

# The Columbus Dispatch

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### ACTIONS PAINT UGLY PICTURE OF CITY'S STANCE ON ARTS CENTER



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NEWS 01C

**By Steve Stephens**  
*Dispatch Metro Columnist*

City building-safety bureaucrats are either Three Stooges-smart or Bill Clinton-honest.

They are going to court insisting that they didn't know that artists were living in the *Milo* Arts Center. They say they've never had relations with those people.

Nyuk-nyuk-nyuk.

The former *Milo* School, 617 E. 3rd Ave., provides homes and studios to more than 30 painters, musicians, sculptors and dancers. Numerous city documents dating back more than 10 years prove that officials knew about the residents all along.

The documents also show that owners Rick and Donna Mann have continually made extensive improvements to meet city concerns.

But officials suddenly want to kick out the artists, who were "discovered" in September when Mayor Michael B. Coleman and other pooh-bahs toured the neighborhood.

Riding along were members of the *Milo* Grogan Area Commission, already smarting from city approval of a homeless shelter in their neighborhood. Some of the commissioners complained to the mayor about the scruffy appearance of the arts center.

Coincidentally, without the artists, the building might make a perfect community center, a project high on the commissioners' wish list.

A week after the mayor's visit, a city inspector declared that the *Milo* Arts Center posed "an unreasonable and imminent threat" to occupants, despite the nearly perfect safety marks the building has earned in annual inspections.

"In 1998, 1999, everything's fine," Rick Mann said. "Then in 2000, page after page of bs."

To explain, a building official gave the Columbus Fire Division an institutional pie in the face. The official testified that firefighters who conduct city safety inspections -- and gave the building good

marks -- are unqualified for the job.

The city might as well hire Shemp.

Building officials tried to close the arts center immediately, but Judge Richard C. Pfeiffer Jr. of the Franklin County Environmental Court gave the Manns and their tenants a reprieve.

Residents at the center have been unanimous in their support of the Manns and their building. Government officials and arts honchos once embraced the project, too.

One backer was John P. Kennedy, a former member of the Columbus City Council and now a Franklin County Court of Appeals judge.

"We think the *Milo* concept is very positive for the community, and we encourage it," said Kennedy in 1989, after the council unanimously approved a zoning variance allowing artists to live and work in the building -- and before \$800,000 in renovations were completed.

At the time, Ray Hanley, director of the Greater Columbus Arts Council, said there was "dramatic need" for such facilities.

The need hasn't changed. The Manns' commitment hasn't either.

The court case against the arts center will resume later this month.

Judge Pfeiffer said he doesn't care about the city's motivations. That could mean trouble. The building, erected in 1894, undoubtedly violates some city regulations.

If Pfeiffer's only concern is the law, he should save everyone time and trouble and order the building bulldozed immediately.

In a regulation-infested society, it's hard not to run afoul of one rule or another. If a bureaucrat wants to poke a citizen in the eye, plenty of ordinances justify the action.

Perhaps the only person who can save the building now is the mayor.

Larry Price, Coleman's community liaison, all but confirmed that the mayor began the action against the arts center.

"It all started when the mayor pulled up on that lot," Price told The Dispatch in October. "It was an eyesore, and if it hadn't been an eyesore, we wouldn't be here" in court.

Since the mayor's visit, the Manns, who are by no means wealthy, have made extensive efforts to spruce up the exterior and have continued their interior renovations.

Surely, someone in the mayor's administration has learned of the role the Manns have played in nurturing artists and the arts and in preserving a historic structure.

And just as surely, the administration must disavow the selective, petty and perhaps dishonest methods city officials have employed.

If the mayor let the stooges loose, he should be able to call them back.

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