot of what we're doing is parks. A lot of it to the infrastructure point is stormwater. And we've got a lot of work to do to put together studies to figure out how we're going to attack it but stormwater is a key piece of what the American Rescue Plan is there to cover and we know that we've got a lot of work to do underneath us here in Scranton. So we will be using a healthy chunk of the funds for stormwater.

Making tough decisions

GC: I am the mayor for the whole city. I'm not going to beat around the bush, right? I am going to go into a meeting, I'm gonna be honest with people. If I as a mayor in a small city can't be honest, then why would anyone trust anybody at any level? Right? So I think the trust has to come from person to person communication at the local level if we have any hope of doing the

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DOMENICK'S DISHONESTY KEEPS KEY FIASCO GOING

This newspaper gave Debi Domenick several opportunities to come clean. So did a private investigator hired with taxpayer money to uncover how she procured a key to the county prison Administration Building.

Again and again, the Lackawanna County commissioner lied. To our reporters. To her colleagues. To the constituents she swore an oath to serve.

Investigator James Sulima's 147-page report — a copy of which was obtained by The Sunday Times — makes few direct

conclusions and raises more questions than answers. Sulima earned \$75 an hour to find out who gave Domenick the key.

His report does not answer the key question. It does present a host of facts, exhibits and interview transcripts that leave no reasonable doubt

about the falseness of Domenick's claims that she doesn't "remember" who gave her the key and that she "never used it."

Domenick doubled down on Friday, telling Sunday Times Staff Writer Borys Krawczeniuk she is the victim of a "witch hunt" because she "holds prison officials accountable." With her memory, I'm surprised Domenick can identify them.

NOTE: There is way too much evidence in the report to unpack in one crack. Today, I will stick to the hits.

It was never believable that Domenick "can't remember" who gave her a key to the prison, or that she "never used it." Without drawing a conclusion, Sulima's report makes a convincing case that the key was given to Domenick by Deputy Warden Krista Purvis, a longtime personal friend with a knack for remembering events others say didn't happen.

For instance, Purvis told Sulima she wasn't present when Domenick received the key, but was there when Warden Tim Betti authorized Lt. Joseph Cianflone to have it made. Betti and Cianflone have wildly different recollections. Cianflone, for example, said Purvis asked him to make a key for Domenick, and that he refused unless the warden authorized it.

From the start of this time-lapse fiasco, Domenick insisted that Betti knew she had the key. He vehemently denied any knowledge or authorization of Domenick's key. Sulima's report settles the matter definitively — via polygraph.

It's delicious that the idea of submitting to lie detector tests was introduced by Purvis, long considered the most likely source of the commissioner's key. In an interview with Sulima, the private investigator pointed out that such keys can be copied without supervision at self-service kiosks at any big-box home improvement store. According to a transcript, Purvis agreed.

"And you didn't take the key that was given to you, have it made and provide her with one?" Sulima asked.

"Never," Purvis replied. "Swear to God. I would take a polygraph for that."

"You would take a polygraph to —" Sulima asked.

"Absolutely," Purvis said, so eager she cut him off.

Purvis said Cianflone made Domenick's key. Cianflone said he didn't.

"I'm promising you that it was a key made by him for Debi," she told the investigator. "I will take a polygraph and swear on my grandma's grave. It was for Debi Domenick, and Joe made them."

A funny thing happened on the way to the cemetery. Betti and Cianflone took polygraph tests and passed with "no signs of deception." Purvis failed to show up for a scheduled test and declined when Sulima tried to reschedule. Domenick also took a pass, treating another opportunity to bolster her credibility as "bullying."

Also, polygraphs are "unreliable," Domenick said. She would know.

In the credibility contest, the score is Team Betti/Cianflone, 2, Purvis/Domenick, 0. Kudos to prison board member and District Attorney Mark Powell, who called the game as he sees it.

"One version of what happened is consistent with individuals who passed a lie-detector test; the other is riddled with inconsistencies, contradicted by direct evidence, and the parties involved refuse to

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CHRIS KELLY
Kelly's World