

Folioweekly

Oct 16, 2007

Plane Truth

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There was a rare and glorious moment during last Tuesday's Jacksonville City Council meeting — a moment of political drama so righteous and satisfying it seemed to have come straight from a Frank Capra movie.

In this particular scene, a young, fresh-faced politician takes on the arrogant forces of entrenched authority and greedy special interests. He ignores the hostile stares of his colleagues and those who hold sway over his political future, and boldly confronts the lie he's discovered.

Q: Mr. Clark, how long have you been at the Port Authority?

A: About 13 years.

Q: As long as you've been there, what has been the Authority's motivation for wanting the Craig Field runway expansion?

A: Pilot safety.

Q: Isn't it true that you told me just a few hours ago that in 2000 the Authority agreed to its pledge never to lengthen the Craig runway in order to curry political favors necessary to win unanimous Council support for splitting the Port Authority?

A: [Tap dance, tap dance, tap dance ...]

Q: Is that a yes?

A: Yes, that is what I said.

In this case, the very real characters were City Councilmember Clay Yarborough (asking) and Jacksonville Airport Authority Executive Director John Clark (dancing). At issue was the airport's attempt — after promising, pledging and pinkie-swearing not to — to extend the runway at Craig Field.

The airport, located at the northeast corner of the intersection of Atlantic Boulevard and St. Johns Bluff Road, has been a source of conflict for 30 years. Airport officials want to expand the runway by 2,000 feet, neighbors vehemently oppose it. The debate surfaces every few years before being quashed by organized opposition from residents and Council representatives, but it never dies. Even in 2000, when residents extracted a written promise from JAA to never raise the issue again and got city officials to inscribe the pledge in its comprehensive plan for development — even then, it didn't die. Instead, it rose from the grave, yanked the stake out of its heart and marched back down to City Hall to give it another go.

The reason for the airport's tenacity is simple. It stands to profit mightily from a longer Craig runway. It would allow massive corporate jets and small commercial aircraft to use the runway, and would increase by 74,000 the number of planes using the strip annually.

Airport officials aren't comfortable disclosing the reason for their desire to extend the runway, however, so they've created a faux justification for their cause. Safety. In case anyone misses their point, they've dubbed the current expansion attempt the "Craig Safety Initiative."

Which is why last week's cinematic exchange was so resonant. Yarborough noted that while the airport uses safety to rationalize expanding, it sold out safety in the name of political expediency in 2000. That year, airport officials needed to persuade city leaders to split the once-unified Port Authority into separate marine and air functions. The split was controversial; many feared it would simply create two costly fiefdoms. In order to win over naysayers, port officials agreed to never, ever, ever bring up the Craig expansion again.

Yarborough, a novice councilmember barely out of college, was quick to notice that safety was ruthlessly cast aside in order to grease the political skids. After some heated exchanges with Clark during previous committee meetings, he buttonholed Clark away from the microphones to ask him about this, and Clark confessed the truth: It wasn't about safety. It was about politics.

Clark clearly did not expect his admission to become a matter of public record. Visibly shocked, audibly stammering, he was forced to choke on the same canard he's tried to force-feed the public and media — a meal made more palatable by the high-priced "crisis management" firm the airport has hired to press for the expansion, at a rumored cost of \$300,000 in public money.

The issue isn't dead, you can be sure. But Yarborough deserves praise for his earnest, even somewhat credulous pursuit of the truth. A rising young Republican, he faced down big GOP guns, including Duval Party Chair John Falconetti and party rainmaker Jack Demetree, both present that night in support of Clark. He didn't quail in their presence, neither did he back off when Clark started to squirm. Yarborough may not realize the ramifications of his actions; he may be just that green. We'd prefer to think he knew and did it anyway. He may be punished for the courage he showed last week, but it's a small price to pay for standing up for the truth.