

EDITORIALS

The starting point

THE ISSUE Jefferson County's new team of advisers should pick up talks where the old team ended.

A Jefferson County's new advisers try to create a rescue plan for the county's troubled sewer system, the first place they should start is where the old advisers ended. That means determining whether the old team was as close to a deal with creditors as County Commissioner Jim Carns contends it was before a majority of commissioners fired the team and hired a new one.

If Carns is correct that an agreement was close at hand, the new team needs to pick up that plan and continue the talks. That's because the plan Carns laid out looks to be far less painful to county taxpayers than the options the new team is considering.

As News staff writer Barnett Wright reported Sunday, those options include an increase in property taxes, an increase in business license fees, removing exemptions for professionals from the county's occupational tax, redirecting occupational bond money and moving to the Birmingham-Jefferson Convention Complex and using excess revenue from the county's 11 cent sales tax for school construction.

Most of those options would require the approval of the legislature, which is a high hurdle. The property tax also would require voters' approval, an even higher hurdle.

According to Carns, the old team's plan didn't rely on any tax increase. The money to repay the \$3.2 billion in sewer debt would come from two sources: sewer customers and the school sales tax. Under the plan he outlined in a statement last week, the sewer debt was to be restructured at fixed interest rates instead of the current variable and auction-rate bond debt. The county's \$1 billion school bond would be refinanced over a 40-year period, with excess revenue going toward the sewer debt. The interest-rate swaps, which put the county hundreds of millions further in the red, would

be terminated, with the payments the county owes on the swaps for-given or substantially lowered. Sewer rates would increase a modest 2.85 percent a year.

In exchange for those concessions, Carns says, creditors wanted the county to turn over financial oversight of the sewer system to a "control board" (with the authority to set sewer rates) and an agreement from the county to come up with another \$10 million a year, if necessary, from the county's budget.

Even though county officials are loath to hand over control of the sewer system to an independent board, that shouldn't be a deal breaker. In fact, it's understandable that creditors, after witnessing the county's mismanagement of the sewer system, would want a more competent body in charge. Even the promise to kick in an additional \$10 million is doable, considering the county stands to gain that amount after its commitment to the BCC ends this year.

The bottom line: The plan the old team was working on is much better than what we know so far of the ideas from the new team. Unless creditors reject that earlier plan — and Carns says they had gotten most of the creditors to tentatively agree — it makes no sense to go to a plan B. Especially if plan B calls for tax increases on county residents and stands little chance of winning legislative and voters' approval.

Perhaps what's most disappointing is that county officials did such a poor job of communicating with each other. Carns says his fellow commissioners pulled the rug from under him and the old team by planning to appoint a new team without talking to him or the old team. Commissioners who voted for the change say they weren't told a deal restricting debt could be imminent.

That just makes the idea of a sewer system oversight board all the more appealing.

A decent enough consolation prize

THE ISSUE Volkswagen chose Chattanooga over Huntsville as the site for a \$1 billion auto assembly plant that will employ 2,000 people, but Alabama still should fare well because of it.

There are worse things than losing Volkswagen's new auto assembly plant to the state next door. Just ask Michigan.

Alabama officials found out Tuesday the German automaker chose a site near Chattanooga over sites near Huntsville and in Michigan. Volkswagen in April had named Alabama, Tennessee and Michigan finalists for the project, which will result in a \$1 billion investment and 2,000 direct jobs. In the weeks leading up to Tuesday's announcement, several reports had given Alabama the edge in what was supposed to be a two-state race with Tennessee. Obviously, those reports were wrong.

As the crew that the sources of those reports should be eating flies, the new VW plant will be about 30 miles from Alabama's northeastern border. Michigan, meanwhile, sits three states and more than 500 miles away.

That means Alabama, not Michigan, stands to gain from the thousands of indirect jobs which will arise because of the plant. "It is exciting that these jobs will come from the tri-state area, pulling from the labor force of Tennessee as well as Georgia and Alabama," Volkswagen said in the news release announcing the decision. Look what has happened in the two years since Korean automaker Kia picked a site in West Point, Ga., just over the Alabama line, for an assembly plant. More

than a dozen suppliers, with more than 2,000 jobs and investment that tops \$560 million, have located in Alabama. State officials have projected that from one-quarter to one-third of the Kia work force of 2,500 could come from Alabama.

So Alabama should do very well despite the big prize going to Tennessee. Alabama didn't lose for lack of trying. State and local officials fought hard for the plant, from site preparation, to a legislative bill allowing Huntsville to offer incentives for industrial projects, from a \$71 million robotics training and education center at nearby Calhoun State Community College, to a package of almost \$400 million in incentives.

Alabama officials said the state offered its standard tax breaks and other incentives in addition to \$120 million in cash incentives to entice Volkswagen. "But we didn't have the biggest checkbook," said Limestone County Commissioner Chairman David Seibert.

Apparently, Tennessee did, having topped its offer late in the bidding, according to published reports. At least Alabama's consolation prize — a potential tens of thousands of construction, supplier and even auto plant jobs going to Alabamians, with millions of dollars invested in the state economy — isn't so shabby. Just ask Michigan.

© 2008 by Scott Stantits. All rights reserved.



See more of Scott Stantits' cartoons on the Web at al.com, the online home of The Birmingham News. blog.al.com/stantits

YOUR OPINIONS

Should highlight what people with disabilities can do, not what they can't

Having a longstanding interest in art created by the mentally and physically disabled, I am thrilled that 18 delightful drawings by Frank Calloway, a patient for many years at Bryce Hospital, will be seen by a national audience at Baltimore's American Visionary Art Museum "A graceful angel" at 112 years old." The News, July 13.

The Birmingham News should be commended for helping to recognize this talented individual. Two years ago, after reading the touching article "Portrait of the artist as an old man" (The News, May 7, 2006), I contacted Bryce to offer time and resources toward the preservation and exhibition of Calloway's pictures. Dismayed that the works were being sold for \$50 before they could be photographed and cataloged, I expressed concern about this practice, which was then stopped. I subsequently sought permission to contact AVAM's director to urge her to visit the artist.

It is my hope that the Alabama Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation, inspired by Calloway and his nurturing caregivers at Bryce, will establish a center or systematic program dedicated to stimulating the latent artistic and musical talents of other patients with mental disabilities. A model for such a center exists at the New York State Psychiatric Institute at Creedmoor. "The Living Museum," a 1999 Oscar-winning documentary about the Creedmoor art center, is a must-see for all who believe in highlighting what people with disabilities can do, not what they can't.

Alan Blum, M.D.
University of Alabama School of Medicine
Tusculum, TN

and Congress ignored the approaching storm. We citizens had no lobby.

Lynne Wilbanks
Pethare

No evidence of mysterious group

Associated Press reporter Jay Byers was apparently taken in by a hoax "Alternative moon rocket takes shape." The News, July 15. There is no evidence the mysterious group of 57 volunteer engineers' working on an alternative launch system for the U.S. space program exists.

I publicly offered anonymity to any qualified professional propulsion engineer who would respond to my request for technical details on the Jupiter-120 project. Not a single engineer stepped up to the plate.

The self-appointed, volunteer spokesman for the alleged group of disident engineers is Ross Tierney, a British citizen and a nongenieur who builds space models at his home in Cocoa Beach, Fla. I know this because I have visited Tierney's home. Nobody, other than Tierney apparently, has been able to talk to one of those alleged 57 disident engineers about the technical merits of their project.

The real engineers at the Boeing Co. and NASA Project Constellation have pointed out the fundamental mismatches between the largely borrowed Jupiter-120 rocket design and the congressionally authorized missions NASA will be flying in the coming decades. Basically, Jupiter-120, a rehash of an old NASA study proposal from a different era, is too many expenses between the International Space Station and too weak by fly America's new Crew Exploration Vehicle to the moon.

There are many basic, unde-

able flaws in the Jupiter-120 proposal that cannot be adequately addressed in a letter. At best, the Jupiters are a passing fancy. At worst, it is a distraction for the honest engineers and workers who are building America's next generation of space vehicles in Huntsville.

Jim McDade
One Giant Leap Foundation
Vestavia Hills

The News hit an all-time low

In its editorial "No gambling on sewers" (July 11), The News hit an all-time low, wanting to put its beliefs as restrictions on the new financial advisers who have been hired to find a solution to the sewer debt.

Thank goodness for the common sense of Jefferson County Commission President Bettye Fife Collins. She said just because gambling was raised as a possible solution doesn't mean she is "colluding." On the contrary, Collins is "pro-finding a solution."

Don't wish commissioners Jim Carns and Bobby Humphries were as smart? Carns and Humphries would just as soon see taxes raised or rompers of the sewer system forcing the bill than explore all options.

The Birmingham News says gambling is on the pose. Well, how about increased taxes, increased sewer rates or paying for sewer when you are not on it? Those also prey on the citizens who can least afford it. I commend Collins and commissioners Shella Smoot and George Brownman for their smarts to say to the new advisers: Help us avoid bankruptcy at any stake.

As for Carns and Humphries, The News' lawyers get your head out of the sand. Gambling is legal in six Alabama counties, including Jefferson. It is a user tax. If you play the games, you pay the tax. If you don't play the game, you don't pay.

To Carns, Humphries and The News: Shame on you for wanting restrictions along your personal beliefs. Remember what Thomas Jefferson said: The fairest form of taxation for all citizens is a lottery. If you don't want to pay the tax, don't play the game. Don't pay.

To the new financial advisers, I say: Put all notions on the table. Present them to us, the citizens, and let us vote.

Monny Ballard
President
Ballard Advertising
Ironton

Arlington already is in the South

I couldn't help but notice The News titled the upcoming national cemetery to be located in Alabama as the "Arlington of the South."

Actually, the Arlington National Cemetery is in the South. It is the ancestral home of Gen. and Mrs. Robert E. Lee of Virginia.

Bobby Lett Jr.
Birmingham



Taxpayers to the rescue

For eight years, we have had virtually no government regulation of big business. As a good friend is fond of saying, "How's that working for you?" The answer is: It's not.

Now we, the taxpayers, are going to bail out Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae because these two unregulated companies have run amok. The expression being bandied around is "profits are privatized and losses are socialized." When companies are successful, the CEOs and stockholders take the profits. When they fail, the citizens assume the risk.

We are told it was "implicitly" understood the government would not let these private companies fail. Knowing they had a safety net allowed these two companies to engage in a lot of risky behavior. Now, we citizens are left with a huge debt and an uncertain economic future. Why did government officials look the other way?

The Center for Responsible Politics lists Freddie Mac in its top 100 campaign donors of all time. In this year alone, its PAC has contributed \$478,000 to campaigns. Last year, Fannie Mae spent \$1.4 million on lobbying, and it paid off. The White House

HOW TO WRITE US | Letters should be no longer than 200 words and will be edited for grammar, spelling and brevity. All letters must include the writer's name, address and daytime phone number. The address and phone number are for confirmation purposes and will not be published.

MAIL | Editorial Page, P.O. Box 2553, Birmingham, AL 35202 FAX | 205-325-3445 E-MAIL | epage@bhamtrib.com

OUR OPINIONS | The opinions on this page are shaped by The Birmingham News' editorial board, independent of news coverage decisions elsewhere in the paper. Members of that editorial board are publisher Victor H. Hanson III, editor Thomas V. Scarfit, editorial page editor Bob Blalock, editorial writers Jay Kennedy, Eddie Lee and Robin DeKorn, and cartoonist Scott Stantits.