

Dear judges,

When do disagreements between elected officials cross the line into something more serious? In Washtenaw County's Scio Township, the answer was when those spats spilled over into the courts, involved county elections officials and reached all the way to the Michigan Attorney General.

This award submission features just a selection of the 24 stories reporter Lucas Smolcic-Larson wrote on the township encompassing suburban Ann Arbor in just the three months since he joined The Ann Arbor News as a local government reporter in 2021. They served as a crucial roadmap for residents wondering what exactly the marathon six-hour meetings and harsh words exchanged between board members meant for them as taxpayers and engaged citizens.

The township of roughly 17,500 people serves as a key home community for many Ann Arborites, while attracting others to businesses located along I-94. Its residents hit reset on the township's top officials at the polls in 2020, electing a brand-new supervisor and three first-time trustees. They took office without a full-time administrator and facing questions over managing growth in the township, as well as a decades-old dioxane plume spreading pollution in local groundwater.

Things got off to a rocky start with the supervisor and clerk each promoting differing visions for how township government should be structured. "Agenda setting is a pitched battle for control," one trustee would later write in her resignation letter, blasting a board driven by dysfunction.

Residents trying to understand the root of the problems might have turned to partisan sources: A local newsletter that often unobjectively took sides on key debates, or social media posts from residents bent on booting nearly half the board from office for their own personal reasons.

That's where Lucas' factual and objective reporting came in. His stories chronicled the moments when dysfunction had real consequences for people, like thousands of taxpayer dollars being spent on resolving a persistent inability to perform a basic

government function: Approving meeting minutes. His stories also gave context to allegations made by residents leading the ongoing recall effort, offering those leaders targeted the chance to respond and tell their side of the story.

It's important to sort through the trivial and find the meaty issues that matter for stories that serve the public by going beyond a chronicle of votes taken at a meeting, or the verbatim publication of township news releases. That is what Lucas has done in Sciot Township, a smaller community that doesn't benefit from a gaggle of local reporters competing for scoops.

In the short time Lucas has reported on Scio Township, he has won the trust of local leaders through his stories, even those stories that include criticism of their actions. Reporting on these issues is why Lucas got into local news reporting, and it is a great example of public service.

Thank you for your consideration,

Leanne Smith
News Leader
MLive/The Ann Arbor News