

The fall of Niagara Falls Mayor Vincenzo V. Anello and the rise of the Niagara Falls Reporter

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The following is an excerpted article I published in Politics NY Magazine in November 2005, three years before the indictment of Vince Anello.

Sicilian-born, Vincenzo V. Anello came to Niagara Falls as a child. Becoming a union electrician, he started his own company, and, showing a flair for populist causes, became councilman and served for six years.

In 2003, in the American tradition, the once-poor immigrant ran for mayor, defeating incumbent Mayor Irene Elia in a landslide.

Mayor Anello then proudly posted to the city's Web site that Niagara Falls "stands ready to enter one of the truly exciting periods in its history."

It turned out to be too true.

The Niagara Falls Reporter, a free, weekly tabloid, was birthed when two intrepid, if impecunious, gentlemen—Bruce Battaglia and Mike Hudson — in the American tradition — determined to found a newspaper.

Starting with 5,000 copies in June 2000, they persuaded 34 taverns, restaurants and stores to carry the first edition. Today, the paper boasts a circulation of 22,000 at 600 distribution points.

The Reporter's ... Editor in Chief is Mike Hudson. Hudson, lead singer of the 1970s legendary punk band The Pagans, led music to work for the *Corry Evening Journal*, *Hustler*, *Rolling Stone*, the *Associated Press* and the *Niagara Gazette*, which last he quit and/or was fired, after a dispute with the editor. Then he started a newspaper.

During the first five years, the *Reporter* broke the story of the fallacy of Kaleida Health needing to close Childrens Hospital because of financial strictures. After they published the salaries and gilded benefits packages of top executives, other media took note.

They were first to publish inside information that led to multiple indictments of Local 91 laborers union members. *The Reporter* published damning enough stories that three Local 91 members followed Hudson into a restroom in the Niagara Falls Convention Center and smashed his head, face first, into a urinal, breaking his nose.

Afterward, the *Reporter* pounded out more than 100 stories, until indictments came, breaking the sinister influence of the mob-controlled union forever.

They were first to publish the Parkway Condominium scandal that led to the indictment of its former manager. And the story of a DPW worker who stole \$20,000 of city property, resulting in an indictment and guilty plea. And the County Youth Bureau chief — of perjury — which resulted in another guilty plea, and her resignation ...

In 2003 ... the *Reporter* endorsed city



The Reporter has chronicled the rise and fall of former Niagara Falls Mayor Vincenzo V. Anello several times.

Councilmen, and master electrician, Vincenzo V. Anello for mayor.

The honeymoon ended the week Anello took office — when the *Reporter's* cover story "Recycling Retreads at City Hall" criticized Anello for appointing "political hacks to make-work patronage positions."

... Anello (rebutted, calling) the paper a "cancer" that "wallow(s) in cynicism and berate(s) our city and its public servants for perverse pleasure and personal gain."

Hudson retorted, "Maybe my perverse cynicism leads me to see Anello's glass as half empty when really he's half full of it."

... In March, three months after taking office, Anello negotiated a no-bid, 30-year lease with Smokin' Joe Anderson for a city-owned tourist walkway. The council approved the lease. *The Reporter* was quizzical.

In spring 2004, the mayor proposed giving Greater Niagara Sports a no-bid, long-term lease for much of city-owned Hyde Park Golf course.

The Reporter revealed that GNS "stuffed the city" of nearly \$300,000 for unpaid lease and water bills on an indoor golf range the year before.

In June, the Council approved, but the *Reporter* crusaded. The "Golf Course Giveaway" inspired citizens' lawsuits in state Supreme Court.

(In February 2005), following a court battle, the Council reversed itself and voted to quash the golf course deal.

... Every week the *Reporter* had something about Anello. *The Reporter* revealed that city assessment decreases on Joe Anderson's properties was "in stark contrast" to neighboring properties that saw steep increases. They noted tax money set aside for community events were diverted to Anderson-controlled events ...

In spring (2005), the *Reporter* wrote about the new Public Safety building ... Based on a request for proposals by Donald Zuchelli "acting Director, Office of Economic Development," several developers submitted proposals.

Zuchelli, a consultant who resides in Maryland, was hired by Anello, with Council approval, for a \$105,536 annual contract.

... The mayor ... selected Yorkshire Development ... a newly formed company that never built anything.



The Council still had to vote on it, when the *Reporter* started asking questions: "What has been the role of Donald Zuchelli in the selection process? ... (As head of a city department) is it legal ... for (Zuchelli) to live in Maryland, where he owns and operates a company?" ...

Then, on May 3, 2005 ... the *Reporter* came out with its now famous and damning cover:

FEDS PROBING 2003 ANELLO PAYMENTS FROM DOWNTOWN DEVELOPER ANDERSON

By Mike Hudson

"The Federal Bureau of Investigation is looking into a series of payments made by a company controlled by Tuscarora businessman "Smokin' " Joe Anderson to Mayor Vince Anello in July and November 2003, shortly before and just after Anello was elected mayor.

"At least two former Anderson associates have been interviewed by agents from the Niagara Falls FBI office, where official corruption has become the 'number one priority,' sources said.

"Documents made available to the *Reporter* last week show that Anello received \$30,000, from Aarrow Brokers, a company then run by Anderson and his former wife, Gail Anderson, a month before the hotly contested Democratic mayoral primary, and \$10,000 a week after his election, in November 2003.

"... None of the payments were reported by the Anello campaign to the county Board of Elections ...

"There is no record in the books of Aarrow Brokers that the money has been paid back, or even that a single payment has been made by Anello in the nearly two years since he took the money ..."

Hudson pointed to the East Mall, which Anderson negotiated for \$7,500, "which a person could make in a season selling hot dogs and soda on the highly trafficked walkway."

He reported Anderson received a low-interest loan from the city that Anderson's property was approved for a city grant, and Anderson's properties benefited from 2004 reassessment.

The Reporter mentioned the FBI was investigating. "Verified," Hudson wrote, by "the fact that an agent showed up at our offices within 15 minutes of our calling them to say that we were in possession of some relevant documents."

When this hit the streets, it dwarfed every other event in the Falls.

"Published reports about alleged misconduct on my behalf are totally unfounded," Anello told the *Gazette* ... "I have done nothing improper or illegal," adding the *Reporter's* article was "unfounded, false and defamatory."

During the next few days ... Anello admitted money changed hands. The \$40,000 was a legitimate "business loan."

Anello told *The Buffalo News*, "I'm going to explain every single move that I've made."

... One week after the story broke, Hudson wrote, "Your mayor, Vincenzo V. Anello, would have told you nothing about his backdoor dealings with Joe Anderson had it not been for the article that ran last Tuesday in this paper. Now he wants to talk to everybody ..."

... By the end of May, the *Reporter* was first to report that a federal grand jury was convened to hear evidence ...

Meanwhile, a Freedom of Information Act made Anello's financial disclosure forms public, which revealed another loan — for \$5,000.

The Reporter made this analysis: The woman who lent the mayor \$5,000 has a "brother (who) happens to be part of Greater Niagara Sports, the company given a sweetheart deal to operate (the) Hyde Park Golf Course."

The Reporter's cover had the mayor's head pasted over the Lone Ranger's body, and titled, "The Loan Arranger."

... Meanwhile, Anello appearing on cable TV, said: In Niagara Falls, "you've got more rats than cats, and the rats have their own newspaper."

Nonetheless, the mayor was losing support ... Yorkshire lost the public safety contract. (And) the Council voted (not) to renew Zuchelli's ... contract ...

Anello next announced a plan to give the Restaurant at the Hyde Park Golf Course to Greater Niagara Sports. The deal was killed in a 5-0 Council vote.

(After months of being the only media saying Anello was in serious trouble) The *Associated Press* ... and *The New York Times* (wrote articles) ... Next came a front-page article in *The Buffalo News*.

Things had changed. And now, an issue close to Hudson's heart, preventing the "shuttering of the most important cultural icon Niagara Falls possesses" — might be accomplished. After several editorials, three councilmen who voted to close the library changed their minds and State Supreme Court Judge Vincent Doyle ruled the city must find the money to keep the library open.

The Reporter suggested (cutting) patronage. In November, the Council voted to ... cut most of the mayor's appointments for 2006.

The mayor, who started the year as a powerhouse ... now found even minimal mayoral prerogatives stripped from him.

As of press time (November 2005), no indictments have come ... Yet Niagara Falls is operating under a new open-light policy, and, in many ways, the electrician appears to be *The Niagara Falls Reporter*.

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