

# How far-right blogger boosted Joel Greenberg's smear campaign against rival candidate

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Jay Miller had recently co-founded [Save Rural Seminole](#), a citizen advocacy group opposed to [a developer's plan to build hundreds of homes on protected land](#), when a local blogger began attacking him online in the summer of 2018, including a post about an incident in which he was arrested but prosecutors declined to press charges.

Around the same time, Miller, who worked for a military contractor, said he got a call from his boss who told him the company had received an anonymous letter accusing him of drug-dealing and other crimes. Miller said it was untrue and his boss later said they cleared him after looking into the claims.

Miller still doesn't know who sent the letter. But soon after, he said he got a call from Jacob Engels, who'd written the blog post about Miller's arrest on his website, Central Florida Post. Engels, he said, offered to begin writing positive stories about Save Rural Seminole and its leaders — in exchange for \$10,000. "He said that they would be willing to do favorable stories concerning Save Rural Seminole to make us look better in the public light," Miller recalled in a recent interview. "I don't even know how he got my number."

Not long after, another co-founder of the citizen advocacy group, Brian Beute, was targeted with similar tactics. The following February, Engels sent emails to Beute's work insinuating that his opposition to the proposed development, River Cross, meant he supported racial segregation.

Later, after Beute filed to run for tax collector against Joel Greenberg — a friend and ally of River Cross developer Chris Dorworth — Engels slammed the new contender as “creepy candidate Brian Beute” in videos that would soon after be deleted from Facebook in a purge of propaganda accounts tied to Roger Stone, the infamous political strategist **and self-proclaimed “dirty-trickster”** whom Engels **considers a mentor**.

Greenberg has since confessed to carrying out an elaborate scheme to destroy Beute's reputation, using bogus social media accounts and anonymous letters to tar his political opponent as a white supremacist and child abuser.

But to attorney David Bear, Engels' role in the smear campaign against Beute has been clear from the start. Bear, who also was a member of Save Rural Seminole, said Miller immediately informed him after Engels offered favorable coverage in exchange for payment.

When a letter arrived at Trinity Preparatory School the following October falsely accusing Beute, a music teacher, of sexually abusing a student, Bear told Seminole County authorities he suspected Greenberg and Engels were behind it.

“One of Engels' typical MOs is hiding behind the veil of being a journalist,” Bear wrote in an Oct. 30, 2019, email to a Seminole County Sheriff's Office investigator. “This is really no different than lots of perpetrators that you investigate and I used to prosecute, they put one seemingly legitimate foot in the door and through the opening spew their criminality.”

Greenberg pleaded guilty on May 17 to six federal charges, including a stalking count for his smears against Beute. He is cooperating with federal authorities and **slated to face sentencing on Aug. 19.**

Engels, who declined to comment, has not been charged with any crime or publicly implicated by federal authorities in their case against the former tax collector. A criminal defense attorney he hired last year, Thomas D. Somerville, also declined to comment.

## CREEPY SEMINOLE COUNTY CANDIDATE ATTACKS OUR PUBLICATION.



Jacob Engels, a far-right blogger with ties to Roger Stone, posted videos in June 2020 attacking Brian Beute, who was running for tax collector against Joel Greenberg. Days after the videos were posted, Greenberg was arrested on stalking charges for a smear campaign against Beute.

## **‘I will dispatch you’**

On Feb. 17, 2019, Engels emailed Trinity Prep, claiming he was working on a blog post for Central Florida Post about Seminole County’s rural boundary, a protected low-density area established by Seminole voters in a 2004 ballot measure.

“As one of your teachers [Beute] is involved in opposing the removal of the racist rural boundary lines, I was wondering how your students/parents/teachers of color will feel about a TPS [Trinity Prep] employee leading this pro-segregation group?” Engels said in his email to the school.

Engels’ question mirrored **the developer’s argument in a lawsuit** filed against the county months earlier, seeking to reverse commissioners’ rejection of River Cross. Greenberg worked behind the scenes to urge commissioners not to fight the lawsuit, including by **sending a letter to county leaders that Dorworth helped him to craft.**

**Early that October**, Beute announced his candidacy for tax collector. Within a week, Greenberg began mailing anonymous letters to Trinity Prep and several of its faculty members, purporting to be from a “very concerned student” falsely claiming Beute had sexually abused another student.

On Oct. 29, 2019 — shortly after Greenberg mailed the first of the anonymous letters to the school and before they became public — Engels sent an email to the school asking for Beute’s personnel file, including any disciplinary action. “This should include any disciplinary action he has faced during his time at Trinity Prep, complaints from parents or teachers,” Engels’ request said. “It should also include his performance reviews and any student complaints as well.”

Greenberg's smears against Beute did not become public until June 23, 2020, when the tax collector was arrested and his indictment for stalking and identity theft was unsealed. But Engels in the days before Greenberg's downfall posted a pair of videos on Facebook in which he implied Beute was facing sexual misconduct allegations at work, while repeatedly asserting the legality of his own tactics against Beute.

"You started it and I will now finish it — legally, lawfully, within all the realms of legal and lawful — I will dispatch you," Engels said in a video posted online June 15, 2020.

The month after he posted the clips, [\*\*Facebook eradicated Engels' Central Florida Post page\*\*](#) in its purge of Stone-linked accounts.

Stone has in the past referred to Engels as one of his "volunteers" and the two worked closely enough that Stone testified under oath he has entrusted Engels [\*\*with his phone and the login and password for Stone's Instagram account\*\*](#). Though the Central Florida Post's Facebook page was deleted, its website remains online and active.

Among the accounts Facebook identified as part of the Stone network was one purported to belong to a woman named "April Goad." The page frequently shared content from Engels' website, including one of his videos about Beute. "Watch out women in Seminole County," the Goad account posted June 20, 2020. "Don't open your door to Brian Beute."

According to [\*\*a report by Graphika\*\*](#), one of the nation's top social media monitoring and disinformation tracking companies, Goad was one of numerous bogus "personas" used to boost Stone and his allies.

But when other users questioned Goad’s authenticity, the account had an ardent defender in Leslie A. “LA” Key, a Trump activist in Seminole who claimed to know Goad personally. Explaining why Goad hadn’t been seen at any conservative events, Key said Goad was a person homebound with a disability.

“Y’all... To help clear the confusion I KNOW April.. YES, SHE knows JACOB ENGELS.. who cares...” Key posted, in defense of Goad.



Jacob Engels interviews Leslie "LA" Key for his blog, Central Florida Post, in 2017.

Engels is an ally and onetime business partner of Key and her husband, real estate attorney Robert Hoogland. Greenberg also awarded a contract to a

newly-formed company founded by the Altamonte Springs couple within days of him taking office in 2017.

Auditors who probed Greenberg's spending after he resigned found that Tax Collector's Office staff had "no idea" what MAGA Advisory Services did for the \$29,000 that Greenberg ultimately paid the company, named in apparent homage to the Donald Trump campaign slogan, "Make America Great Again." Key and Hoogland later got more work from Greenberg: Key was given a staff position and paid \$105,000 in salary and benefits, while Hoogland was paid at least \$11,500 in legal fees. Auditors couldn't determine what they did for that money, either, though [Hoogland told WFTV-Channel 9](#) earlier this year that the couple did "political consulting" and "marketing" for the tax office. Beute, who since Greenberg's arrest has advocated for greater oversight of tax collectors in Florida, argues the payments to MAGA Advisory Services, Key and Hoogland deserve more scrutiny and explanation.

"Where'd the money flow?" Beute asked. "Was it for personal use? Did they use subcontractors? These are tax dollars we're talking about."

Key and Hoogland could not be reached for comment.

### **Lawyer alleged intimidation**

Engels framed his emails to Trinity Prep as journalistic inquiries, indicating his interest was in finding out the school's position on its teacher's involvement in opposing River Cross and, later, in vetting the background of a newly-filed candidate for office.

Bear, who represented Beute once Greenberg's anonymous letters to Trinity sparked a criminal investigation, argued Engels' actual goal was to intimidate Beute to drop out of the race.

“Jacob obviously has knowledge that the October 2019 letter was sent, whether because he sent it himself... was involved with directing it, or the person who sent the October 2019 letter told him about it,” Bear wrote in his Oct. 29, 2019, email to Detective Jose Tirado.

Bear also noted articles he called “fluff-posts” that Engels had written about Greenberg, including one about him partnering with a dog rescue group and another about his re-election campaign’s hefty war chest of Bitcoin.

Bear also represented Miller, writing a cease-and-desist letter to Dorworth after the developer launched a tirade against Miller on Save Rural Seminole’s Facebook page, bringing up the arrest that Engels had written about and calling him “a useless criminal fraud.” The attorney also included in his letter a late-night text message he said Dorworth sent to Miller calling him a “pathetic coward” and “an embarrassment to man.”

As evidence of a connection between Dorworth and Engels, Bear noted in an email to Tirado that he’d sent a cease-and-desist letter to Engels via certified mail on Feb. 22, 2019, sending a copy to Dorworth’s attorney via email that afternoon. Bear said his co-counsel received a “threatening” email from Engels that evening — far too soon for the letter to have arrived by mail.

Bear wasn’t alone in suspecting a link between Engels and Dorworth.

When former Orlando-Orange County Expressway Authority director Max Crumit sued Engels for defamation in 2017 over tawdry allegations published on another of Engels’ websites, records show Crumit sought to subpoena any communications between Dorworth and Engels, and any records of payments from Dorworth to Engels.



The suit was ultimately settled privately.

Dorworth in a text message to the Orlando Sentinel adamantly denied ever having worked with or paid Engels.

“No, I have not,” Dorworth said in the text message.

He said he was pursuing legal action against the Sentinel “and the people and groups that repeatedly said this to law enforcement despite having no evidence — something I am confident of because no evidence exists — in an attempt to get me investigated for the crime for which Joel was charged and pled guilty to.”

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