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Art of the Possible

Progress and the city's common good must be at the heart of successful streets vote

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Last Thursday night, May 29, was the deadline to put a billion-dollar-plus streets financing package on the July 29 ballot, and the City Council missed it.

A draft of the proposal didn't emerge until May 15. It's essentially the "Back to Basics" approach developed by the Council's streets task force, under the leadership of District 5 Councilor Bill Martinson. (I saluted his approach in my February 7-13 column.)

City of Tulsa voters would be asked to approve a bond issue and a 1.767 percent sales tax, which would be phased in to replace the City's current Third Penny tax and Tulsa County's "4 to Fix the County" and "Vision 2025" sales taxes as they expire, so that the overall sales tax rate in the City of Tulsa would not increase.

Under Martinson's plan, the bond issue would have increased Tulsa's property tax rate by 3.3 mills - \$33 more dollars a year on a \$100,000 home. But there are reports that the City Finance Department has numbers showing a bigger impact - over the next 13 years, that \$100,000 homeowner would pay an average of \$54 more than if the current rate continued.

The official reason for missing the deadline for a July 29 election is that the city departments needed more time to review the plan. But the principal roadblocks to this package going to the voters in anything resembling its current form are three in number, all beginning with the letter C: The Chamber, the County, and Bill Christiansen.

The Chamber wants to be relevant, the County wants to keep its sales tax slush fund, and Christiansen wants widening in his district to be as well-funded as maintenance.

On May 22, Stan Lybarger, head of the Bank of Oklahoma and this year's Chairman of the Tulsa Metro Chamber, and Mike Neal, the Chamber's paid, full-time CEO, wrote a letter to the City Council urging them not to set a streets election for July 29, but to hold off until August 26, the date of the lower-turnout runoff election:

The Chamber letter expressed concerns about the use of the County's "4 to Fix" sales tax, the absence of critical needs from the project list (they cited downtown's long-closed Boulder Ave. railroad overpass), and the package's emphasis on street rehabilitation over street widening in south Tulsa.

The subtext of the letter was that the package can't win public approval unless the Chamber funds a massive, well-funded PR effort and unless the election is held on a low-turnout date, when a massive, well-funded get-out-the-vote push can turnout only voters who will say yes.

Martinson responded the following day with a verbal smackdown, calling the Chamber's letter "offensive and disturbing."

Martinson wrote that the letter "conveyed a serious lack of understanding as to the development and status" of the Council's streets proposal, which spanned eight months and included "more than two dozen fact finding meetings" and "town hall meetings for all districts." "You and your staff were welcome to attend, and had you done so, I believe you would have found the meetings most informative.

"Your contempt for Tulsa's City Council was apparent in your comments. To assume that the Council and City staff would advance an initiative of this magnitude to the voters and ignore fundamental due diligence and statutory requirements is arrogant and absurd."

Martinson pointed out the "appalling level of ignorance" revealed in the letter, attaching two pages from the 2006 Third Penny sales tax proposal with big arrows drawn in to point to the \$4.8 million set aside for replacement of the Boulder Ave. bridge.

There is so much to like about this letter (see full version in "Letters," page 7) that it's hard to pick just a few excerpts to share with you, but here are three more gems:

"I must admit that I found your comment about [return on investment] on campaigns rather amusing considering your recent track record. Your temerity to condescend to the Council on voter behavior, when by definition, each City Councilor has a better record with the voters than the Chamber, again demonstrates an incredible level of arrogance."

While the Chamber would like to believe that their PR campaigns carry the day, the deficiencies of that approach are demonstrated by number recent failures, to wit: of the river sales tax, which had been promoted with more than a million dollars used to appeal to voters' emotions (recall the silliness: "It's for the children! And seniors get a tax break!"), and the Tulsa Community College millage hike and bond issue, which sought to win by turning out pro-TCC voters in a low-key, low-turnout special election.

Martinson rightly asserts that voters will support a good package that has been developed with a transparent process. "You may consider it a novel approach, but I would rather tell the citizens the truth and let them decide rather than attempting to manipulate the outcome."

There's even a backhanded compliment on the inclusion of money for Arkansas River low-water dams in the bond issue approved by the legislature: "I believe we all support river development and welcome the day when you feel the same passion to convince the Tulsa delegation to support our transportation system."

Maybe, dear Chamber, you could get the Oklahoma Department of Transportation to fix their highways in Tulsa. Maybe you could push the state to let go of some of its sales tax, so it's available for local communities.

Finally, Martinson delivers what may be the understatement of the decade: "The Chamber appears fixated on glamour and glitz to enhance economic development."

I'm told that that following this verbal volley, the Council and the Chamber leadership kissed and made up. But the point was made: The councilors, not the Chamber leadership, are the elected representatives of the people, and the Chamber leadership has neither the democratic mandate nor the track record of success to justify its high-handed attitude toward the Council.

There They Go Again

The Tulsa County Commission is another source of resistance to the Council package, which would preempt any County effort to renew their "4 to Fix" and "Vision 2025" sales tax streams. If the Council's proposal passes, any renewal of those taxes by the County would amount to a net tax increase.

Commendably, county commissioners don't object to the loss of the 0.6% "Vision 2025" tax, which at any rate won't expire for another eight years.

The current "4 to Fix" five-year tax will expire in October 2011. It was renewed 10 months early, in December 2005, to preempt mayoral candidate Chris Medlock's proposal to replace the temporary county sales tax with a city sales tax earmarked for public safety.

County Commission chairman Fred Perry met with city councilors to discuss the county's ongoing need for that 2/12ths of a cent, mentioning the pressing need to replace the county's juvenile justice center.

But Proposition 1 of the current "4 to Fix" plan was dedicated to "funding juvenile justice center and courthouse complex renovations, improvements, furnishings and equipment."

Prop. 1 was the most popular and featured the most pressing need, but was allocated only 12 percent of the funds. If the need for juvenile justice center improvements is so great, why didn't the county dedicate the whole of the "4 to Fix" renewal to this crucial need, rather than using part of it to fund new golf cart barns at LaFortune Park.

Even if Tulsa County loses the "4 to Fix" and "Vision 2025," it will continue to collect a permanent one-fourth cent tax to fund operation of the jail. Oklahoma County gets by with no sales tax at all, despite being 25 percent larger and 17 percent more populous than Tulsa County.

Politics of Pragmatism

The final obstacle is south Tulsa Councilor Bill Christiansen, who doesn't object to the structure of the package, but to making widening a stand-alone ballot item, separate from maintenance. Christiansen has called for a 50/50 split of funds between widening and maintenance.

There is a political problem to be solved here. District 8 has grown faster than any other part of the city, and the voters are the most reliable of any district. It would be tough, but not impossible, to pass a package without strong south Tulsa support.

But taking care of what we have is a more pressing need than building more to take care of. Street widening ought to be considered in connection with matters of urban design and public transit which could reduce the need for wider streets.

South Tulsa traffic isn't snarled just because the roads are narrow. Zoning segregates retail from residential, so that every shopping trip requires several miles of driving.

The development patterns so beloved of suburbanites -- cul-de-sacs, residential collector streets, gated communities -- funnels traffic into bottlenecks. The lack of through-residential streets forces local traffic onto arterials. Midtown's grid disperses traffic efficiently across multiple paths.

In Midtown, you can use neighborhood streets to avoid making a left-hand turn onto or off of an arterial. That's not possible in most of south Tulsa, and nasty old left-turners are a prime cause of traffic delays down south.

Homeowners in south Tulsa have chosen the area's amenities over convenience and ease of travel. Before all of us spend hundreds of millions on street widening in their part of town, south Tulsans should be willing to accept some adjustments to their lifestyle, which may include putting public streets through their gated communities, building mid-mile minor arterials (think 15th or Utica in midtown), and allowing neighborhood-scale retail development to connect directly to residential areas.

Fixing what's wrong with south Tulsa is a complex issue, and what to fund ought to be addressed as part of the new Comprehensive Plan.

Delaying the streets vote makes sense, and minor adjustments may be needed. But the Council shouldn't abandon the sensible, straightforward approach represented by the Martinson plan: Reprioritize existing revenues to fix what we already own.