

Dan Haar: New Britain mayor describes alleged pressure from Diamantis to hire company that employed his daughter

By Dan Haar

Sometime in 2019, New Britain officials embarked on a new school construction project and realized they had a dozen previous jobs that were done but weren't fully closed out with the state — leaving millions of dollars in reimbursements up in the air.

Mayor Erin Stewart, frustrated by the delays, arranged a meeting with Konstantinos “Kosta” Diamantis, then director of the school construction finance unit for the state. She brought the school facilities director.

“Diamantis’ lawyer, Norm Pattis, told my colleague John Moritz that his client is “a man of the highest ethical standards, so I doubt he would do anything involving a conflict of interest.”

“He did ask me in that meeting a couple of times,” Stewart recalled, “Do you have a consultant? You have to hire a consultant. I can give you recommendations.”

“Kostas told us that if we wanted to make sure we got our money back, that we should hire this company to do the work for us.”

The company was Construction Advocacy Professionals LLC, located in the Moosup section of Plainfield, in eastern Connecticut. That

same year, CAP hired Diamantis' daughter, Anastasia.

Diamantis' lawyer, Norm Pattis, told my colleague John Moritz that his client is "a man of the highest ethical standards, so I doubt he would do anything involving a conflict of interest." He did not return a call Tuesday morning for comment.

Stewart said she didn't like the idea of paying a consultant because she believed the city had the capability to close out the projects on its own — if Diamantis told them how to proceed. But the New Britain Board of Education, acting independently of City Hall, hired CAP to do the work.

Then last March, the school board in an 8-2 vote hired CAP again, this time as an "owner's rep," or project consultant, for a job upgrading the high school to meet federal Americans with Disabilities Act codes and standards.

CAP's principal, Antonietta Roy, brought a favored construction company to do the work, which the school board initially moved to hire along with her, records show.

"The BOE intends to engage D'Amato Construction Company Inc. under a design-build contract and has selected CAP to act as the BOE's representative," a nine-page agreement said.

Still underway, the high school job is expected to total around \$1.5 million, sources said. CAP's estimated fees should total \$65,620, at \$115 an hour, school board records show.

D'Amato is based in Bristol, the city Diamantis had represented in the Connecticut General Assembly. It's also the company that received a no-bid contract in 2019 worth \$46 million to rebuild the Birch Grove Primary School in Tolland, according to state documents that were first reported Friday in the Hartford Courant and the CT Mirror. Those news outlets reported pressure on local officials by Diamantis, to hire D'Amato and CAP.

Diamantis, who retired rather than accept a paid suspension from Gov. Ned Lamont at the end of October, is now under federal investigation in connection with his activities directing the state's Office of School Construction Grants and Review. That office moved in November, 2019 from the state Department of Administrative Services to the state Office of Policy and Management, the governor's budget agency — a move Lamont now calls a mistake.

Construction Advocacy Professionals, Antonietta Roy, D'Amato and New Britain are all on a list of possible subpoena recipients in the federal investigation, based on keywords in documents released publicly.

The picture unfolding in New Britain, combined with Tolland, points to a possible repeating pattern of pressure from Diamantis on routine, sometimes small consulting work, not just large, high-profile projects. That pattern, if it turns out to be true, will draw close political scrutiny in addition to the inquiry by federal prosecutors.

It's too soon to say whether the pressure Stewart described in New Britain is a case of improper behavior. Republicans in the legislature and on the campaign trail are already calling for more oversight and political investigations — causing Lamont to have to respond to this new crisis just as the omicron variant fades.

The state Department of Administrative Services took back control of the school construction grants office on Oct. 29, the day after Diamantis retired. In a statement late Monday, the Lamont administration sought to wall off the earlier period.

“It is not and should not be common practice to require municipalities to use specific contractors in order to access state funding. Our competitive bidding process, and collaboration with municipal leadership are key values in this administration,” DAS spokeswoman Lora Rae Anderson said in a written statement. “Since DAS has re-inherited the administration of the

school construction grant program, DAS has adhered to all policies, laws, and ethical guidelines while ensuring complete transparency.”

In New Britain, the school board later in 2021 reconsidered the no-bid “design-build” deal with D’Amato for the ADA work at the high school. The board sought proposals and received three bids including one from D’Amato. A different company, Newfield Construction Group, snagged the first phase of the work.

As for CAP, Stewart said Roy, who is named as Antonietta DiBenedetto-Roy in some public documents, tried to gain work on two much larger school projects, sending her Facebook messages and requesting a meeting, which Stewart said she rebuffed.

“Typically in previous years we’ve done it all in-house,” Stewart said, referring to the project oversight role.

She said she was mildly perturbed that the board of education hired CAP a second time last year — circumventing a city board, as was the school board’s right because the project was not financed with bonded debt.

“I didn’t think anything of it at the time,” Stewart said. “The school district typically

marches to the beat of its own drum anyway.”

DiBenedetto-Roy did not respond to an email seeking comment about the New Britain work. There have been no questions raised about the quality of the firm’s performance.

Even as the federal probe continues the growing political question is, how much should Diamantis’ bosses, up through to Lamont, have known about his alleged ties to companies that he apparently helped in his role overseeing hundreds of millions of dollars a year in school construction grants? And, when did they first have an inkling there were problems? ■