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Tribunal of Fools: More expensive comedy from the Cuyahoga County commissioners



Is this a real plan? Or is Tim Hagan just scamming the Plain Dealer?

In a Plain Dealer story this morning, Commissioner Tim Hagan announced that Cuyahoga County's three wise men are now considering a site at East 55th and Chester for the new convention center/medical mart. Though Hagan concedes this isn't the preferred site, he says the cost of the center might force commissioners to move it from downtown.

But The PD's paint-by-the-numbers story is void of that wonderfully human gift known as "critical thinking." So C-Notes will provide the short hand: The latest proposal simply means that you, dear reader, could be hosed far more than originally thought...

If you examine the fine print, the cost of the center is already approaching \$1.3 billion, thanks to the keen negotiation skills of Superlawyer Fred Nance, who's orchestrated the worst deal since the Rocky Colavito trade. But since the deal was announced, commissioners have taken repeated hits for being the imbeciles they are. Among the highlights:

They blew \$33 million on new county headquarters, only to discover that – *oops, our bad!* – they couldn't actually afford them. Now they're stuck with asbestos-filled buildings they can't unload.

They looked the other way as Recorder Pat O'Malley loaded his office with patronage hires, making for the most bloated payroll this side of the Cuban Ministry of Socialist Doctrine & Intellectual Hygiene.

And then there was Jimmy Dimora's infamous booting of the Plain Dealer reporters from a county meeting, in which he was taped sounding like a self-pitying Mike Trivisonno high on pastries and meth.

So Hagan, hoping to separate himself from the buffoon that is Fat Jimmy, has taken to recasting himself as a model of fiduciary responsibility. But the 55th Street proposal is like a drunk's cry for help. *Doesn't anyone around here know how to do an intervention? Please, stop me before I spend again!*

Begin with the simple fact that Cleveland doesn't stand a chance of success in the convention business. It's an industry dominated for decades by natural vacation spots – see Vegas and Orlando – and much larger cities – read: New York and Chicago. The rest of the nation has spent 30 years trying to horn in, only to be stuck with multimillion dollar lemons exactly like the one we're about to build.

But somehow, we're now to believe that Cleveland's elite – *Making Failure a Spectator Sport Since 1965* – will succeed where all others have failed.

Have another drink before you digest that one.

Worse, the convention industry has been declining for years. The reasons are obvious. Company belt-tightening. The rise of video-conferencing, teleconferencing, and interactive websites that make it unnecessary to meet in person. Etc., etc. Add soaring fuel costs, and you're looking at a business that will someday have the gross receipts of a Public Square hotdog stand.

Since 2005, the industry has reported declines of 40-50 percent. That's right, ladies and gentlemen: We're about to spend \$1.3 billion on the mercantile equivalent of a Ford Expedition that gets 8 miles a gallon.

Which leads us to today's topic: Building a new center at East 55th and Chester.

Imagine yourself being the guy who books conventions for, say, the National Association of Medical Malpractice Attorneys & Related Reptilians. Everybody's pitching for your business -- LA, San Francisco, Boston, Miami.

Then you get the brochure from Cleveland. It shows a gleaming new building, naturally constructed at twice the original estimate (this is the county commissioners we're talking about), on a desolate stretch of East 55th. The accompanying text touts the advantages of coming to the near East Side:

Why go to South Beach or Fisherman's Warf when you can spend a delightful week amid the ghettos of Cleveland! Enjoy dining with takeout sandwiches on the curb of a nearby gas station! Engage in fun-packed shootouts with the neighborhood drug boys! Shop at our abundant selection of sidewalk crack dealerships!

Well, you get the picture.

Fortunately, Hagan's idea is likely complete bullshit. Though commissioners don't seem to have done a minute of research on the billion-dollar business they're about to enter, not even Hagan is dumb enough to build a center on East 55th.

More probable is that he's running a scam. Unlike Dimora, Hagan knows how to play the media. He throws out a fake plan that makes him look fiscally earnest. The Plain Dealer dutifully reports without contemplating the sheer stupidity of it all. Then a few months from now, the commissioners do what they always do: Give the deal to Sam Miller.

These guys may be morons, but never shortchange their talent for predictability. – *Pete Kotz*