

Pete Buttigieg & Disability Rights: A Ramp Too Short

By Andrew Straw

I have fought some big-time disability rights violators, including the ABA, 50 law schools, the Indiana Supreme Court, the federal courts in the 7th Circuit, and even the Democratic Party and the Green Party of the United States. I also went after smaller towns that discriminate, such as Streamwood, Elgin, Glendale Heights, and Bloomingdale in Illinois. They left snow in their sidewalks all winter, blocking them so disabled people could not use them. The insurance companies, especially Travelers Insurance, that should have paid my claims refused to admit that the ADA covers snow in sidewalks.

One smaller fry who seems to have grown in his South Bend pond is Pete Buttigieg. This very young mayor of South Bend did some foolish things as he was being elected to mayor and after he was sworn in. While he was waiting to take office, Buttigieg bought a ramp to take care of an accessibility issue I identified at the Democratic HQ in South Bend.

In short, there was no ramp and no safe way for people in wheelchairs to enter the building and participate in Party business. I

was on TV over this and challenging my party to do better. ABC 57 covered it and this is the video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2DebpmIA0oc>

You can see Pete's name on the window in this ABC 57 story. The Party scrambled for a response, telling another station that they are doing something about it with a lift that was never purchased and this is 8 years ago. The said it would take \$10,000 and the money was being raised.

The problem with this is that the district chair was dishonest and lied about this and many other topics. He was the ringleader of a forgery scandal that rocked the Indiana Democratic Party to the core. Butch Morgan was on the Indiana Democratic State Committee and served at one time on the Indiana Election Commission, in charge of deciding if OTHER PEOPLE have enough signatures.

<https://www.wndu.com/home/headlines/Butch-Morgan-gets-prison-time-for-election-fraud-211893851.html>

Somebody must have told Pete that he would get good media coverage if he bought a cheap ramp that served as a press release prop. The South Bend Tribune covered Pete's ramp and only contacted me after

it was in use at the Democratic HQ. Below is Pete's Ramp. Please note that the guy about to push the disabled person in a wheelchair down this ramp is Mike Schmuhl, the campaign manager for Pete Buttigieg for Mayor. What an awful image. Pete Buttigieg provided a ramp too short to have a safe slope. If Mike Schmuhl's hand slips, this person will go racing down the ramp, almost guaranteed to crash at the bottom. The newspaper did not mention the slope, only that Pete bought this ramp, which I found out cost a few hundred dollars. For a few hundred more, he could have bought a fairly safe ramp, but still not ADA-compliant.



(Photo Taken by South Bend Tribune Reporter, December 2011)

I was running for Congress in the 2nd District of Indiana, including South Bend, and MY campaign manager, Rev. Greg Brown, offered a real ramp. Rev. Brown also made a cement ramp for one of the Democratic clubs. He did not need the South Bend Tribune there. He just built it with a friend's help knowing people who use wheelchairs like his mom would benefit. This would have been the Greg Brown ramp if the Party were serious about a ramp instead of always saying no to disability activists and shoving Pete Buttigieg's ramp down everyone throat. As a federal candidate in 2011, I spent much of my time with disabled voters:



The fact that the Democratic Party was first absolutely wrong, then accepted a photo op instead of a real disability ramp made me switch parties because I didn't want anyone to believe that I approved of those actions. I later discovered that I was excluded from Democratic Party meetings under State Rule 10 because I have mental disabilities. If that is how Indiana Democrats act, rejecting my values and excluding me from meetings, it was not me doing any rejecting. I know when I am an outsider and unwanted.

But I was not an outsider to Democratic activism. A friend and I founded the Indiana University College Democrats in 1994 and I was an activist during my graduate and law school days. A Parker-Powell Award winner for student leadership. I drafted the IUCDs constitution. I was first appointed to be a precinct chair and then won that position with 100% of the vote. I served as a Democratic State Convention delegate.

Of course, when I switched to the Green Party, I was the Indiana delegate to the Green Party National Convention and advocated for disability issues within the national party. I pushed for the Green Party to have an ASL interpreter for its national convention and for a Disability Caucus.

<https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4494621/delegate-indiana>

The Buttigieg cheap ramp stunt was my first major experience with Pete Buttigieg's attitude toward disability. His administration had problems providing me with information when I made freedom of information requests, one time taking over 3 years, then lying that 3 emails was a full response. There should have been thousands of emails.

https://www.southbendtribune.com/news/local/south-bend-s-public-records-response-called-too-slow/article_a9fbcbbe-5aa8-5aa5-a278-c63ea5259f0b.html

Straw v. Buttigieg, et. al., 3:16-cv-342-JDP (N.D. Ind. 2017)

I sued South Bend and Mayor Buttigieg after I documented a large number of ADA violations in the City, especially handicap spaces with no markings on the ground and no way to get up to the sidewalk. When I told the Federal Highway Administration to visit a few days after a snowstorm, FHWA did so and found snow in handicap features such as ramps and curb cuts and in the sidewalks. The FHWA national civil rights office in Washington wrote a letter of findings very clearly stating that snow must not be left blocking accessible features, including

sidewalks. Two documents from FHWA are in the federal court record in this case.

I placed photos of ADA violations on a website named after the City ADA coordinator, who was not being helpful and also served as the attorney for the City. Since then, I have taken the position that no counsel for an entity may also act as its ADA coordinator because there is conflict in the purposes of these two roles. So, the violations of Pete Buttigieg's administration made me think carefully about how the law should be enforced and that it may be necessary to spell out discrimination in a way that nobody can misinterpret it.

I am afraid of Pete Buttigieg. Not so much because he is running for president, but because of the damage he could do as the secretary of some large agency that makes decisions impacting disabled people. People like Tammy Duckworth need a disabled veteran in charge of the Veterans Administration. Social Security must always put the needs of disabled people first in its programs. Even HUD should be favoring and helping disabled people to always have a decent place to live.

Pete Buttigieg also ran for Democratic National Committee chair. I saw this and thought about the kind of damage a careless individual

could do to disability rights in the Democratic Party. Someone very focused on proving how smart he is can lose sight of the right thing to do. And I had evidence. So, I wrote to all of the DNC members and told them about the problems in South Bend and with the Indiana Democratic Party and my reservations about Mayor Buttigieg. It did not take long before he withdrew his candidacy for DNC chair. I understand him. Losing dismally in that vote would bode very poorly for his “Superdelegate” chances if he decided to run for president, which he now is doing.

Pete’s history shows that first he will raise his profile above the level of the position he actually hopes to achieve. He ran for Indiana Treasurer and didn’t even come close. His major achievement was being part of the statewide team and yes, that’s noteworthy. One year after this, he ran for mayor of South Bend in a very friendly environment, his home town where his parents are Notre Dame University professors. You might call it a shoe-in. He simply needed to win the primary in a town that is overwhelmingly Democratic.

He is trying to make a big deal out of his marriage to another man, I guess to show he is a minority and understands civil rights for that

reason. I only wish he had the same concern for disability rights as he has for LGBTQ rights. Mayor Buttigieg needs someone to educate him on disability issues and race issues and gender issues.

Pete Buttigieg has potential, but he needs diversity around him so he regularly hears what others need. This is true of all politicians. I have been disappointed in Buttigieg's treatment of disability rights and that is my signature issue, so I can't support him for any higher office at this time.