

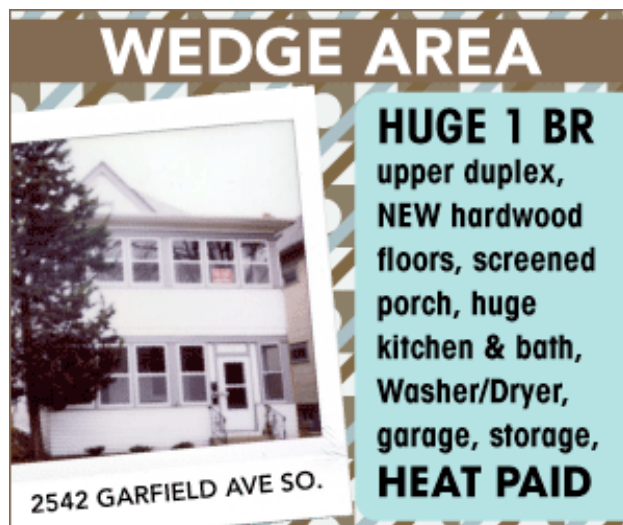


# City Council President Barb Johnson enjoys perks of office

## Fourth-term candidate used campaign funds for haircuts, cell phone, cable TV, and dry-cleaning

By Erin Carlyle

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courtesy of the City of Minneapolis



Barb Johnson's \$108,000 expense bill for this campaign outstrips that of fellow City Council members by a factor of 3 to 1

Details:

[Barb Johnson: The expenses](#)

If she wins a fourth term to the Minneapolis City Council this week, Barb Johnson may allow herself a moment to breathe a sigh of relief—but only a moment.

Because even though she won't be up for re-election again until 2013, Johnson is always—*always*—running for office.

"I consider myself to be campaigning continuously—all the time," Johnson says. "I can't go to the grocery store or to church without bumping into a constituent and being asked a question, which is the life of a politician."

That's why, Johnson says, she feels okay about charging her campaign supporters for her dry-cleaning, haircuts, cell phone, internet and cable television service for her home, AAA coverage for her car, and a land line for her lake house.

"This is a full-time, 24-hour-a-day job," Johnson says. "And it requires having a lot of things set up in your home, so that you can take care of business as it comes in, that sort of thing. It's kind of an all-consuming job."

During her most recent council term—2006 through 2009—Johnson charged her campaign \$1,154 for hairdresser appointments and \$986 for dry-cleaning.

In the past four years, Johnson has been the only council member to use campaign funds for personal grooming. Johnson's spending also outstrips that of her average fellow council member by a factor of 3 to 1—about \$108,000 in the most recent election cycle. Only Lisa Goodman spent

more (about \$119,000).

For the record, a short 'do like Johnson's requires trimming every three to four weeks (that's 13 to 17 times a year). She says she charges her campaign account for hair maintenance only when it's directly related to campaigning. "If I have a fundraiser scheduled or photographs getting taken, that kind of thing," she says.

No one has ever directly questioned her about the ethics of such spending, she says. But Johnson's interpretation of the rules has definitely raised some eyebrows.

"Campaign funds are supposed to be spent for things that are campaign-related, not expenses that you would normally incur as being a human," says government ethics expert David Schultz, a professor at Hamline University. "I would hope that *hygiene* is something that you would spend money on as a normal person."

Schultz compares Johnson's dry-cleaning to Sarah Palin's lavish wardrobe-shopping during her vice-presidential bid. At the time, Palin's defenders argued that the expenses were fair—as long as Palin returned the clothing after the campaign.

But in Johnson's case, the campaign clothes are what she wears all year.

"I think you could say that spending money on personal clothing for campaign events is still converting campaign dollars for personal use, and therefore at least unethical—perhaps illegal," Schultz says.

While candidates for state office must file reports with the state's Campaign Finance and Public Disclosure Board, which reviews what candidates are spending, city candidates don't face the same oversight. Contenders for city jobs file with county elections offices—in Johnson's case, Hennepin County—which don't scrutinize how the money is spent.

Years ago, that wasn't the case. But in 2004, the Legislature took that authority away from the counties and gave it to a little-known state agency, the Office of Administrative Hearings. Now, administrative-law judges investigate misuse of campaign funds only when someone files a complaint.

So far, the administrative-law judges have ruled on candidates accused of bribing potential voters by buying them chicken dinners, making false statements during their campaigns, and accepting more money than allowed from individual donors.

One candidate was accused of using campaign funds to purchase model airplanes for personal use. The judges slapped him with a \$600 fine.

No complaints have been filed about personal grooming expenses, says Amber Lee, staff attorney with the Office of Administrative Hearings. "We've never had haircuts or dry-cleaning."

Some of Johnson's other expenses are also questionable. Contributors have paid \$372 for AAA car coverage. How, exactly, is AAA related to her campaign?

"I have the coverage because just in case I have an accident, or the car dies, or whatever—you get locked out of the car, that kind of thing, so AAA covers it," Johnson says.

Johnson argues that she wouldn't have cable and internet at home if she weren't always campaigning, which in her mind justifies expensing the \$3,574. And though she has the option as a council member to use a city-paid cell phone, she'd rather not, to avoid the appearance of abusing her power.

"I just think it's perhaps more private," Johnson says of her campaign-paid cell. "I don't want to have a confusion of using a city cell phone for political reasons."

Johnson is not the only council candidate to charge a cell phone to her campaign. Betsy Hodges listed a campaign cell phone as an expense this election season. But she charged for the cell phone only during summer and fall 2009—election season. Johnson charged for her cell phone and other communications equipment year-round, every year, for the past four years. Total cost: \$4,851.

"The fall is when you're campaigning, not six months after when the campaign is over," says U of M political scientist Larry Jacobs. "Dry-cleaning six months later after an election, you kind of scratch your head and say, 'How's that's going to work?'"

Not only are Johnson's expenditures a gray area ethically in terms of campaign finance, but they also may have to be reported to the Internal Revenue Service.

"If they're personal expenses, if you have others basically spend money on your behalf, you're supposed to report that as income on your own income taxes," says Jon Pratt, executive director of the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits.

But in Johnson's view, that wouldn't be necessary because the expenses are for the campaign. "As I said, I'm running all the time—that's my life."