

Ethical Dilemma

OH, ETHICS! WE REALLY, REALLY VALUE YOU, LIKE, SO MUCH.

Last Monday? We totally gave an award in your name? And we did it because we love you! And believe in your total worthwhileness.

Of course, things get a little confusing if you look too closely. Because even as we (the city's Ethics Commission) were presenting our first-ever ethics award to a man who forced the city to comply with public records laws, we (the city's transportation agency, JTA) were scrambling to appear in compliance with a three-months old public records request that we'd simply ignored. To make things even more upside-downy, we (JTA) got sued the very next day, for our refusal to produce public records. And the lawsuit was filed by a former city attorney (ex-we)!

So do we (the city of Jacksonville) understand our ethical obligation to follow the law? Like, totally unclear!

OK, that voice gives everyone a headache. But let's roll back a few

lawyers to push the deal through City Council — a relevant issue, since JTA routinely claims it doesn't have enough money to build and maintain shelters.

JTA has also refused to provide documents that substantiate JTA Executive Director Mike Blaylock's assertion that "thousands" of people have begged him to provide more bus shelters. Justification seems in order, given Blaylock's notoriously squishy estimating skills. As Folio Weekly reported in October, JTA has for years claimed to have more than 6,000 bus stops — a number that, as it turns out, doesn't reflect the number of actual places where a bus stops, but the number of busses that pass each stop. Which is a little like McDonald's calculating the number of restaurants it has by how

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months for clarity. First, the Ethics Commission nominated Folio Weekly writer Marvin Edwards for its first-ever "Excellence in Ethics" award.

That's weird by itself, considering that Edwards' contribution to the realm of ethics was suing the city of Jacksonville for failing to produce public records. Although Edwards had repeatedly asked for documents related to the city's conversion of the old Gator Bowl into Municipal Stadium, he'd gotten bupkus. City attorneys repeatedly insisted there were no records. It wasn't until Edwards hired a private attorney — after three years of waiting — that he got the documents he'd asked for. (Find the whole sorry story at Folio Weekly's online archive: "Stadium Scam," Oct. 7, 2008.)

Afterwards, city attorneys admitted they'd made a mistake. The city agreed to pay Edwards' legal fees and Chief Deputy General Counsel Cindy Laquidara acknowledged the city had "dropped the ball."

But it doesn't seem like the city learned its lesson. For the past three-and-a-half months, the city's independent transportation agency, JTA, has stonewalled public records requests related to its plan to let billboard companies build bus shelters (then plaster them with ads). Among the documents JTA has declined to provide are those related to how much the agency has spent on lobbyists and

many Big Macs it serves. (Read all about it at: http://bit.ly/numbers_game)

The person to whom JTA has declined to provide these records is, ironically, Tracey Arpen, former Deputy General Counsel for the city of Jacksonville. In other words, a former city attorney is suing an independent city authority for ignoring city (and state) public records laws.

Arpen's lawsuit, filed last Tuesday, was scheduled for a hearing on Monday, Feb. 1 (after our press deadline). And while we hate to second-guess the judicial system, the judge will presumably find that JTA failed to produce the records in a timely manner. (It's hard to see how he could decide otherwise.) If that happens, Arpen will be able to — *wait for it* — recover the money he expended drafting his legal motion.

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We'd be laughing, too, except we submitted our own public records request to JTA in October asking for documents related to the number of bus stops in Jacksonville. So far, we've heard bupkus.

Anyone know a good lawyer? ☐



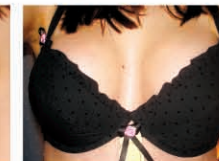
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