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Minneapolis elected official Carol Becker registers trademark for name of critic's blog

Minneapolis elected official Carol Becker, who serves on the city's Board of Estimate and Taxation, confirmed Friday night that she was behind an effort to file applications for business and trademark registrations for Wedge LIVE!, the name of a blog that has been critical of her.

The story perhaps begins four years ago, as John Edwards attended his first neighborhood meeting after moving to the Lowry Hill East neighborhood, more commonly known as the Wedge. Disappointed in the hostility and lack of diverse representation in the room, Edwards started a blog and Twitter account to write about neighborhood issues and city politics. He called it Wedge LIVE!.

In the intervening years, Edwards has written about complex and controversial urban planning and political issues, adopting a distinct comedic tone to recompense for the frequent mundanity of municipal government. In so doing, Edwards has engaged a population that is younger, spends more time online, and is more likely to be a renter, in conversations about everything from transportation to affordable housing, and, sometimes, the Mayor's dance moves.

This year, Wedge LIVE! earned the City Pages title of "Best Website," with the accolade that Edwards' work "shin[es] a light on the often absurd mechanics of local government," and that through his entertaining and informative style, readers and viewers learn about decisions affecting their neighborhood.

"It started as a place to write about issues I didn't think anyone would care about," Edwards said. "Four years later, people kind of do care about it, and I hope it's making a difference."

In the 2017 city election, Wedge LIVE! prepared a voter information guide and sent out candidate questionnaires focused on affordable housing issues, and analyzed campaign finance data. Edwards' Twitter and YouTube accounts were a constant stream of information about campaign developments, often employing satire as critical commentary about the candidates' positions.

Wedge LIVE!'s work certainly caught the attention of Carol Becker, who has served on the Minneapolis Board of Estimate and Taxation for over a decade, in addition to being a professor at Hamline University in Saint Paul. In a forum post titled "Who's funding Minneapolis elections?" Becker denounced a "paid advocacy class that has been growing in strength and is leading the discussion in our community more and more," pointing to Wedge LIVE!, Black Lives Matter, Our Revolution Twin Cities, and others.

"I don't think we are seeing just a popular uprising. I think there is money driving what we are seeing," Becker wrote, expressing concern about what she saw as a lack of disclosure of funding, "...some is probably local and some national. But without reporting, it is all speculation."

"I see WedgeLive as a huge influence on the conversation," Becker wrote.

Edwards isn't much of a fan of Becker either. In the final months of former Minneapolis Mayor Betsy Hodges' 2017 re-election campaign, Becker filed a civil lawsuit against the Mayor, claiming she had violated the City's charter in the budgetary process. After Becker had claimed victory before any final disposition of the lawsuit, a judge found there was no violation and dismissed the case.

"When she sued the mayor, it felt like a stunt," Edwards said, "I just felt like she was using her office to take political shots at people. She's a perfect representation of a certain kind of politics in Minneapolis that I'm not a fan of." Edwards decided to run a last-minute write-in campaign against Becker, which he described as being a "half-joke" and doomed from the start. Becker won, but a surprising 1,539 voters wrote Edwards' name on their ballot.

Becker and Edwards found themselves on [opposite sides of a debate](#) once again this year. Political tensions in Minneapolis have heated over the [City of Minneapolis' 2040 Comprehensive Plan](#), a set of policy priorities intended to guide how the City grows over the next 20 years, centered on a theme of reducing disparities between white homeowners and lower-income people of color and indigenous communities.

Edwards co-founded a group called [Neighbors for More Neighbors](#), who have advocated for a variety of proposals to increase the supply of housing and make housing more affordable, such as eliminating exclusionary zoning and building height limits, as well as focusing on non-motorized and mass transit to better support a growing city. Becker, on the other hand, co-founded [Minneapolis for Everyone](#), a group that has said the plan would result in neighborhoods being bulldozed in favor of density and corporate gain for developers, and that making it harder to drive in the City would harm elders and residents who aren't able-bodied.

Edwards also used the Wedge LIVE! blog to ask readers to submit their opinions on the Comprehensive Plan before the comment period closed.

In the days after the public comment period ended, Becker went to the Office of the Minnesota Secretary of State and filed business documents—[name reservations](#) and [certificates of assumed name](#)—for both "Wedge Live" and "WedgeLive," the name of Edwards' blog. Becker also [filed an application](#) with the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office to register a trademark on the name "Wedge Live," stating under penalty of law that she believed she was entitled to use the mark in commerce, that nobody else had a right to use the mark, and that she had a bona fide intention to use it herself.

The filings did not become widely known until Friday night. While waiting at a restaurant, Hannah Pritchard—a fan of Wedge LIVE!—was flipping through newspapers and came across a legal notice in the Star Tribune classifieds. State law requires that business assumed name filings be published in a newspaper. The notice, signed by Carol Becker, declared that she would begin conducting business as "WedgeLive."

"I did a double take," Pritchard said, "I like John's work because I think local political coverage and journalism are really important. I've learned a surprising amount from Wedge LIVE!"

Pritchard sent a [photograph of the legal notice](#) to Wedge LIVE!'s Twitter account, and it was news to Edwards. "I was initially confused because I don't know what kind of jeopardy this places me in," Edwards said. "I value the Wedge LIVE! brand. It's something I've put a lot of work into and don't get a lot of compensation for, and I would feel violated if someone paid a bunch of money and was able to take it out from under me. I hope that's something that's not going happen."

Reached by phone, Becker admitted—proudly so—that she filed the business and trademark documents, paying at least \$355 to do so.

"There were no legal entities using that name, and I think it would be an awesome name for a podcast. And so since no one else is actually legally using that name, it seemed like a good thing to do," Becker said, stating that she intended the podcast to discuss 'wedge issues' and to do so 'live' instead of attacking others on social media, something she felt Wedge LIVE! does.

Becker has made prior written statements about Wedge LIVE! content, and spoke on the phone in detail about material on Wedge LIVE!'s blog, YouTube channel, and Twitter account, as well as specific t-shirt designs in the Wedge LIVE! store. In the same call, Becker later claimed she had never visited the Wedge LIVE! website. "I haven't been there. I haven't been on it. I haven't read any of it," Becker said.

Asked if Becker was concerned about the perception of an elected official trademarking the name of a former opponent's blog that had been critical of her, Becker conceded some may view it that way, but said, "I would hope that people would ask how [Wedge LIVE! is] being funded and who is behind it." Becker's comments echo her [June internet posting](#) where she remarked that "WedgeLive is a pro developer mouthpiece. Ask who is funding them."

Becker continued to insist her "Wedge Live" business and trademark registrations were a separate, independent matter from her concerns regarding Wedge LIVE!, the blog. "Two great minds coming up with the same name isn't a bad thing," Becker said.

Becker cited the influence the WedgeLIVE! Twitter account and blog had over the 2017 Minneapolis election, contending there was a team behind the Wedge LIVE! brand being funded through "dark money." She alleged that Edwards had failed to pay income and sales tax, and that he must register with campaign finance authorities.

"[Becker] has these conspiracy theories about people she disagrees with, and how they're funded by monied interests," Edwards said, describing that Wedge LIVE! was a full-time solo hobby he's very passionate about, and that he lost money for the first three years.

Recently, Edwards launched an [online store through Teespring](#) and a [Patreon campaign to support his work](#), but Edwards said it's not particularly lucrative. He currently has 113 supporting patrons, who he said typically each contribute less than \$5 per month. Both Patreon and Teespring collected Edwards' information and will report as taxable income any amount over a legal threshold. Edwards said he pays taxes on the small amount received. Teespring is technically the seller, and is based in California without a requirement to remit sales tax.

"I think people could perceive it as retaliatory, and I think that's kind of sad," Becker said of her business and trademark registrations, saying that if it was retaliatory, she was retaliating against an "illegal business" and "tax fraud." Becker conceded she had never contacted Edwards specifically regarding her disclosure and tax concerns,

but that Edwards had not responded to her requests to go out for beer after last year's election. "Usually when people run against you, you sit down and talk, have a beer, get to know the other person. It's polite campaigning," said Becker.

Becker said Wedge LIVE!'s "political activities," particularly Edwards' selling of products, required registration with campaign finance authorities. However, state law provides numerous exemptions to lobbyist registration requirements, such as for the publishing or broadcasting of news items or editorial comments, paid advertisements urging official action, or the selling of goods or services to be paid for by public funds. Only money, goods, or services directly given to a campaign are considered contributions under law, and news and editorial comments are specifically excluded from the definition of campaign expenditures. Many of the political issues discussed by Wedge LIVE! do not relate to candidates or ballot questions, but rather broad discussion of public policy not governed by campaign finance statute.

Among the products in the Wedge LIVE! store are socks with a photograph of a home at the center of a demolition debate in the Wedge neighborhood, illustrated as though it is blasting into space; t-shirts showing a map of the City Council wards with the visual appearance of a football field, as commentary on the Super Bowl held in Minneapolis earlier this year; and socks featuring a photograph of Minneapolis Council Member Cam Gordon, with items he has worked to ban or restrict in city ordinance, such as plastic bags and cigarettes.

Becker said someone had previously sent her photographs of shirts and socks being sold on the Wedge LIVE! store, and she specifically pointed to a t-shirt with an illustration of Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey, with the text "OBEY" below it, in the style of the iconic Shepard Fairey poster and sticker campaign. Becker agreed there was a place for commentary and satire, but she insisted Wedge LIVE!'s artwork advocated for or against political candidates, and thus constitutes lobbying or campaigning, which must be registered and disclosed.

Shortly after Becker was interviewed for this story, and in the hours before publication, Edwards received an email from Teespring stating that sales of that very item—the 'OBEY' design—had been terminated due to "content concerns." The product had been in the Wedge LIVE! store for 11 months. Becker made comments in the interview suggesting that she could have sent complaints, but she did not reference who those complaints could have been made to. In response to a direct question as to whether she had submitted any complaints to third-parties regarding Wedge LIVE!, Becker said, "If I did, it wouldn't be public, would it?" Becker did not respond to a later email explicitly asking if she had made any complaints to Teespring.



A tote bag and sock design in the Wedge LIVE! store, depicting Minneapolis City Council Member Cam Gordon, and products he has worked to ban or restrict, such as plastic bags and cigarettes.

A design in the Wedge LIVE! store with an illustration of Mayor Jacob Frey (left), in the style of the iconic Shepard Fairey 'OBEY' campaign (right).

<https://store.obeygiant.com/products/obey-offset-poster>



Mentions of Becker's podcast plans faded over the course of the interview. "I don't know any other way to get through to [Edwards]," Becker said, "I wish there was something better to do. I wish people that were doing what he's been doing were legal and disclosing, and I wish there were some other tools."

Notably, trademark applications must be filed with a list of specific goods or services associated with the mark, but Becker's application did not reflect any of the more than five options relating to podcasts. Instead, Becker's application was about as close of a description of Wedge LIVE!, the blog, as one could get: "Providing political information about elections; Providing political information, news, and commentary in the field of election campaigns; Providing a website featuring information about political issues; Providing information regarding political issues, knowing how to vote and knowing how to register to vote; Providing information, news, and commentary in the field of politics." Additionally, Becker does not live in the Wedge neighborhood.

"What's the moral justification of taking something that somebody has worked on, and using it somewhere else?" Becker asked herself during the interview, "Did I do something immoral or mean? I don't think so. How does our democracy function when anybody can just fake an advocacy group and fake, make up, and not report and not disclose, and not let people know."

Asked if her business registrations and trademark application send a message, Becker said, “Think about it this way. Going forward, every group that wants to do this understands that they’ve got to legally register.”

Becker said that she is willing to hand over the business registration and trademark applications to Edwards, but that conditions would have to be met. Becker said she was not motivated by money—she said she would need a nominal \$1 from Edwards to make any transfer legal—but that her conditions would relate to ensuring Edwards’ blog was “legal” and that he was paying taxes.

Becker repeatedly used the word “we” while describing her efforts to file the business and trademark registrations. In response to a question about who else was participating, Becker said, “Well, some of my friends and I have been talking, but right now the DBA [assumed-name business] is just me ... at this point, I don’t want to name any names.”

While the trademark application hasn’t been granted yet, an application is often enough to use social media trademark policies to take control of accounts, said Davis Senseman, one of several attorneys who offered pro bono legal representation to Edwards. Becker said she would consider using such processes to protect the “Wedge Live” trademark she applied for, if her podcast was successful like the podcast *Serial*. “I guess then [Edwards] would have to find a different name for all of that, if we couldn’t come to some sort of agreement,” Becker said.

Becker also hinted at a future possibility of litigation. “I control the name,” said Becker, “Right now, I legally control the name. So, if [Edwards] were illegally using my intellectual property, the courts are the remedy.”

“It feels like either blackmail or an attempt by a public figure to say, ‘I’m going to silence this critic,’” said Senseman, “It just doesn’t look right to the outside world. This is just not what an elected official should be spending their time doing.”

Senseman called Becker’s actions reckless and a “textbook example of bad intent,” and said Edwards has a common law right to the name Wedge LIVE!, with an array of legal options available—but that challenging Becker’s actions could exceed \$5,000 in costs and fees. Asked if Becker was concerned about any legal ramifications, she said she was new at this, and did not consult an attorney. “If I did something legally wrong, I’d like to know about it.”

Becker said she would not have been able to register the names had Edwards registered them first. “If it wasn’t me, it could have been someone who is an asshole,” Becker said, going on to say that she wasn’t out to hurt anyone. Becker said she would be willing to meet with Edwards to discuss terms, and Edwards—who has received at least four offers of pro bono legal representation and multiple offers to defray legal costs—said he will be meeting with an attorney soon.

“Becker knows what Wedge LIVE is because she’s criticized it by name many times over the past year. She knows she’s attempting to take something that belongs to someone else. Obviously I think Becker is wrong to have done this, and that she’s embarrassing herself and the City of Minneapolis,” Edwards [wrote](#) on Facebook. The Minnesota Society of Professional Journalists also acknowledged Wedge LIVE!’s work Sunday, saying in a [tweet](#) that his “pointed reporting is a great example of hyper-local, Internet driven, citizen-led journalism.”

After initial publication of this story, Becker made several online comments in an online forum. In her [first post](#), Becker confirmed she filed the business and trademark applications, and that she was starting a podcast. A [second post](#) suggested that Becker would withdraw the Wedge LIVE! business registrations, with no mention of the

trademark application, but that she would re-file for the name after six months. “Given the outcry over my filings of DBA over the last couple days, it is my intention to withdraw my DBAs on Monday,” Becker wrote, “That way, if existing groups want to file as businesses or as non-profits, they will be able to. It would be my intention to re-file in six months for remaining intellectual assets after those groups have had the opportunity to do so.”

In a [third post](#), Becker later cited a “dramatic lack of understanding of what [she] has done,” and said she had “removed” her filings for both the business and trademark applications. “If someone wants this intellectual asset, please go ahead,” Becker said, “I will be back in about six months so if you want to file something, you should have ample time.” Becker did not respond to follow-up calls or emails.

As of Monday, an outpouring of support for Wedge LIVE! resulted in a 38% increase in [Patreon donors](#) for the site. Government records showed Becker had abandoned the trademark application, and that the assumed name and name reservation filings had been canceled. In follow-up emails Tuesday regarding the six-month window she gave Edwards, Becker said, “I am trying to do what is fair and that seems like a fair amount of time.”

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