

Department of Family Services

WHY NOT WAYNE NEWTON?

IF THOMAS MORTON CAN BECOME DFS DIRECTOR, CAN ANYONE?

By GLENN CAMPBELL

As the County of Clark bravely marches down the aisle toward its arranged marriage with a new DFS director, we cannot help but wonder if a credible alternative has been overlooked.

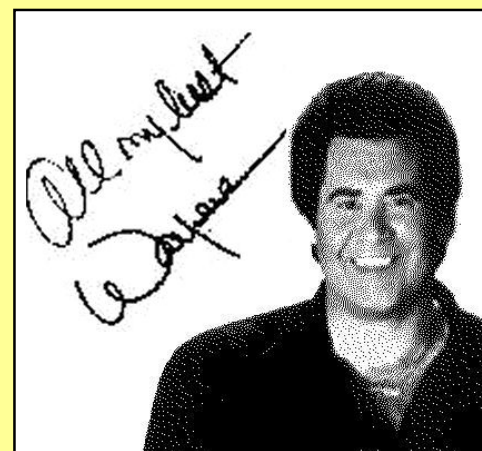
What about Wayne?

The ceremony is scheduled for July 5 at 9:15am in the County Commission Chambers. The bride has wiped the tears from her eyes, and her crying jag of the past seven weeks has nearly abated. The groom chosen for her is looking dapper and sly as always, reminding us of Sylvester the Cat after consuming Tweety the Bird.

It will be a simple ceremony. The County Manager will say a few words about the "caliber" of the candidate, his "out-of-the-box ideas" and his "impressive list of accomplishments." The groom himself will also speak and will no doubt dazzle the crowd with his grasp of child welfare issues. The County Manager will say, "I do," on behalf of the bride, and the union will be complete.

It's a done deal, at least according to the county's press release, which makes no mention of approval by the Commission. The groom has been chosen. The dowry has been paid. There's no use crying over spilt milk. (Now there you go crying again. Just relax and breathe deeply. Everything is going to be just fine.)

There is no point in dreaming about what "might have been." There might have been a job listing published so other candidates could apply. There might have been consideration given to recruitment from within. There might have been some form of



input from the various constituencies of DFS, each with their own perspective on what is needed. At the least, there might have been a committee formed to look into this one candidate and test his claimed credentials.

But this is too cumbersome. To consider other candidates or look too deeply at this one would only slow down the process. The

need, after all, is urgent – as it always is – so there is no time for democratic safeguards.

“Just trust me,” the County Manager seems to be saying, and we really want to, but there are too many red flags. The deeper we look at Thomas Morton, the more we feel railroaded. The obvious innuendo is that he was “juiced” into this position through hidden connections and probably would not have survived any competitive process.

The groom is probably a very nice man. He’s just not our man. That’s why you can’t stop crying.

Think about it: If Thomas Morton can become DFS director, with no agency management experience, no competitive process, and not even, it seems, so much as a Google search of his background, then why can’t anyone? Why not you? Why not us?

Why not Wayne Newton?

We know the deal’s been done, but forgive us if we daydream. Thomas Morton may have “over 35 years of child welfare experience,” but Wayne Newton has almost 50 (yes, fifty!) years of experience performing in Las Vegas. Which is more important: topical experience or local experience?

If Thomas Morton and Wayne Newton were to each contact the media regarding some child welfare issue, who would get more attention?

We’re fantasizing, of course. Wayne Newton never founded a Child Welfare Institute, like Morton did. Then again, Wayne Newton never drove a Child Welfare Institute into the ground, like Morton also did.

This is a little thing the county failed to mention in its press release, which lists the Institute – in the present tense – as Morton’s first qualification. It should have been the past tense, as the organization has not renewed its corporate registration for 2006. Its offices are vacant, and its largely discredited foster parent training program has been transferred to another agency.

The organization’s 2003 tax return (the latest year we have found) shows the Institute having only four employees, kicking around in an office space designed for 14. And this was before the Institute lost a key federal contract.

Wayne Newton has had his own federal problems. There was the celebrated income tax case a few years back, but we understand it is behind him now.

As long as the underlying issues have been resolved, we are willing to forgive any difficulties that either man may have had

with the Feds (such as the “formal congressional complaint” that Morton acknowledged in his televised interview with Jon Ralston). We just want to know about them and how they were resolved.

Wayne Newton has never “played key roles in reforming the child welfare systems in Illinois and Alabama, two of the most successful child welfare reform efforts of the past decade.”

Then again, maybe Morton didn’t either. Yes, the child protective systems in Illinois and Alabama have been greatly improved since court ordered restructuring, and Morton’s Institute has held various contracts in these states, but we have found no evidence, apart from Morton’s own words, for causality between the two.

On Aug. 20, 2005, the New York Times published an in-depth article about the turnaround in Alabama: “Once Woeful, Alabama Is Model in Child Welfare.”

Thomas Morton is never mentioned.

In some ways, Wayne Newton and Thomas Morton are comparable. Neither has had any experience managing a public agency. Both are available immediately: Morton, sans Institute, now appears jobless, while Newton’s bookings have been thinning in recent years due to voice problems.

Wayne Newton has never been a social worker. According to the county press release, Morton “served as a case worker for Washtenaw County Juvenile Court in Ann Arbor, Mich., from 1970 to 1971.”

In other words, Morton has no experience as a public administrator but about one year’s experience as a bona fide social worker... 35 years ago!

Wayne Newton has contributed his time and money to a number of worthy causes, including USO tours and charity benefits around the country. In his music, he consistently expresses a message of love, which is always important.

Wait! This is insane! Wayne Newton is an ENTERTAINER. He makes pretty noises with his mouth, and people pay him for it. Thomas Morton is a CONSULTANT. He makes pretty noises with his mouth and on paper and agencies pay him for it. It is totally different.

But neither job is the same as actual management experience. Leading hundreds of employees, massaging the press, placating interest groups and dodging bullets from every direction are a lot more complicated than singing songs and writing reports to please an audience.

Wayne Newton has never publicly expressed any theories regarding child welfare (except, perhaps, that every child should be loved), while Morton seems to have plenty of them. We just don’t understand what they are. His website is filled with hundreds of monographs and pontifications, most of them indecipherable to the common reader.

For example, where does the candidate stand on “risk assessment”? We know Newton’s answer (“Huh?”) but what about Morton’s?

Risk assessment is when a social worker comes into a home and tries to decide, by some methodology, whether a child is at risk of future abuse. The results of the analysis may determine whether or not the child is removed from that home for his safety.

Morton has his own risk assessment theories, but we have yet to find anyone in Clark County who understands them. All we know is that his views provoke great controversy among academics. Simply put, if his theories are wrong or flawed, more children, in the aggregate, are going to die.

Wayne Newton is a blank slate, whereas Thomas Morton is a black box. Who knows what is going on in there?

Then there’s the character issue. It may be only a surface thing, but Wayne Newton comes across in interviews as Mr. Nice Guy, while Morton flashes a smirk and sometimes appears evasive.

Jon Ralston, in his 5/19 Face-to-Face interview with Morton, asked: “Chris Baird of the Wisconsin-based Children’s Research Center said about Thomas Morton, ‘He’s someone who will say anything to promote his own point of view.’ There’s stuff on the internet about how you fabricated stuff and distorted stuff. I mean, nobody here knows who you are, Mr. Morton. We’re taking Thom Reilly, who has been involved in this field for years, at his word. Why do people say these things about you?”

Morton then launched into an attack on Baird and never answered the question.

What can we do? Apparently nothing. Our duty now is to grow up and face reality. No dashing crooner will be rescuing us.

There are simple, time-tested solutions to all of our concerns: They are trust, faith, selective blindness and respect for ones elders. The County Manager knows who we should marry, so we are bound to obey.

Now please stop weeping, dear, and put on your wedding dress.

–GC