Savoring a slated candidate’s election night success, Dolton Village Mayor Tiffany Henyard arrived at a March village board meeting ready for her victory lap.

She wasn’t wearing the typical business attire seen at village board meetings, but rather was dressed to look like the Wesley Snipes character in the 1991 film, “New Jack City,” crack cocaine kingpin Nino Brown, who was notorious for his brutal way of doing business.

Her ensemble included a stuffed toy dog at her side, just as Brown had a real one in the movie.

Plus, she brought a DJ.

During the meeting, Henyard had the DJ punctuate her political points with
musical cues, including Rihanna’s hit single “B - - - Better Have My Money” when she demanded trustees approve the bill for a village ice rink. That is one of two ice rinks trustees say they never authorized spending money on.

“At the end of the day, this is what they told me to tell you all,” Henyard said about the payment for the ice rink before cuing up the DJ. “Pay me what you owe me!”

While Henyard’s actions certainly livened up that night’s village board meeting, her critics are finding nothing to be amused about.

Dolton Mayor Tiffany Henyard takes a page from Nino Brown, the fictional crime kingpin played by Wesley Snipes in the 1991 film, “New Jack City,” as she address trustees during a board meeting earlier this year. (Credit: Village YouTube video channel/”New Jack City” clip)

They argue their communities can’t afford Henyard’s free spending ways and say she’s blurred the lines between self-promotion and marketing both the village and the township, where she works in dual roles.

In Dolton, which shares a border with Chicago, about 15% of families live in poverty, census records show. Burdened with some of the highest property taxes in Cook County, homeowners feel the full brunt of the tax burden, since there’s little commercial or industrial development in town.

In her defense, supporters point to programs she’s set up to help seniors and others to give away gas cards.

Henyard wears two hats in local government. As the Dolton mayor, she takes home more than $46,000 in base pay and as the supervisor of Thornton Township, she makes more than $200,000 a year, records show.

An Illinois Answers Project and FOX 32 investigation has found that while in office, Henyard has:

- Funnelled thousands of dollars in taxpayer money to a private foundation that bears her name. She says the organization helps people with cancer. The officers of the foundation are people who work for the township or the village.
Spent thousands of taxpayer dollars for a group bicycle ride to Springfield in support of a breast cancer bill, Henyard said in videos taken during the trip. But the bill was never formally filed and state lawmakers weren’t in session.

Spent thousands of taxpayers dollars for not one but two ice rinks. Elected officials say they did not authorize either expenditure.

(Fox32/Youtube)
In a September 2022 meeting, Henyard and the township board voted to give $10,000 to her foundation, which claims to help people with cancer. Records show the foundation’s paperwork was filed with the state the same day that the township payment was approved.

Documents show the foundation’s officials are all people who work for the village or township.

Dolton Village Manager Keith Freeman, who is also her paid senior advisor at the township, filed the paperwork for the foundation. Village of Dolton Housing Director William Moore and her executive assistant in Dolton, Carmen Carlisle, sit on the board. Thornton Township employees Cheryl Schranz, Pamela Airhart and Kamal Woods, are also nonprofit board members.

Woods and Airhart declined to comment. Schranz, Carlisle and Moore did not respond to multiple messages, and Freeman told an Illinois Answers reporter, “you’re barking up the wrong tree.”

Henyard and others, including a DJ and a photographer flying a drone, took an e-bike ride for over a week last October from Dolton to Springfield, so she could testify on behalf of a bill that she hoped would give tax breaks to people suffering from cancer.

The timing for the ride, though, was off. The bill that Henyard’s caravan was heading to Springfield to support was never filed. And when they got there, the state legislature wasn’t in session.

Days after checking out of a Springfield hotel, Henyard appeared before the House’s Revenue and Finance Committee — which met in Chicago — and told
them her nonprofit “supports the fighter in everyone.”

Records show Henyard authorized a separate $17,000 payment from the township for 1,000 white hoodies and T-shirts. Neither Henyard nor the shirtemaker would comment on whether the clothing was for the foundation. The invoice for the hoodies and T-shirts was submitted one day after the paperwork for Henyard’s foundation was submitted to the state. The township declined to answer questions about the clothing purchase but provided one photo of a Henyard wearing a white T-shirt over the weekend to suggest that the purchase was for clothing with a township insignia and Henyard’s name on it.

Documents obtained through a public records request show that Thornton Township spent about $8,800 on hotels, restaurants and at other businesses statewide during the dates of the Springfield trip.

This includes nearly $4,800 in hotels; $358 at Firehouse Subs in Bloomington, and $300 at Smokey Bones Bar and Fire Grill in Springfield. Village of Dolton officials spent another $2,700 on hotel rooms in Springfield during that same time period. Neither village nor township officials would comment on the expenditures.

Tiffany Henyard greets a supporter at a Thornton Township meeting in April.
Asked about her foundation by reporters from Illinois Answers and FOX 32, Henyard said at a Thornton Township meeting on April 11 that she’s “the face of the foundation” but also “my face is nowhere” near the operation or its leadership.

“It’s a foundation I created to help people that struggle with cancer – it doesn’t matter what type of cancer it is ... ” Henyard said. “You know public funds are not going to fund my foundation ... $10,000 is not going to fund our operation.”

At that meeting, Henyard targeted the media for showing up only for the “mess,” blasted critics and basked in praise from supporters — with one backer calling her “my courageous supervisor.”

Henyard told the media she had an open-door policy, but when reporters pressed for more details on the Springfield trip and her foundation, township employees and two armed security guards, including at least one Dolton police officer, circled her and escorted her away from reporters who pursued the group.

Thornton Township Supervisor Tiffany Henyard says she has an open-door policy, but she ducked reporters questions at a township meeting in April with the help of security. (Footage courtesy FOX 32 Chicago.)

Officials in both Dolton and Thornton Township have raised questions about Henyard’s leadership, which have been chronicled in the Daily Southtown, the Edgar County Watchdogs and other local news organizations.

“She’s spending like crazy,” said Edward Steave, a former Dolton trustee who recently lost an election to a candidate supported by Heynard. “There’s so much money she’s spending. She’s spending like it’s her own personal stuff. She doesn’t mind spending anything, she just wants to make herself look better.”

Village officials who spoke to reporters for the Illinois Answers Project said they can’t afford Henyard’s freewheeling spending.

Steave pointed to outstanding bills related to a Dolton ice rink — one of two — that Henyard ordered built without board knowledge.

Last fall, under Henyard’s direction but without board approval, the Village of Dolton hired Minnesota-based KwikRink Synthetic Ice to build an artificial ice rink for $115,000, which included a $10,000 down payment.
But after the board found out and refused to pay the bill, leaving KwikRink with an ice rink collecting dust in a Minnesota warehouse pending payment, the village hired another company at her direction to supply the materials for a second rink ahead of a grand opening which came days before an election that would determine the fate of her control of the board.

“Hey y’all it’s your mayor, Tiffany A. Heynard: the people’s mayor,” she said in a video she posted to Facebook at a campaign fundraiser she held at the rink in advance of the grand opening. “We about to get our skate on! Remember: when all five of them trustees said no, look what God did! Ah ha ha ha!”

Mayor Tiffany Henyard appeared in a Facebook video in January earlier this year, celebrating the village ice rink. Fundraising on government property is prohibited unless the property has been rented for the occasion. Campaign finance records from Henyard’s campaign fund do not show any expenditures made to lease the rink.

Beyond the unpaid costs, village board members expressed concern about the potential liabilities that come with the ice rink along with long-term expenses related to staffing and upkeep.

“Everything being done should be brought before the board and community,” said board member Jason House. “No board meetings, no plans presented to the board, no budget, no financials. None of that has been presented.”

Andrew Holmes, Henyard’s main supporter on the board and a well known advocate for victims of gun violence, said that board officials are kept aware of Henyard’s plans but complain because “it’s just an ego thing.”

“You can’t turn a blind eye to developments that have been done since she’s been there,” Holmes said. “What more do you want? There’s no negligence there; all I see is progress.”
Dolton Trustee Andrew Holmes sings the praises of Tiffany Henyard at a Thornton Township meeting earlier this year. (Credit: Casey Toner/Illinois Answers Project) According to township records obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request, Henyard has received $316,000 in salaries and other payments since being appointed to the board in 2022. Those records show that she also received exorbitant reimbursement checks, though a township Freedom of Information officer never responded to requests for further clarification on those records. The Village of Dolton declined to provide records.

Those township sums don’t include her salary as Dolton mayor or perks, like the cost of the police officers who provide security to her at her own home or the township vehicles she uses to advertise her nonprofit, the Tiffany Henyard Cares Foundation.

Village Clerk Alison Key filed suit against Henyard in April 2022 alleging that Henyard directed the village manager to stop staff from responding to public records requests. In her suit, Key included a list of 32 outstanding requests, including one from a reporter at the Illinois Answers Project, that went unfilled.

The lawsuit alleges Freeman told village employees that they would be fired if they told anyone about the order to withhold records or if they provided records
responsive to public records requests.

In response, Henyard’s attorneys called Key’s lawsuit “unmeritorious” and said that she is trying to “smear the mayor for political purposes.”

Despite being one of the highest paid elected officials in the south suburbs, she still owes South Suburban College $1,500 in unpaid bills from her time selling hamburgers in the cafeteria to students through her catering business, Good Burger, which no longer operates at the college.

Henyard has also been Thornton Township supervisor for almost a year, taking over for the late Frank Zuccarelli, a Democratic political powerhouse in the south suburbs known for providing key early backing to political candidates, including Barack Obama in his bid for U.S. Senate. After his death two years ago, township trustees unanimously voted for Henyard just minutes before a midnight deadline to install a successor.

“For the township administration now there’s utter disrespect and disregard for the law,” said Tim DeYoung, a local Republican who used to work with Zuccarelli but now finds himself on the outs with the township government. “Everything is about patronage and who you are friends with now with Tiffany and her crew. Everything is all about her. Her only goal is to make herself look good.”

Thornton Township has hired a number of Henyard confidants since she took over the top spot, including some of those on the board of her nonprofit.

At the village, Henyard hired former Cook County Clerk of the Circuit Court Dorothy Brown, whose office was under a federal corruption investigation. Henyard later made international news after hiring and then firing a registered sex offender who had volunteered for her mayoral campaign to be a building inspector.

Township Trustee Chris Gonzalez says though he ultimately voted for Henyard the township is now facing “some struggles with transparency.”

“I used to be able to pick up the phone and just make a call to get information. Now, I never get anything back,” Gonzalez said. “We have an issue with spending ... why is it that one day you’re laying off 11 people and yet spending thousands and thousands on events? That doesn’t sit well with me.”
Gonzalez said he didn’t realize until later that he and the board had approved the $10,000 donation to Henyard’s foundation; it was part of a lengthy group of expenditures. He says his requests for more information on the nonprofit’s work and what the money would be used for have gone unanswered.

Henyard has been working to circumnavigate the board by laying off employees instead of firing them, which would require board approval, Gonzalez said. New hires are brought on as part-time employees, which don’t have to go through the board, but they are later offered township employee benefits.

Nakita McGraw, Henyard’s former Dolton chief of staff, said many employees in the suburb are afraid of speaking out for fear of being fired. The day she resigned Henyard berated her for allowing a trustee into the building, she said. Other basic job tasks, like responding to Freedom of Information Act requests, could also lead to firing, she said.

“She’s a young woman, she has a lot of fire in her and I and others had high hopes for her, however, I think that she’s overwhelmed,” McGraw said. “She doesn’t know what she’s doing — this task is a little big for her and I’m afraid for the people of Thornton.”

Stephanie Wiedeman, Zuccarelli’s former chief of staff, was fired by Henyard in March 2022 after roughly 20 years working with the township. Since then she’s been in touch with Dolton board members and employees, sharing information on Henyard’s dealings at the township and in the village, she said.

Wiedeman’s attempt to shed light has made her an irritant to Henyard, who went so far as to have her thrown out of a “township talk” hosted by Henyard in November. Several months earlier, Wiedeman was arrested for removing flyers featuring Henyard from cars in a Dolton Park District parking lot.
Stephanie Wiedeman, the chief of staff to the former Thornton Township supervisor, is a critic of Henyard. Henyard fired her last year. (Credit: Casey Toner/Illinois Answers Project)

Though the charges were dropped, Weideman said she was on the hook for several thousand dollars in attorney fees.

“She took no initiative to understand the services the township provides to the community ... she put her name and her face on everything and she’s using resources so people know who she is,” Wiedeman said of Henyard’s “takeover” of the township.

“Maybe she thinks people aren’t noticing,” Wiedeman said.

FOX 32 reporter Dane Placko contributed to this story.