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The Developer Who Got Away

In October 2007, Michael Rankin, developer and former Economic Development Director for Branson, Missouri, and Evan Shark, developer from Branson, Missouri, were brought in by Clyde Sare, a local businessman, as potential developers in Bartlesville. They met with Justin McLaughlin, Business Development Director for the BDC, to discuss projects and obtain information about Bartlesville. Mr. Rankin requested demographic information, community profiles, and square-foot lease rates for both downtown and outlying areas. McLaughlin did not have the information in a format that Rankin thought acceptable and which he was used to providing when he was Economic Development Director in Branson.

In November 2007, Shelby Navarro, Tulsa architect who is currently involved with an investment group re-developing 70 buildings in the Pearl District of Tulsa, and J. Elliot Nelson, owner of McNally's Pub in Tulsa and of other pubs and restaurants in both Tulsa and Oklahoma City, came to Bartlesville at Clyde Sare's invitation. They toured the BRTA buildings at Second Street and Keeler Avenue with the idea of developing them and other buildings downtown into a dining/entertainment/retail complex. Mr. Nelson was already committed to installing a pub at the Pioneer Building on Dewey Avenue.

After the BRTA overturned the Design Review Committee's decision regarding construction of a metal building in the Downtown District, Mr. Rankin and his associates, as well as Shelby Navarro and J. Elliot Nelson, decided to put their plans on hold. They were concerned that such lax enforcement of design guidelines would be harmful to future investments. In Rankin's words, "There needs to be a stable environment to protect the investors who risk their capital in a historical district."

At this time there was an increasing effort to remove Ron Nikkel as mayor among the old City Council members and other members of the existing power structure. The reason cited was that Mayor Nikkel was hurting economic development in Bartlesville. Various business owners and developers were approached to provide evidence of this, including the mis-use of a letter from one Gerald Coast sent to City Manager Ed Gordon. Rumors were also being circulated that Rankin and his associates, as well as another restaurateur who owns McNally's Pub in Tulsa, had pulled out of Bartlesville because of Mayor Nikkel's actions.

Mr. Rankin heard of these rumors and approached the mayor of Bartlesville in an effort to set the record straight. He asked to speak to the City Council and request their help in protecting any future investments in the City. In response to Mr. Rankin's request, Mayor Ron Nikkel asked Mr. Rankin to speak at the City Council meeting.

Prior to appearing at the City Council meeting, Mr. Rankin received a phone call on his private cell phone from Council Member Julie Daniels, berating him for not going through the "proper channels"; e.g. BRTA, BDC, City Manager Ed Gordon.

On Dec 13, 2007, Mr. Rankin sent an email to Mayor Nikkel detailing his specific concerns about the BDC and the BRTA.

On Dec 16, 2007, Mr. Rankin appeared before the City Council to express his desire to invest in Bartlesville. Mayor Nikkel distributed Mr. Rankin's [email](#) to the Council members at that time. Council members Julie Daniels and Tom Gorman subjected Mr. Rankin to comments and questions designed to discredit and embarrass him.

After Mr. Rankin returned home, he learned that his former associates and employers in Branson, St. Louis, and other cities in which he's worked have had numerous phone calls asking questions about Mr. Rankin's background and credentials.

As of April 2008, Mr. Rankin and his associates have decided that Bartlesville is an unfriendly environment for outside developers and have decided to withdraw from any investments in Bartlesville at this time.