

The “Big Bang” is Really The “Big Bull” Theory

Written by Kathleen McCarthy
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What are we coming to when we allow special interests like those of Jack Bush, CEO of McCarthy-Bush Real Estate, but more importantly McCarthy Improvement Company, one of Scott County's largest builders and repairers of roads, to influence spending with schemes like the “Big Bang” theory for capital improvements needed in Davenport? How is this any different from developers, of which Bush is one, asking taxpayers to pay their upfront costs for real estate projects in Davenport? According to a recent article in the QC Times, Bush's “Big Bang” theory, in a presentation to city leaders, calls for borrowing “millions, hike property taxes and take care of the city's major infrastructure needs all at once. ” This big bang is big bull from big Jack. Consider that McCarthy Improvement bids on many of the street construction and repair projects throughout the city and county. I ought to know because my family is the McCarthy in McCarthy-Bush, and we sold to Bush many years ago. The fact that he is a partner in the outfit that owns the River City Bandits should not be held against the Bandits, but the “Big Bull” theory would be killing two birds with one stone if John O'Donnell were renovated in the same deal. So, naturally, Bush is advocating infrastructure repairs, such as streets, first, then John O'Donnell stadium close behind, as the order of priority for spending the city's capital improvement budget. The fact that Bush resides in Bettendorf, so the tax hike wouldn't affect him as much, is an additional insult to Davenport taxpayers.

The Council's willingness to entertain this chicanery is utterly frightening. We would most likely need to bond to our capacity, in order to comprehensively to accomodate all of the projects under the “big bull” umbrella. What we need to do is prioritize the city's spending. The Council should be more discerning, including City Administrator Jim Pierce. They should be savvy enough to get that this “Big Bull” idea appears to be cast in a pool of self-interest and greed. Can it be more obvious? The major road builder/repairer in the county, and a partner in the River Bandits baseball franchise, presents a scheme to keep the revenues flowing directly into his own pockets. He makes out like a bandit (no pun intended). Hello. If this is the kind of direction that our leaders are willing to entertain, let alone follow, then this council should no longer be tolerated because they are just as dangerous, if not more so, than their predecessors. This “big bull” plan makes the 53rd Mixed Use Development project look like a gift horse by comparison. Shame on the council for not being outraged at such a proposal, let alone considering it, fleshed out more or not.

Rules of Order & Ethics

The Davenport Council is currently drafting new “Rules of Order,” and the public needs to get involved. To call the new Rules a draft is completely misleading on the Council's part because it is on the Council Agenda in the form of a motion and has already passed first consideration, heading for 2nd consideration at Wednesday's Council Meeting (8/16). However, Aldermen Caldwell and Engelmann will each propose individual amendments to the “draft” for the Council's consideration. The two rules to be amended are Rule #2 and Rule #21. In addition, the Council should also be concerning themselves with Rule #12. Regarding Rule #2, Engelmann is proposing that the public be allowed to speak on each item of discussion on the agenda, as well as consent items that are moved to the discussion agenda, for a two-minute duration. This is a noble gesture, but it should make some further distinctions. Those citizens who are directly impacted or have a qualified interest in the discussion or consent item should be allowed to enter into dialogue with the Council and staff, asking and answering questions until concerns and/or issues are resolved. This is how it is done in Bettendorf. If problems can't

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be solved through that evening’s dialogue, then it is tabled until the next cycle, or for the amount of time necessary to resolve things. Bettendorf’s system is thoroughly civilized and citizens feel heard. It is a common-sense approach that empowers both city government and the public.

Meanwhile, for the rest of the public who just wish to comment on a discussion or consent item, the two-minute rule could apply. That way, time is managed. As for Rule #21, Caldwell has actually expanded the authority of the Mayor by allowing him to change aldermanic committee member structure after only six months of tenure on a committee, also a noble gesture with a common-sense foundation.

But Rule #8 (old Rule #12) is problematic. It will allow for even less accountability from aldermen. This rule deals with aldermen voting where a conflict of interest may exist. In the current rules, an alderman must abstain from voting if “the law requires an abstention for reasons of conflict of interest.” The problem can best be described by example. Last year, there was much controversy on whether then-Alderman Carroll should vote on items that pertained to the 53rd Street Mixed-Use Development because he owned land adjacent to the project area, as did his family. He was allowed to vote because the letter of the law maintains a conflict of interest only if the property owned was within the project area. Yet the Mixed-Use development would have greatly enhanced all the surrounding properties, including the Alderman’s and his family’s. While it may be legal to vote in such instances, it certainly begs the question of ethics. In the old version of the Rules, aldermen voted “unless he is directly interested in the question, in which case he shall not vote.” This language is far more vague, but it allows the public to hold the aldermen accountable on the ethical question of interest. In the new rule, there is no room for ethics. In fact, it could be argued that the aldermen must vote if they do not have a legal conflict of interest. How far from the spirit of the rule can we get, folks? In Bettendorf’s Rules of Order, it specifically states that aldermen must refrain from voting if they have “an apparent or actual conflict of interest.” Bettendorf absolutely captures the spirit of the rule, that if an alderman has a real or perceived interest, then he/she should abstain from voting. It allows for public scrutiny on matters where an alderman could be directly, indirectly, positively, or negatively impacted by an item they are voting on. In other words, common sense prevails here, also.

There is no reason why we can’t take a few lessons from Bettendorf’s methodology. Their system works smoothly, for the most part, and the citizens are welcome at City Hall, even encouraged to engage in dialogue with their aldermen. Many times, Bettendorf’s City Administrator, Decker Ploehn, gets involved and is able to resolve issues himself, with the help of staff. Either way, citizens of Bettendorf have a voice in the issues that affect them. They are invited by the Council to give their input if the discussion item impacts them in some way. It is a cooperative effort between the council, the Mayor, the city staff, and the public. Once again, it is common sense. But it looks like the public is going to have to insist on this cooperative approach if Davenport is to incorporate such “rules.”