

On Sunday October 17, on her Facebook Live show “Sunday’s with Shawyn”, Mount Vernon Mayor Shawyn Patterson Howard was asked to address the “financial mishandling” at the Mount Vernon Public Library.

This is what she said (Minute: 33:50 (<https://www.facebook.com/MayorSPH/videos/414317246885849>):

*“The City of Mount Vernon does not oversee the library. The library’s finances are overseen by the school district and so, you know, that would be a better question for the Board of Trustees. I know that the library is going through an audit. There have been some preliminary audits saying that certain expenses have not been logged correctly but I know that the library Board of Trustees has hired an external firm to work with them in handling that, so I’m having conversations with them as to where that’s going. But look, just like the City of Mount Vernon we’re all going through audits, and we have to see what’s happening, what’s happened on the backend with the money, and I expect to get an update from the school board trustees who oversee the library along with the library trustees. And so, you know, it’s nothing has been said that there’s been mishandling or misappropriation of funds right now based on what I’ve read, it says there have been funds that have been filed maybe in the wrong, um...what do you want to call those...financial code lines, and so, you know, I’m looking forward to get further information and will continue to have my eye on that.”*

#### My Comments

1. It was correct for the mayor to say that the City of Mount Vernon does not oversee library finances. However, the school district does not oversee the library finances either. The school district is just a financial conduit for the library- it collects the taxes used to finance library operations and transfers those monies to bank accounts controlled by the library board of trustees. *The Board of Trustees of the Mount Vernon Public Library is responsible for ensuring those funds are used and accounted for properly.*
2. Mayor Patterson Howard said, *“There have been some preliminary audits saying that certain expenses have not been logged correctly.”*
  - a. It is not clear what *“preliminary audits”* the mayor is referencing. I have found no mention of *“preliminary audits”* in Library meeting minutes. On 11/19/19, Library Trustee Cathlin Gleason reported that the auditors issued an *“unofficial report”*, however, that report has not been released to the public. If the library board shared that report with the Mayor *but not with the public* that would be problematic.
  - b. Regarding the mayor’s assessment that *“certain expenses have not been logged correctly”*, that is probably true, but it is grossly misleading to leave it at that given what we know from the DSJCPA report issued last month, and the comments made at library board meetings by Marcus Griffith. The issues with library finances go far beyond expenses not being *“logged correctly”*.
3. The mayor said that *“nothing has been said that there’s been mishandling, or misappropriation of funds right now. Based on what I’ve read it says there have been funds that have been filed maybe in the wrong, um...what do you want to call those...financial code lines.”* As with her earlier comment that expenses weren’t *“logged correctly”*, it is misleading to suggest that the issues with library finances are as mundane as using the wrong *“financial code lines”*. According to the DSJCPA report, over 1400 transactions totaling close to five million dollars were missing from the general ledger, bank accounts have not been reconciled in years, and *“questionable”* debit card transactions have been found, *“that are not consistent with a library’s normal course of business”*. This suggests

systemic fiscal mismanagement and negligent oversight that goes far beyond humdrum data entry errors.

So, what's going on here? Where is the disconnect between what we know so far about the library's finances and the mayor's casual assessment that it's a matter of expenses being logged in the wrong place or with the wrong code? It seems likely that the mayor is downplaying the issue because two candidates that she supports for elected office in the City of Mount Vernon– Cathlin Gleason (for City Council) and Daren Morton (for Comptroller)- have been directly responsible for overseeing library finances:

- Cathlin Gleason- on the board of trustees of the library since 2016 and chair of board's finance committee.
- Daren Morton- on the board of trustees from 2014 to 2017 and chair of the finance committee from 2014 to 2016.

In fact, Gleason and Morton were on the finance committee together in 2016.

A more principled response from the mayor might read something like this:

*"Look, I'm not an accountant, but the information in the DSJCPA report is a real concern. As an elected official one of my most basic responsibilities is to safeguard taxpayer money. If that wasn't done at the library it's a problem and the people responsible for that problem need to be held accountable."*

Instead, the mayor stands before the public and says things that anybody who has been half awake knows are designed to downplay the seriousness of the issues and shift accountability (to the school board) because the reality does not fit the political script of the local democratic party. Obviously, she is just trying to toe the party line.

This is a wonderful example of putting politics before principles.