

Signs of Intelligence

IT'S A STATEMENT THAT MIGHT NEVER HAVE BEEN UTTERED

before, but the JTA Board showed great courage last week.

Although the Jacksonville Transportation Authority was poised to move ahead with a deal to let billboard companies build ad-covered bus shelters, the board rightly decided to delay any such action until at least January — after the board has had time to consider other options.

Really, that's all anyone has been asking of JTA for the past five years. Unfortunately, Executive Director Michael Blaylock and spokesperson Mike Miller have had tunnel vision when it comes to shelter funding options. Instead of aggressively seeking federal dollars and matching grants, they've put their energies into chasing a partnership with billboard companies. The deal necessitates gutting Jacksonville's sign ordinance, which prohibits new construction of large offsite signs — even those disguised as civic “improvements.” Amending the sign ordinance matters not just because of the shelter ads that will result, but because it imposes a double standard: Offsite signs are illegal, except when the city says they're not.

Unequal treatment under the law is the kind of thing that invites lawsuits, especially when the players are billionaire billboard companies. Defending the double standard would cost millions in legal fees, but the price of losing the case is almost immeasurable. If the city's sign ordinance were struck down in court — even for a few weeks or months — the city would be flooded with new billboard applications that city officials would have no legal basis to deny. Those roads that are currently sign-free (9A, JTB) would be inundated with billboards, and the city's long battle against visual blight would be lost.

Despite the risks, the Jacksonville City Council agreed to JTA's proposal. Two weeks ago, it voted 11-6 to “amend” the sign ordinance to allow the ad-splattered bus shelters.

While the council's vote cleared the way for the deal, however, the JTA board still needed to approve it. And last Thursday, they slammed on the brakes.

In part, the board was responding to serious concerns about how JTA does business. For one, JTA attorney David Cohen acknowledged at the council meeting that his law firm also represents Clear Channel Communications — the world's largest outdoor advertising company, and one that has lobbied JTA and the city on the bus shelter issue. Addressing the apparent conflict, Cohen told councilmembers that there was a wall of separation between his JTA dealings and his firm's business with Clear Channel: “We have adopted a ‘no discussion rule,’” he said. That may well be true, but it sure drew a big laugh from the audience when he said it.

A larger issue is the reliability of JTA's own data about the need for — and cost

of — shelters. As first reported here two weeks ago (http://bit.ly/numbers_game), JTA has devised a novel, and wildly misleading, means of counting bus stops. Rather than just tallying the number of actual, physical bus stops, JTA multiplies that number by the bus routes that pass a stop. So if twelve buses stop at the corner of Philips and Emerson, JTA counts that as TWELVE bus stops.

This dubious accounting has greatly inflated the city's bus-stop count. For the past five years, JTA has claimed to have 6,000 bus stops. In fact, the number is closer to 3,660. Agency officials have no explanation for their poor accounting practices, which appear to be unique in the transportation industry. But the fuzzy arithmetic apparently bleeds over into their assay of how much it costs to maintain a shelter. JTA estimates have ranged from as much as \$3,500 a year per shelter to as little as \$950, but an analysis of JTA maintenance invoices from October 2007 to October 2008 shows the real cost is a mere \$271.

Reconciling JTA “data” with reality will be the job of JTA Board Member Cleve Warren. He was appointed by the chair last week to revisit the issue of bus shelter signage and explore whether there isn't another, better way to finance the construction of new shelters. It's a move JTA's executive leadership should have made years ago. Had they done so, they might have sought other avenues for financing shelters, like federal stimulus dollars. (A more forward-thinking city than Jacksonville, Albuquerque, N.M., landed \$9.8 million in stimulus money to build 500 *solar powered* bus shelters.) The agency might also have come up with some way to finance shelters that doesn't imperil the city's sign ordinance and its financial well-being.

JTA board members didn't spend much time talking about their motives last week, but it's hard to read their decision as anything but a rebuke to the JTA's executive leadership. After five years of fighting to win approval for their shelter financing scheme, JTA execs finally persuaded the City Council — only to have their own board put the effort on ice.

JTA board members are to be applauded for their backbone — something the council and the mayor (who quickly signed the bill) failed to exhibit. One can only hope their reality check restores some credibility to an agency that has become literally unaccountable. □



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