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Case Study Analysis: OPPL spending on Robin Wagner/Wendy Xie Syracuse Adventure in October 2014

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Watch the animated version of "Robin & Wendy's Excellent Adventure"
here:  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tRkROJw

Recently, we used the Freedom of Information Act to obtain documents related to a trip that Library Assistant Director Robin Wagner and sidekick Wendy Xie took to Syracuse, New York (in October 2014). Let's analyze what they spent on this trip and see if the public benefitted at all
from spending so much taxpayer money on transporting, housing, and feeding these two individuals in arguably one of the most glamorous cities in New York state (aside from Manhattan…and Rochester…and Albany…and Buffalo) for four days.

**Document #1: $600.00 Invoice for Robin Wagner and (Guest) Wendy Xie for Polaris conference attendance**

So, it cost $600 total just to get Robin and Wendy in through the door for this Polaris event. Now, this is not a conference about the 1960s and 1970s ballistic missile system Polaris, but some kind of library thing. At first blush, it would seem okay to send these people to a library related event (as opposed to sending them to something on ballistic missiles), but let's think about this for a minute: why does it cost $600 for them to learn about something that the Library is paying for? Polaris is a system that the Library is paying to use to be part of some kind of book-sharing thing. So, Polaris is a for-profit company that is receiving tax money on a regular basis for the Library to use this system. Why would the OPPL have to pay to have two employees learn how to use a system that they are paying a monthly or annual fee to use? Wouldn't that kind of be like if you leased a car and had to pay money each month for a lease…but the car dealership also made you pay $600 for you and a sidekick to go and learn about how to drive the car? Makes no sense.

Also, since the fee to learn about Polaris was so high…was it really necessary to have both Robin and Wendy go? Why couldn't the two of them have held a contest on who takes the best notes and gives the best account of presentations. They could have done this in a fun way, by maybe putting a movie on in a meeting room at the Library and then taken notes on it. Whoever was deemed to have most accurately recounting the movie in her notes would have won the chance to go to Syracuse. The expectation being that this woman would be the best one to take excellent notes and come back to tell everyone at the Library about Polaris. So instead of sending a note-taker plus a sidekick, the OPPL could have just sent the best note-taker they had and saved at least $300 on registration fees alone.
Now, let's pause for a minute and wonder why there was a need to go to Syracuse New York in the first place. It's the year 2014. Why couldn't Robin or Wendy have learned about Polaris via YouTube videos or done Skype/FaceTime with someone at Polaris and received instructions that way? Why was there a need to travel anywhere when everything today can be done virtually? It's a computer system we are talking about here. You mean to tell me that a computer system cannot be learned about through videos and Skyping over the computer? That's not credible.

The other issue is that people around the country come to Chicago for training. Chicago, in fact, is one of the top training destinations in the country. People who live in Syracuse get sent to Chicago for training. So, why are two public employees in Chicagoland being sent to Syracuse for training? You mean to tell us that there was no Polaris training to be found in Chicago? It's not credible that Syracuse is the only place this training happens. There has to be Polaris training in Chicago.
The OPPL should have banded together with other Illinois libraries and demanded that the Polaris company fly out a trainer to do this event in our area. That would have been much less expensive, as librarians from all around Chicagoland could have gotten the training for a fraction of the cost of sending people like Robin and Wendy to Syracuse for the training.

**Document #2: $544.40 in airfare to Syracuse for Robin and Wendy's Big Adventure**
When you add the airfare to the conference admission fees, you are now at $1,144.40 to send two people to New York state for training that they should have been able to do in Chicago for about $30 tops. Are costs like this justifiable when the Library claims it is broke and has to QUADRUPLE the tax levy just to break even? People who claim they are broke should not be sending people on $1,144.40 trips to one of the most romantic and picturesque cities in the Empire State.
Documents #3 and #4 and #5: $549.99 in hotel, food, taxi, and other miscellaneous expenses for Robin & Wendy's Syracuse Sojourn

Okay, so now we are at a total of $600.00 + $544.40 + $549.99 = $1,694.39 to send Robin and Wendy to Syracuse. It looks like Robin and Wendy shared a hotel room and stayed at a reasonably priced Holiday Inn. However, it was strange that they booked a room at the $150 rate when they could have acquired a government rate of $86.00/night, since they are government employees and hotels are compelled to honor the government rate for all government employees (be they federal, county, or local). Maybe Robin and Wendy don't know about the government rate, but Holiday Inn does indeed offer it. Instead, they paid the conference rate of $150.00 when they could have saved some taxpayer money by insisting on the government rate of $86.00.
PLEASE MAKE CHECK PAYABLE TO
Robin O. Wagner

AMOUNT
$549.99
10-4-20

EXPLANATION
10-7-14 Taxi - Syracuse Airport to Hotel - R. Wagner & W. Xie $26.00
10-7-14 Lunch - R. Wagner & W. Xie - Ruby Tuesday $32.64
10-8-14 Dinner - R. Wagner & W. Xie - KFC $14.01
10-7-14 10-10-14 Hotel - R. Wagner & W. Xie - Holiday Inn $477.94
10-7-14 Mileage to W. Xie then O'hare 45.5mi = $25.48
10-10-14 Mileage from O'hare to W. Xie to OPPL 45.5mi = $25.48

$600.95

REQUESTED BY:
Robin O. Wagner

DEPARTMENT
Admin

APPROVED
For food, Robin and Wendy didn't splurge. Ruby Tuesdays is a good place for them to have eaten and they didn't go overboard. KFC is also very reasonable. It looks like possibly they either bought some meals on their own and did not ask for reimbursements or some meals were included with the conference price. So that was a savings as well. The taxi fare to and from the airport in Syracuse seems fair…but we think it's ridiculous that they are forever charging taxpayers for gas mileage reimbursements. We know that "everyone does it", but considering that Robin and Wendy got a free trip to one of New York state's treasures they should have picked up their own gas mileage to the airport (where taxpayers were already paying for them to fly across the country, stay in a hotel, and eat on the public dime).
In terms of food spending, Robin and Wendy were certainly better than Mary Weimar and Bridget Bittman. Those two regularly rack up huge bills in restaurants or charge taxpayers for weird things like $5.00 here for cinnamon creme cake and a pop or lunchtime treats from Chipotle or Corner Bakery, just because they don't feel like dipping into their own wallets for the goodies. Robin and Wendy seem to have actively tried to limit their spending on food…and we're glad for that. They are definitely not the norm at the OPPL in that regard.

**FINAL ANALYSIS: OPPL claims Robin and Wendy learned nothing, took no notes, and brought nothing back from the conference.**

A big problem we have with this Syracuse trip, and why we think it was wasted, was that the OPPL insists that Robin and Wendy took no notes while they were there and that they brought back nothing from the conference. We specifically FOIA-ed their notes, their learnings from this trip, and anything they brought back from the trip. We also asked for anything they prepared as a report or presentation to give to others when they got back…and for any report they gave the Board on what they learned on their $1,694.39 sojourn in Syracuse. The OPPL says they learned nothing, took no notes, and brought nothing back. They also claim that Robin and Wendy didn't
share any learnings with anyone, didn't give any presentations, and didn't do a presentation for
the Board.

The public should have a big problem with this.

Technically, there's no documentation proving that Robin and Wendy actually attended this
conference. Yes, they paid for registration (to the tune of $600.00) but they did not produce any
ID badges, conference wristbands, conference agendas, etc. So, conceivably they could have just
used the Polaris training as an excuse to have a Thelma & Louise style adventure in the Empire
State. Fly into Syracuse with the conference as an excuse….and then have a devil-may-care
adventure for three days on taxpayers. While it's not probable that they did this, it is possible
since we have no proof that they went to a single training session or event at the conference.
They could have sat in their room the whole time watching TV or having pillow fights. The
OPPL has not established otherwise and has a duty to do just that.

It's bizarre that two people spent $1,694.39 for a four day excursion to Syracuse but took no
notes. So, there was nothing worthwhile that was said in those four days that would have
warranted note-taking? Maybe the two of them have photographic memories. But is that likely?
If someone does not take notes at a conference when it's a private company footing the bill, that
person is deemed unworthy of attending future conferences. In the private sector, if an employer
foots the bill for $1,694.39 worth of business trip, the company expects to see notes from the
trip, a binder brought back from the conference, and a presentation and report on learnings to be
shared with other employees.

At the OPPL, in contrast, people like Robin and Wendy are sent to these events but they bring
back no learnings. They claim they took no notes and learned nothing. They refuse to show any
proof they actually attended the events of the conference and didn't just sit in their rooms the
whole time, staring at each other for hours and daring the other one not to laugh or challenging
each other to belching contests.

Have you ever heard of anything as ridiculous as these people insisting that they take no notes,
bring nothing back, and learn nothing from these expensive conferences?

That's why this is such a total waste to send people like Robin and Wendy to these things. Here,
the OPPL cries that it has to raise the tax levy (QUADRUPLE IT) and we see that $1,694.39 was
wasted sending Robin and Wendy to Syracuse, when the Library could have just sent two large
potatoes or two unwanted Halloween pumpkins to Syracuse by FedEx, have them sit there for
four days, and ship them back again. That would have cost maybe $50 total for the two potatoes
or two pumpkins (depending on weight).

And the OPPL would have received just as many learnings, notes, and documents out of the trip
as they did with Robin and Wendy.