

Road Gone

Sunday, 17 August 2008

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Road Gone Given North Carolina's statistical position in the US prison-industrial state, the attendant collapse of North Carolina's Department of Health and Human Services mental health sector and the already obsolete and dangerous Central Regional Hospital in Butner, a new facility to deal with the growing number of medical and mental cases remanded to the care of the Department of Correction is a genuine need. The DOC's proactive approach to disaster is commendable: North Carolina has returned to keeping mental cases in prisons, as before Dorothea Dix's mission to end that medieval practice. So long as this state adheres to the failed, costly (a billion a year) "correction" model, it minimally owes to its charges decent medical care, the only care many of the indigent poor in the joint ever receive. But how this 157 million dollar monster happened to be planned, funded, and commenced with no notice from public nor media is an indication of the worsening vital signs of this so-called "democracy." That this project managed to elude the attention of one of the most civically active neighborhoods in the city points to either (1) a failure of public policy, or (2) something more, given that State legislator Deborah Ross and Raleigh Mayor Charles Meeker live two blocks from the job, knew about it and chose to keep it to themselves rather than inform their constituents or their next-door neighbors. Ho-hum, business as usual, no story here. I am so hardened by years of this routine sort of Soviet-style dismissal of the public interest I simply don't care enough to squander anything on outrage or anger. This sort of governmental arrogance is ubiquitous: the clothes-lined public referendum on the Convention Center, the dog and pony Dix meetings and the new PROP rules. "They" simply don't give a flip about anything but appearances and then only enough for a thin sham of plausible deniability. Evolution dictates that the route with the least resistance is any organism's likely path, including governmental agencies. Public involvement leads to unnecessary administrative hassles and expenses. Much better from an survival standpoint to reduce impediments as much as possible, i.e. concealment of intent. So—like duh. Nevertheless, in the days after the bear was loosed from the cage, (this surprise construction job, the second largest in the city) I had chance opportunities to talk with two heavies in the local building business, Dean Marvin Malecha of the NCSU College of Design and Architect Frank Harmon, whose office on Mountford Avenue possesses a fabulous view of project. Both expressed "surprise." Malecha agreed with my more generous analysis.

"This seems to be some failure of public notification policies."

"I suppose you are the sort of person who pays attention to this sort of thing," I asked as we stood near the steps of Brooks Hall.

"I like to think that I am," Malecha said with a smile. There will none of Miz Mindy's Federal Fruit pie this year, spawned from the former thicket of Blackberry bushes on the Norfolk Southern Railroad right of way, adjoining the Central Property in Western Boylan Heights. Therein lies the crux of the neighborhood's dismay about the project, the only card they have to play and a coincidence of several coincidences. At the "meeting," a wake of sorts, in Central's "auditorium," basically a crummy break room, vending machines commenced to rattle and hum right as the meeting began, competing with the audio feeds until media techs balked. The Department of Correction claimed that Norfolk Southern railroad cleared the right-of-way. The oddity is that the brush, hedges and mature trees were scraped down to the earth exactly when demolition of the old prison buildings commenced and only along the trackage adjoining the hospital site, thereby exposing Cutler Street backyards to a breathtaking property value enhancing vista of a mall-sized construction site. Architectural models presented for the first time show a line of poodle trees not concealing the five story buildings cheerfully promised to "improve the view." A personal inspection showed no evidence of work by the railroad nor the types of machinery used by railroads. Heavy cleated track impressions led not to the right of way, but the other way, to prison property. Phone calls and a personal visit to Norfolk Southern offices, on a bicycle with temperatures in the mid-nineties, went nowhere, not even a chance to speak to anyone who might be in position to give answers to a question about the erosion potential opened by what amounts to deforestation. There is simply no reasonable speculation that satisfies why a railroad would perform this sort of selective cutting. All this suggests, en aggregate, that the state did the cutting and hung the responsibility on NS, who decided it best to abet what seems awfully akin to a lie in the absence of a response or explanatory information. Oops, I said it ... Ell. Eye. Eee—LIE. The state's typically arrogant pattern of behavior forced Boylan Heights into a defensive position whereas timely and genuine notification would have fostered a more neighborly relationship between these two entities, now damaged and colored by a heavy, conspiratorial flavor. I might point out that the dictionary definition of conspiracy, a stock laugh-line word to all but cops, makes no distinction concerning the legality of a secret plan, only that the plan is secret. If there is any humor available, it would be in musing on how this is playing with the investors of Bloomsbury Estates who have sunk a bundle into the promise of the new Boylan Heights. The old neighborhood joke about "Prison View Apartment" has hilariously come to pass—starting in the 290s. The media, instead of asking the troubling questions about what mechanism led to this "failure," quietly acquiesced to the new model. There, I suppose, the story ends. This opinionista has no interest in eliciting embarrassing responses from officials, nor do I care which flavor of twaddle they wish to serve up. The results of the mechanism are quite damning enough and I have other more interesting things on my plate than badgering reluctant participants. The only reason I am pointing a finger is to shame by pointing out the obvious. All that pretty talk about "public involvement" is a hollow ruse when the "reality" is right there in front of everyone to see and speculate on—all

we can do in the hollow absence. Official types decrying low levels of voting need look no further than this for part of the answer as to why so many don't vote. There was reportedly one speaker with a quick word at a city council meeting that no one seemed to notice or actually be able to cite, about as believable as "she said she was sixteen." Da man is going to do as directed and convenient, no matter what the plebes want. Don't bother. As long as I've raised that specter of "conspiracy," I'll also point out another, um, coincidence, that of former Raleigh city manager Dempsey Benton sitting at the helm of DHHS, the failed agency that in part, along with the legislature, made the new facility at Central Prison more of a necessity and Dix such an attractive site for commercial development. That in mind, now that Dix is being depopulated, watch what happens to Dix what with Raleigh's go-go "new urban" model, amid the stream of Raleigh Police vehicles carrying patients away from the familiar and their families to Butner. The whole grotesque tangle is so familiar as to not induce outrage, only a vague, familiar cynicism. Esse Quam Videri, goes the North Carolina state motto: "To be rather than to seem." In a pig's eye.

I will be just as reluctant to toss the word "conspiracy" into the mix as Peter. I believe the rich and/or powerful minds in motion on these state projects are possibly embarrassed to show their greed and lack of concern for the rules of public service. They aren't conspiring to anything. It's a culture of power...keep your non-free market job and collect the rewards.

But I would throw in the word "hypocrisy" since we still haven't seen any inspection boxes posted. In these boxes should be the same rules which property owners and developers have to suffer.

And I agree that it is a waste of time to get angry over these 500 lbs. gorilla tactics because it is easier to get sadden over the fact we need more and more prison facilities to harbor the disenfranchised.

WiseOne08/10 12:19 PM

Is good to have Peter E musing aloud here at New Raleigh. Welcome and thanks.

I have just posted a comment on the another thread (Waters post) about the insanity of closing Dix doors when our culture is needing just what could have been created there. I do not know where one would begin to scream aloud. ... Peter's take looks like it is all in committee somewhere in the legislature and then brushes with the public sector as it emerges.

So what it takes to enter forward thinking into that equation, obviously from the back end now, is what we need to be looking for. As an attender of many city commission meetings, i am surprised by the lack on expertise in some of those areas. I suppose that is part of the problem.

But in this era of no-funds-for-nuttin, we are digging ourselves into a fine hole.

... scream ..

georgia08/10 02:24 PM