

City video touts education advances

The City of Delray Beach has a tremendous history of being supportive of its schools—public, private, parochial and charter.

In fact, the city has won national recognition for its innovative programs including Eagle Nest (in which high school construction academy students design and build homes on lots donated by the city), the Career Criminal Justice Academy, the risky but ultimately successful move of Atlantic High School which led to Bexley Park, two new public parks and the Seacrest Soccer Complex and the Sharing for Excellence Plan which saved schools such as Spady Elementary by adding magnet programs and new facilities.

The list goes on and on. To celebrate this partnership and the \$10 million the city has invested in its schools, a video was produced by the ICMA (International City Managers Association) and posted on the city's website.

The video is a good primer on the city's efforts and should be required viewing, but there are some glaring absences.

We do not know if former Mayor David Schmidt was contacted to participate in the video, but if not, he should have been.

Mayor McDuffie talked about the pivotal move of Atlantic High School, and talked about how “we made it happen”, presumably meaning the City of Delray Beach. Special thanks is owed to Mayor Schmidt and the commission he led at the time. We forget now that the decision was controversial. In a show of leadership, they took the brunt of the criticism and did yeoman's work to make a new school happen. Along with city staff including Community Improvement Director Lula Butler, Education Coordinator Janet Meeks and then City Attorney Susan Ruby—the commission pulled off the visionary and risky move against strong local opposition. One Delray woman stood in front of the commission and declared that the move would take place “over my dead body”. (A commissioner later commented that it was unfortunate she did not follow through.)

We like the video—but it would have been even better if Mayor Schmidt's voice had been added to the mix.

An acknowledgement of the late Police Officer Johnny Pun who co-founded the Delray Youth Vocational Charter School along with Delray CSO Fred Glass might have been nice too.

But Delray is right to celebrate its partnership and support of our schools.

Concession Stand Redux

Last month we reported on Delray's deliberations over whether to build a \$456,000 press box/concession stand at Pompey Park.

While we didn't question the need to build a safe and adequate facility, we did question why in these tough economic times it needs to cost nearly half a million dollars to do so.

The original project was budgeted at around \$218,000 according to debate on the commission dais. That cost more than doubled when amenities and a second floor meeting space requiring an elevator were added to the project. At the time we questioned the need for meeting space when there is adequate existing space in the Pompey Park building.

Last month, the commission voted 4-1 to approve the contract to build the \$456,000 facility, subject to a \$200,000 contribution from the CRA. Commissioner Adam Frankel cast the sole dissenting vote.

We commend Frankel for doing so—and for questioning why the cost of the project more than doubled.

The debate over the item ought to be required viewing for anyone interested in how the commission thinks and works. The video of the item can be viewed on the city's website as Item 9F at the Oct. 18 meeting.

Newly appointed Commissioner Jay Alperin mentioned that he would be embarrassed if the project were not fully funded. We're not sure why, since it seems that a perfectly nice and safe facility could be built for far less money. We are also surprised because Commissioner Alperin has been an effective voice for moderation on many issues.

Vice Mayor Angie Gray seemed to struggle to explain (we're not really sure, please see for yourself) that the project wasn't as costly as it was—if the city was going to phase it over two years. Well, \$456,710 is \$456,710 any way you cut it or phase it.

Mayor McDuffie stayed out of the debate until voting to fund the project at the higher amount.

Even more interesting was the behind the scenes politics surrounding the project.

As we reported last month, the CRA originally turned down the project. But this month it was brought back for reconsideration and the Board voted to put in \$200,000 toward the cost. So why did the CRA board change its tune?

This is where it gets intriguing.

Faced with CRA reluctance last month, an email blast was sent by a Parks Department secretary prior to the recent CRA meeting. The email urged people to attend the CRA meeting and support the project on its second appearance. The email was directed at residents of the neighborhood, but was spread far and wide. Your editor received one as well.

It is highly unusual for a city employee to lobby for a project. In fact, we believe it sets a dangerous precedent. As a result of the email, a group of residents appeared at the meeting. Faced with the pressure, the CRA board did relent - to the tune of \$200,000 dollars - voting against staff recommendation.

So how did this happen?

Apparently, neither the Parks Director nor the City Manager authorized the email.

According to the Sun Sentinel, it was initiated by Commissioner Angie Gray, who asked the Parks Department employee to send it out. This is not only bad policy but a violation of how the city is supposed to operate. Under the city's charter, the City Commission has two employees—the City Manager and the City Attorney—all other employees report to the City Manager. The Mayor and Commission are not supposed to provide direction to staff other than the City Manager and Attorney and most times that is with the support of a majority of the commission. According to the Sun Sentinel the City Attorney has confirmed the infraction.

If an elected official did indeed suggest or direct that the email be sent—it's a problem and one that the Commission and the City Manager should address.

Moreover, it raises the question of whether it is ethical for an elected official to pressure a City employee to lobby for an issue that is being considered by a City Board.

Will it be looked into it? Any guesses?

In any case, for nearly a half a million dollars we presume there will be gourmet snacks in the new concession stand. Maybe a free Frappacino for every Delray taxpayer.

Chamber follow-up

We reported some months ago a complicated deal that will enable the Chamber of Commerce to relocate to new offices at the Old School Square garage.

Originally, the Chamber's move was to be paid for by the private developer who won a Request for Proposal to redevelop the old library site. But that deal has been delayed. In the event that the development does not proceed, the chamber still wants to move and so the question becomes who pays for the move and the build-out?

Originally, the city seemed willing to bear a lot of the cost, but Commissioner Carney pushed back on that arrangement and the responsibility has shifted to the CRA which would pledge future funds to pay for the move if the private deal sours. We ask: why should the CRA use public funds to pay for the Chamber move?

The CRA board has yet to approve that arrangement.

Of course, this is a worst-case scenario.

We certainly hope the developer comes through and redevelops the library site and moves the chamber. But if it doesn't happen, we still question why a private business organization would take

public monies (be it city or CRA monies it's still public dollars) to move. Should the taxpayer pay for this? And is it really good for the chamber's independence?

Almost forgot. We're talking about a few hundred thousand dollars.

Should City or CRA money be used to move and build out office space for the Chamber? Please write in and give us your thoughts.

As an aside, we note an element of humor in this story. Some members of the Chamber, while pushing for this handout, loudly decry wasteful government spending and the "socialist" influence of government in the private sector. You can't say they lack a sense of humor.

And Speaking of spending money

The parking issue is still alive. Recently the City and CRA spent \$97,000 on consultants to address the issue of parking meters on Atlantic Avenue. Apparently the City didn't like the results of the study, which recommended adding meters. Maria Herrera in the Sun Sentinel wrote, "City officials, paralyzed by polarizing opinions and fears that installing meters would decimate business on Atlantic Avenue will again turn to the public for input". The City will schedule sessions for the business community and the residents to express opinions on the matter. Apparently the Commission will be guided by this input.

Fair enough, but if the Commission prefers to be guided by popular opinion why spend so much money on consultants?

A Hotel on West Atlantic?

We trust you may have seen the channel 5 coverage of a public meeting to discuss a potential new hotel on CRA property on West Atlantic Avenue just east of I-95.

The CRA received two responses to its request for proposal, with one dropping out and the other proposing a moderately priced flag hotel for the site. Fairfield by Marriott is said to be the brand name.

The news prompted some residents to protest the hotel and decry the supposed lack of investment in the West Atlantic corridor and nearby neighborhoods.

Channel 5 couldn't help itself and filed a breathless report on an unhappy neighborhood demanding its "piece of the pie."

Well...as Paul Harvey once said...here's the rest of the story.

Fact is, while the West Atlantic corridor had been largely ignored for decades. However, the most recent decade saw a huge amount of public investment made by the city and the CRA. We are talking tens of millions of dollars for drainage, sidewalks, landscaping, lighting, beautification, public art, parks, pocket parks, housing etc. etc.

All of which was needed. And no doubt West Atlantic needs even more attention.

There have been very large public expenditures. What has been missing is private investment.

And so when residents decry the lack of amenities, it's not government's fault—it is just that private business owners have yet to step in and open businesses, offices, services and restaurants on West Atlantic. Government's role is to set the table and sell the city. But ultimately private dollars are needed to jumpstart the economic fortunes of the neighborhood. We suggest that Chamber of Commerce members be approached for additional investment.

By succumbing to the typical 'angry resident's piece', Channel 5 was remiss in not mentioning the huge public investment that has been made since 2000. That's shameful.

As for the viability of a hotel—we hope the CRA insists on a market study to determine whether the city can support another hotel, The developers are requesting substantial public assistance, and once built, it is hard to re-purpose a hotel if it fails.

Stay tuned.

Anchoring Pineapple Grove

Your Editor had some initial doubts about the viability of the Arts Garage and its programs. But in the 6 months of operation all doubts have been erased. The Arts Garage has become one of the most successful and innovative arts sites in Palm Beach County. Its weekly programs of jazz, classical music and art shows are sold out. Happy patrons crowd the space, and tickets are sold out in advance. It has added new life to the blocks off Atlantic Avenue and has added a new dimension in entertainment to Delray Beach. All this at a time when other businesses are struggling. The Arts Garage operates under the umbrella of the Creative City Collaborative. Its Board deserves a pat on the back. The Executive Committee of the Board includes:

Tom Carney, President

Jay Alperin, Senior Vice President

Jeffery Lynn, Vice President

Rich McGloin, Secretary

Ron Nyhan, Treasurer

The space was built out with the help of local businesses. Chuck Halberg of Stuart and Shelby Construction contributed moveable walls, platforms and lighting using designs contributed by prominent architect Gary Eliopoulos.

The energy behind this success comes from Alyona Ushe, Executive Director. Originally from Russia, she seems to lack a few English words, such as: “Can’t do... Maybe tomorrow...Too busy...”. She is a dynamo and has overseen the buildout, programming, staffing and marketing of this growing enterprise. As one of the Board members told us, “Alyona operates on two speeds – fast and faster”. Check out the upcoming programs at: www.delraybeacharts.org

At the other end of 2nd Avenue, 2 blocks south of Atlantic, Kevro’s Art Bar has been successfully offering an alternative arts experience. It is the brainchild of artists Kevin Rouse (known universally as Kevro) and Deb Sullivan. Set in a reconverted warehouse, the Kevro scene includes a full bar, and music on most weekends ranging from folk to soul to open mic nights. Your editor enjoyed a night when eminent local artist Sharon Koskoff created a painting in front of the crowd: it was an interesting opportunity to have the artist explain her thinking as she worked. It all takes place in an arts studio where Kevin and other artists create their work. Check out the outdoor patio and rear studio where pieces of larger art and sculpture are often being created. All in all, a hip scene that adds to the luster of Delray Beach. See the website for more information: www.kevroart.com

With all the focus on Atlantic Avenue restaurants let’s not forget that it is the arts that sets Delray apart. And it is the arts that attract young, creative residents needed to keep our City vibrant.