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What's Really Happening in Crockett?

**The fight over an economic development corporation exposes an East Texas
city's racial tensions**

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East Texas city's racial tensions

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Report

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Dedication

To my family.

What's Really Happening in Crockett?

The fight over an economic development corporation exposes an East Texas city's racial tensions

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Abstract: This report explores racial tensions among city leaders and residents in Crockett, Texas, a city in the rural and heavily conservative eastern region of the state, resulting from a petition created by the city's white mayor to abolish the city's economic development corporation, headed by its first black executive director. Many residents' negative perception of the mayor is exacerbated by her status as the county's Republican Party chair, her vocal support of President Donald Trump, her alleged discriminatory treatment of employees at the restaurant she owns and a pair of photos taken at her restaurant that many residents believe are racist.

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Darrell Jones knew right away that something was off about the letter.

It was an afternoon in early August 2018, and Jones, a City Council member in the East Texas town of Crockett, had just retrieved his mail. He recognized the return address; it belonged to Billy “Hollywood” Groves, a local civil rights activist, who is black. But Groves’ name wasn’t on the envelope.

Jones, who is black and was born and raised in Crockett, had developed a reputation as a firebrand when it came to issues of race. A few days earlier, during a packed City Council meeting, he’d announced that Crockett’s mayor, a white woman named Joni Clonts, should resign because, he said, “I feel like you’re racist.”

This was bound to be a bogus letter, he thought, but he opened the envelope anyway. Scrawled on the page was the following:

“Not Everything Is About Race! STOP Being Such A N-----. Your A Typical Sub-Saharan, Spear Chunking, Mud Hutter S.O.B.! And Tell Billy Bob Groves To Fuck-Off Also!”

The letter was postmarked Aug. 1, two days after the City Council meeting. Jones imagined that his pointed criticism of Clonts had inspired this note. It didn’t upset him; he knew firsthand the type of racism that permeated East Texas, a region of the state with proud displays of Confederate flags, active Ku Klux Klan groups and a history of sundown towns — communities that black people are warned to avoid after sunset.

Jones knew Groves hadn’t sent the letter, and he suspected the sender had used Groves’ address to lure him to open it. He took the letter to the police, who passed it on to the postmaster. The police never figured out who sent it. *If you get another letter like this*, they told him, *don’t open it. Bring it straight to us.* He hasn’t received another one like it.

“It was comical to me,” Jones said of the letter. “But it didn’t faze me. I just think I touched a nerve because I speak up for what’s right, and I never will stop.”

In this case, that meant defending the city’s Economic and Industrial Development Corporation against the mayor’s effort to abolish it. In June, Clonts created a petition calling for an election to terminate the corporation because it was failing, she said. The corporation was responsible for attracting new businesses to the city to create new jobs. But industries had shuttered over the past several years — a couple, according to Clonts, due to the carelessness of the corporation, which had not given strict-enough conditions for its fiscal incentives. Opportunities for work had been slow to grow in this city of 6,500, where the population has dwindled since 1990. Clonts saw herself as a champion for change.

But many black residents, including Jones, thought her intentions were more malicious: *Why now? they asked. Does it have something to do with the fact that James Gentry, the corporation executive director, is black?*

But then, in May 2019, after almost a year of acrimony, something surprising happened. Residents voted to save the corporation. They also voted Clonts out of office and elected Crockett’s first black female mayor. Whether the election results will soothe the community’s racial tensions remains an open question.

Throughout the process, the debate has provoked passionate arguments. Many black residents said the effort to abolish the corporation was fundamentally about race. Clonts and her supporters scoffed at the notion that her thinking was colored by racial animus. “They’re just trying to grasp at anything, so they just use the race card,” Clonts said in January this year. On

both sides of the issue were Crockett residents who simply wanted the discord to end, and have participated in a series of prayer meetings on the town square to that end.

Most residents agree on one thing: The fight that has played out in Crockett represents a racial polarization that has long simmered in the city and has escalated, as it has around the country, in the age of Donald Trump.

James Gentry got the bad news on July 1, 2018.

In the late afternoon, Gentry, executive director of the Crockett Economic and Industrial Development Corporation, stepped outside his home for a breath of fresh air, having spent most of the day cooped up with a broken ankle. At that moment, the mailman approached with his daily batch of letters.

James, you need to see today's paper, the mailman told him, referring to the Messenger, the newspaper of a neighboring Houston County city called Grapeland. *They're coming after you.* Unable to drive because of his broken ankle, Gentry asked his wife, Jurlinda, to pick up a copy.

And there it was: Crockett City Council member Michael “Butch” Calvert, who is white and was an ex officio board member to the economic development corporation, had written a letter to the editor calling for the termination of the CEIDC.

“And I actually thought he was a supporter,” Gentry said.

Gentry had been promoted from CEIDC board member to executive director in October 2016, after the previous director, Flint Brent, along with an assistant, abruptly resigned. Gentry

worked on a volunteer basis until he was officially appointed to the position in December that year.

The start of 2017 represented a major shift for the CEIDC. The Crockett City Council, incensed that the economic development board had given \$27,000 in severance packages to Brent and the assistant without the council's approval, decided to replace all of the board members. Although Gentry had also voted to grant the severance pay, the council did not have the power to fire him; that fell within the board's purview. So he was spared.

The council took such drastic measures not just to punish insubordination, but to bring better economic times to the city. The population has dropped by at least 10 percent in recent decades; the major sources of jobs in the city are government work, the local school district and retail. With a per capita income of less than \$17,000, the city recently ranked among the 20 poorest cities in the country, according to a report by 24/7 Wall St., a financial news and commentary website. And the situation is even more dire for Crockett's black citizens: Over the past decade, the unemployment rate among black residents has been, on average, at least three times more than for white residents.

Municipal elections in May 2017 brought a shake-up in city leadership. Joni Clonts — the owner of Crockett's popular Moosehead Cafe, and the chair of the Houston County Republican Party — was elected mayor, and Calvert was elected to represent Precinct 1 on the City Council.

Calvert, a stay-at-home dad to two children and the husband of a Houston County Electric Cooperative employee, said he ran for the seat because he wanted to heal the lack of trust and communication between the council and the economic development board. After taking

office, he helped reinstate an old practice of appointing council members as ex officio board members to the CEIDC. He became an ex officio member, along with councilman Darrell Jones.

And for a while, it helped, Calvert thought. He could inform the council of where the corporation was spending money, which businesses were approaching the city. But nothing ever got done, Calvert said. Board members dragged their feet on business matters, repelling prospective companies; members routinely resigned and had to be replaced (Calvert estimated that a dozen new members have been appointed to the board's five seats since mid-2017).

Calvert said he couldn't disclose details about the board's failures because of its confidentiality policy. But he gave the following example: A company that would have hired about 20 full-time workers wanted help from the economic development corporation to buy property. The corporation had a few options: sell or lease property it owned, secure grants or loans, or persuade local property owners to offer better deals. The company needed an answer within two or three months, but the board members could never agree on how to proceed — and when they came close to a consensus, someone would raise another “what if,” causing the board to table action again and again. The company owner ran out of patience and took his business elsewhere. The board's ineffectiveness cost the city multiple deals like that one, Calvert said.

Calvert came to view the economic development corporation as a waste of taxpayer dollars. He hatched a plan: abolish the corporation, sell its property to pay off its debts of almost \$3 million and use the portion of sales tax revenue that was earmarked for economic development, about \$500,000 a year, to improve the city's notoriously rough streets — which Calvert, Clonts and others believe is one of the factors that make Crockett a hard sell for new businesses. The work of the economic development corporation — courting and creating

incentives for new businesses — would fall to the City Council, and voters could eventually choose to bring back a corporation.

In June 2018, Calvert met privately with Gentry to share this plan. Gentry was not amenable. He argued that the corporation's funding from sales tax revenue — half a million dollars a year — wasn't nearly enough to repair the city's shoddy streets and infrastructure. More importantly, the city wouldn't immediately get that money if the corporation was terminated. Crockett voters had decided in 1995 that the money should be allocated for economic development, and without a corporation, the money would go back to the state. Another referendum would be needed to give those funds back to the city for street repair.

Calvert also remembers him saying: “We could have all of these streets perfectly paved with flowers along the side, but what does it matter if there's nobody to drive on them because we don't have any economic development?”

Gentry made valid points, Calvert thought. But even with an economic development corporation, no new industry was coming in.

Calvert tried effecting change from inside, and it didn't work. He was frustrated and decided he'd had enough. So he wrote the letter to the editor of the Messenger calling for the termination of the CEIDC. Then he resigned as an ex officio board member.

Clonts read Calvert's letter, and she decided to take the matter into her own hands. She says she had wanted to get rid of the corporation for several years, and that when the council cleaned house in 2017, that's when it should've terminated the operation altogether. “That

would've helped the whole situation, and we wouldn't be going through this now," Clonts said in January.

She reasoned that the corporation had made poor decisions in years past, such as not including performance agreement contracts in its loans to businesses that later closed down — a state school, a center for foster children with behavioral issues and a juvenile detention center — and “left us holding the bag.” The late 2018 shutdown of a community college, which had been occupying a building owned by the CEIDC, added to the CEIDC's debts and the city's sense of gloom — as well as Clonts' conviction that Gentry and the corporation were incompetent. Those closures added up to hundreds of jobs lost, and new work wasn't coming in fast enough. And it didn't help, she said, that Gentry had not been transparent with the City Council about the CEIDC's work — something that Gentry, Jones and others have disputed.

Clonts consulted with Calvert, city administrator John Angerstein and an attorney from the Texas Municipal League to draft a petition calling for the CEIDC to be abolished. She went door to door and solicited patrons at her restaurant for signatures.

As word spread of the petition, some Crockett residents began complaining of racism. It was senseless to abort an entity dedicated to bringing jobs to the struggling city, CEIDC supporters said. But what was just as infuriating to them, if not more, was that the CEIDC's missteps had come before Gentry took over, and city leadership didn't call for a dramatic change until a black man was in charge.

Much of the pushback took place in a Facebook group called “What's Really Happening in Crockett, TX?” “Crockett, Texas we need you to understand the magnitude of what Jani [sic] Clonts is trying to do,” Shuntia Wheeler Barnes, one of Gentry's daughters, wrote in the group in

late July 2018. “This lady that many of you call a Mayor has a hidden agenda one that does not include Blacks in the community.”

Then came the now-infamous City Council meeting on July 30, 2018. During the public comment portion, two white women who supported the termination of the economic development corporation lamented the “cloud” that the allegations of racism had brought over the city. “This business of being labeled as racist — stop it,” said one of the women, Virginia Lewis, according to a local news report. “For God’s sake, I don’t want you thinking that about me or my family.”

Council member Marquita Beasley — one of three black council members on the five-person panel — spoke up. It all came back to the mayor’s petition, she said. If you say you want growth in Crockett, why would you try to disband the economic development corporation? “And then, on top of that, the director is black,” Beasley said. “And that’s why all the black people felt like it was attacking him.”

Then Jones held up a copy of the petition. The petition started with the mayor, he said, “so it started at the top.” He turned to Clonts and accused her of not showing up to any of the economic development corporation’s meetings, including informational workshops that Gentry had organized over the summer. Clonts said she had attended a workshop in June; Jones countered that she’d only stayed for 10 minutes (which Gentry later corroborated).

As far as whether the ordeal was racist, “Yes, I feel like you’re racist,” Jones said.

“Well, I’m not,” Clonts replied.

“Well, you’ve sure been showing it,” Jones said, “and you need to resign.”

Clonts did not resign. A week later, she had enough signatures to pass her petition to the city secretary. The petition needed at least 361 verified signatures — 10 percent of the city’s registered voters — to prompt an election; with 373, the petition barely cleared the margin.

Among the agenda items for the council’s meeting on Aug. 13, 2018, was to consider and approve the election to terminate the economic development corporation. The problem, council member Ernest Jackson said during the meeting, was that the city charter contained “no provision for an initiative, referendum or for a recall.”

“This council cannot accept it because we are working outside of the municipal constitution that was already in place,” he said, according to the meeting minutes. “It is incumbent upon us to follow law and not the whims of citizens.”

But state law trumps local ordinances, Calvert said, and state law dictated that the city must call an election if 10 percent of registered voters signed the petition. “If we do not pass this resolution, then we are in violation of the laws of the state of Texas,” Calvert said. “We will get sued.”

Calvert made a motion to approve the resolution calling for an election. There was no second. The motion failed.

And the next day, Calvert sued.

He said his lawsuit had nothing to do with the corporation; he never wanted it to seem like he had an ax to grind. He never even signed Clonts’ petition. “The fact that a legal petition was presented to the council and the council violated state law, that was what I sued for,” he said. “I would’ve sued regardless of what the petition was for.”

On Sept. 21, Calvert and the city agreed to a settlement, which included setting the election on the May 2019 uniform election date. The council approved the election at its next meeting without incident.

The issue was put to bed, if only for a while.

On a Monday night in January, a smattering of cars drove past the Houston County courthouse, a stately Art Deco structure built in 1939 that anchors Crockett’s sleepy town square. Around the courthouse stood a bank, an insurance office and several mom-and-pop shops, along with a handful of empty storefronts.

Despite the biting cold and the darkness, 11 residents gathered on the front steps of the courthouse. For about 10 minutes they prayed, out loud, all at once. Their words ascended into a cacophony of intercessions for the health of their loved ones, for economic prosperity and, mostly, for peace in their city. The voice of one man, Rev. Arvin Medlock Jr., rose above the others. Though he’d donned sweatpants, a hoodie and a beanie for the night, his voice soared as if he were addressing the congregants of Friendship Missionary Baptist Church, where he is a pastor.

“Intervene in this city right now, God,” Medlock said. “We want this city to be a city of love. We’re praying against the racial divide. We can’t do this on our own.”

This was Prayer on the Square, a monthly gathering created by two women: LaCree Beasley, who is black (and is councilwoman Marquita Beasley’s sister), and Ashley Bankhead, who is white. The first edition, held on Aug. 20, 2018, saw as many as 60 participants — black, white, Latino — who joined hands and stayed rooted to the spot despite a downpour. Turnout

had declined since then, slumping to five in December. But LaCree Beasley vowed to keep it going.

She and Bankhead had created the prayer gathering to bring Crockett together, to close the divide. But there was dissent even within their attempt to unite: Beasley was part of a movement to boycott businesses owned by people who'd signed the mayor's petition; Bankhead, it turned out, didn't believe racism was at play.

"It became to where racism was just having a difference in opinion of someone else," Bankhead said. "If you had an opinion and you were white, then you were wrong. You kind of gave racism a new meaning."

LaCree Beasley later admitted that she and Bankhead were drifting apart because of their conflicting views on the issue. "She didn't attend the council meeting; I did, so I saw everything that was going on," Beasley said.

The boycott list was a sticking point for Bankhead. As the list compiled by the Beasley sisters and other Gentry allies grew, it came to mistakenly include businesses whose owners had not signed the petition — including Bankhead's mother, who owned the recently closed Sears store in Crockett.

"They were boycotting —" Bankhead stopped herself. "I shouldn't say 'they.' *People* were complaining that the town wasn't thriving, but in the same breath boycotting businesses, and it was the black people that were boycotting. There weren't any white people that were doing it." She paused. "I don't know. Because I don't want people to twist my words."

The Moosehead Cafe sits in the town square, visible from the front steps of the county courthouse.

Clonts founded the restaurant in 2001 and runs it with her ex-husband, Buddy Clonts. It doubles as the headquarters for the county's Republican Party.

From floor to ceiling, its walls are lined with signs for Republican political candidates — local, statewide and national — and snarky bumper stickers (“Annoy a liberal, work hard & be happy”); a giant portrait of George H.W. Bush looms over one table. Then there are multiple taxidermy mounts: an elk, a horned goat, a gar from the nearby Trinity River, a nilgai that a visiting young boy christened Bradley and, aptly, two moose heads.

The Moosehead, naturally, is one of the businesses on the boycott list. But the restaurant had sown distrust among members of the black community even before Clonts had struck up her petition.

In January 2018, someone anonymously mailed a shocking photo to the activist Billy “Hollywood” Groves. Groves, who regularly attends City Council meetings to rail against racial discrimination and self-publishes a newspaper that serves a similar purpose, is no stranger to anonymous mail. He said he has been receiving racist notes and threats for decades.

The photo showed a taxidermied monkey, wearing blue sunglasses and perched on a wooden chair. In the background is a wall with pegboard holding up shelves of jelly jars, with a picture of Rosie the Riveter hanging above.

Right behind the monkey is a partially obscured sign that says “Vote Republican.” Balanced on its right leg, under the elbow of its raised arm, is a bumper sticker that says “OBAMA IMPEACH HIM.”

It seemed to reference a racist trope comparing black people to primates. “People were like, ‘What is she trying to say? Is she trying to say black people are monkeys?’” LaCree Beasley said.

Groves had been inside the Moosehead Cafe to attend town hall meetings with Republican U.S. Rep. Kevin Brady. Groves recognized the background of the photo as the interior of the restaurant, and he took the photo to the police department.

Clonts remembers that day as a frigid one, with temperatures dipping into the 20s as city workers swarmed one of the downtown streets to repair a water leak. Clonts said that she had bought all of the heat packs she could find to warm up the workers’ hands and feet, and was handing out hot chocolate to them when she got the call from the police.

Somebody’s tried to file a complaint against you, they said, according to Clonts. *About what?* she asked. *A monkey*, they said. She told them she would go to the department after she had finished her do-gooding. “So I went on down there and I saw that,” Clonts said. “Just trying to help out, and then something like that happens. Oh, well.”

Groves brought the photo to the next City Council meeting. In March 2018, Sharon Berry, a black woman who chairs the Houston County Democratic Party, also addressed council members about the photo, calling it a civil rights violation and an embarrassment. She then asked Clonts to publicly apologize for the photo and resign immediately.

Clonts refused to apologize. Although she has conceded that the photo was taken in her restaurant, she says she wasn’t responsible for it. She says that during a Republican Party meeting, a man brought the monkey into the restaurant before making a trip to Bryan to deliver it

to his son, who had inherited it from someone. That was at least 10 years ago, she says, and the monkey was inside her restaurant for no more than an hour.

Asked if any visitors to the restaurant could confirm her story, Clonts became defensive, saying, “Nobody needs to vouch [for me] because I’m an honest person.”

Clonts has repeatedly claimed the photo was Photoshopped to add the Obama bumper sticker, though multiple Gentry allies say it’s clear that the original photo sent to Groves was not digitally altered. And, she said, “I wouldn’t have anything that said Obama or anything like that on it.” But among her restaurant’s menagerie of Republican promotion materials were a couple of “NOBAMA” bumper stickers.

Sitting in her office at the back of the Moosehead Cafe in January, where a “Make America Great Again” sign and a baseball cap from President Donald Trump’s inauguration (given to her by a friend who attended the ceremony) were affixed to the wall behind her, Clonts maintained that she had nothing to apologize for.

“I think they blew it out of proportion,” she said. “People will play that race card when they don’t have nothing else. ... They need to get over it and get a life. We need to work together.”

In April, another troubling photo surfaced in the “What’s Really Happening in Crockett, TX?” Facebook group. In this one, Clonts, looking at least a decade younger with her short blond hair in tight curls, is holding what looks like the same “Vote Republican” sign alongside someone wearing a cartoonish mask of Obama’s face. Clonts says the photo, taken on Halloween several years ago, has been misconstrued.

She is not a racist, she says. She feels that she's been targeted by her constituents who feel that, as chair of the county's Republican Party, she has too much power. But it's all business, she says, echoing a mantra of the nation's president: "Crockett's a business, and it needs to be run like a business."

Critics across the country have also called Trump a racist: They charge that he has tokenized black people, painted Latinos as criminals, fought to keep Muslims out of the country and spurred attacks on a black Muslim congresswoman. Clonts, though, believes Trump is "the best president we've had in years" and that he "stands up for what's right."

Asked how she feels about being called racist and asked to resign, Clonts said first that she's thick-skinned. "I'm gonna tell you, God puts people in places where they need to be, and I think I'm here for a reason." Then her eyes filled with tears. "I really want to do good things for Crockett, and I think I'm trying."

One of Clonts' recurring defenses against the notion that she is racist is that one of her daughters is married to a black man, and she has three biracial grandsons.

It's an argument that has not won over people like Marquita Beasley. "When someone says, 'I can't be racist because,' I automatically put into my brain, you are racist," Beasley said. "Don't explain to me why you can't be racist. Just show people that you're not. I don't want to hear that 'I have black friends or a black son-in-law,' because 9 times out of 10 you don't like that you have that black son-in-law. You threw up a red flag with me on that one."

Others have given accounts of racist behavior by Clonts. Serinda Locklear, a 31-year-old licensed massage therapist in South Carolina, says she worked at the Moosehead in 2005, when she was 17, and that Clonts fired her because she refused to break up with her black boyfriend. In

a Facebook post in March, she claimed that Clonts called her names such as “mudflopper” and “n----- lover.”

Locklear and a co-worker were both dating black men, and they saw a marked difference in the way Clonts treated their boyfriends compared to other employees’ white boyfriends. Clonts asked the black men not to come into the cafe or sit on benches outside the building, Locklear said, but didn’t mind if the white men did. The day Locklear was fired, her boyfriend was sitting in a parking lot behind the restaurant, waiting for Locklear’s shift to end, when Clonts stormed inside, apparently angry that the man was on the premises. According to Locklear, Clonts said she had to choose between her boyfriend and her job. Locklear chose her boyfriend. She said Clonts gave her co-worker who was also dating a black man the same ultimatum; she lied to keep her job.

“Some people may be fooled into thinking she is a wonderful person, but there is not much nice about her past her initial sugar coating, as I call it,” Locklear wrote in an online message. “She shouldn’t be in charge of a restaurant, much less Crockett.”

A Crockett resident, who asked not to be identified out of fear of retaliation, also said Clonts and her ex-husband frequently use the N-word around their restaurant and to criticize black employees. The person said a former Moosehead employee wanting to expose Clonts’ racist behavior shared the photo of the taxidermied monkey with Groves, and that Clonts has avoided hiring black people after the fallout from the photo.

Attempts to reach Clonts for a response to these claims were unsuccessful.

Berry, the county Democratic Party chair, was among those celebrating Clonts’ defeat in this year’s mayoral race. “I think people want a better picture of how people see us, and the

picture that she's showing to the rest of the world is just not OK," Berry said the day after the election. "And I think last night's election was the city and the county basically saying, 'You know what? We want change.' And that's what happened. They delivered."

Crockett suffered a blow in late January 2019. An IT company called Provalus had been considering the city for a potential new site that would bring at least 100 new jobs, and a job fair had been held in December. But the company chose another East Texas city, Jasper, leaving Crockett residents indignant and disappointed.

Finger-pointing began immediately. Members of the Facebook group "What's Really Happening in Crockett, TX?", many of whom are in the pro-Gentry camp, circulated rumors that Clonts and Angerstein, the city administrator, had deliberately excluded Gentry from meetings with Provalus representatives, and that they had lied and told the company that the city owned a building that could house the company — a building that is owned by the economic development corporation. Angerstein said that was false.

To address the rumors, Clonts issued a lengthy statement in which she threw the blame squarely at Gentry, detailing ways he and the economic development board had slacked off and missed deadlines to submit paperwork to Provalus.

Both Calvert and Gentry confirmed that Provalus had approached city leadership first, simply because it did not know the city had an economic development corporation. Gentry said talks between the city and the company began in August, but the city did not involve him in discussions until November or December, putting him at a disadvantage to meet Provalus' deadlines.

Things took a turn for the better in late March, when another IT company, Onshore Outsourcing, agreed to set up shop and create 100 new jobs in Crockett. Gentry gave a presentation about the new company in a City Council meeting; afterward, he said, four council members, including Jones and Beasley, congratulated him. Clonts didn't.

He believes Clonts has made inaccurate statements and acted unprofessionally, but his approach is to rise above it. He knows he's at the center of a debate that he wants little to do with.

Sunlight filtered through the windows of a CEIDC meeting room on a clear morning in early January. On a conference table, Gentry had stacked an array of newspaper clippings boasting the triumphs of the corporation, including the establishment of a rubber molding manufacturer called ElastoTech in 2000. As a former CEIDC board member, Gentry had a hand in that success.

Clonts has said one of the reasons she's dissatisfied with the economic development corporation is that Gentry has not given a monthly report to the City Council on its activities. Council minutes show that Gentry has appeared at a handful of meetings, but he said Clonts never told him she expected a monthly report. He said that around the beginning of her term, he made several trips to the Moosehead — a site that he knows many black people avoid but that he said does not intimidate him — to inform her of what the CEIDC was doing.

Clonts has also submitted several open records requests to Gentry's office for information ranging from the corporation's debts to Gentry's salary. It struck Gentry as strange, he said, because he happily would've answered her questions if she had made a phone call.

At the mention that Clonts' feelings were hurt by accusations that she's racist, Gentry shook his head, both amused and incredulous.

Gentry said he's not quick to pull the "race card." He's of a generation that rejects victimhood. But even he has seen the actions of Joni Clonts and wonders about her motive.

He wants only to focus on his work. When it comes to color, he says, he cares about one color, green — Crockett's prosperity. "Forget the hue of my skin, but understand what I'm trying to do here. Hear what I'm saying, see what I'm trying to reach for, and stop *looking* at me so much."

His hands were out, open, as if in supplication.

"I'm hurt that it even became a racial discussion, to be frank with you, because it's what the world sees. 'They're a divided community.' How's that going to attract a business to want to come to a community that's divided like that? And it's not about me. It's about a community being represented properly. I'm not sitting around here, 'Woe is me.' None of that.

"And I'm sorry she feels that her feelings were hurt. My only thing is," he said with a slight, sad chuckle, "why didn't we have those conversations where we could stand together as one?"

Gentry grew up in a time when black people had to sleep in their cars when they were traveling because they couldn't get a hotel room. He previously worked as a drilling engineer, and he's worked in Northern states where he was the first black man some people had met.

He's seen political divisiveness grow in the age of Trump, and he thinks it's "given a green light for racism to become more of an issue," even in his little town.

“That is troubling for me,” Gentry said. “I’m old enough to have seen the ’50s, the ’60s, the ’70s. And I was raised in a world that saw some of that negativity. The bad sides. And I don’t want to go back to that.”

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This report was typed by the author.