

No Einstein necessary to calculate Eppstein equation

Richard Connor - November 20, 2006



If pride goeth before the fall, then surely smugness goeth before the rout.

Don't believe it?

Just ask the Republicans who were summarily booted out of office almost two weeks ago. And add these traits to that charge of smugness: arrogance, lack of respect for the public — the voters — and, at the very least, literal interpretations of the term “conflict of interest.”

Mark these words.

Our current local-government leaders and officials are spending their political capital at a rate that will leave them bankrupt. The effects will ripple like water on the Trinity throughout this county as ill-heeded, disgusted and indignant voters rise up to fight the Trinity River Vision and all those connected with the proposed project. Federal money budgeted for the project will not come from Washington as promised. And the project will be stalled.

A political rout locally — like the one we witnessed nationally — is in the making, and its impact will go far beyond the banks of the Trinity River.

Unfortunately, the sins of many of our current political leaders and officeholders will offend so many people that the ire of the voters will strike out not only at the river project but also at other projects that might nourish the city.

Some good ideas and plans will be ambushed by friendly fire.

The latest slap in the face to the public from the Trinity River Vision folks is the hiring of Bryan Eppstein, his firm and some friends for \$1 million.

Here's all you need to know: Eppstein is a political consultant-turned-lobbyist who runs campaigns for folks. And then, after they win, those same folks who are clearly beholden to him hire him to lobby for them.

Before long, the Legislature will come to its senses and make it illegal for one person to perform both functions — manage a campaign, and then get hired by the winning candidate for government work at taxpayers' expense. A system is overdue for an overhaul when it allows a person such as Eppstein to have his hands in the pockets of candidates and taxpayers.

This man is a pig at the trough, and Fort Worth is his barnyard.

The Trinity River Vision Authority will pay Eppstein and his firm, along with some partners, at least \$1 million over five years to provide public relations and lobbying support if the project runs into financing problems. To say nothing of objections raised by homeowners and businesses who will lose land to the river project.

Trinity River Vision is the name of the proposal to re-route and expand the river as it runs through downtown Fort Worth. The objective is a park-like setting — similar to the River Walk in San Antonio.

The prime political driver is Congresswoman Kay Granger, whose campaigns have been managed by Eppstein. Granger's son, J.D. Granger, was hired by the Tarrant Regional Water District last year at a salary of \$100,000 to manage the project. One must ask why we need both him and Eppstein, but J.D. Granger is reported to have been highly supportive of Eppstein's hiring. Granger says Eppstein was clearly the man for the job.

Is this supposed to be a revelation, given the connections between families?

The job was not put out for bid because the hiring agency is not required by law to do that for this type of work.

But that rationale misses the point: The fact that the law does not require openness and competitive bidding does not make the process "right." Elected officials have the responsibility and the ethical burden to avoid even the appearance of a conflict of interest.

Two new Tarrant Regional Water Board members were elected last spring: Marty Leonard and former City Councilman Jim Lane. They promised openness and fairness.

And who managed their campaigns?

Eppstein.

And so much for the new light Leonard and Lane had promised to shine on the water board's activities. How many times have we heard how candidates will infuse new blood and ideas into a tired old board or city council? Not long after they are elected, they are singing on key with the choir.

Clyde Picht, where are you when we need you?

And who has managed the campaigns of Mayor Mike Moncrief and council members Sal Espino, Becky Haskin, Jungus Jordan and Carter Burdette?

Eppstein.

His connections have won him work before. In 1999, the Fort Worth City Council hired Eppstein's company to conduct a survey of local citizens for a total of \$23,750. Only one city council member — yes, Clyde Picht — voted against the hiring.

And this is no backyard dog we're talking about. Eppstein is a wide-ranging fox who also gets into the Austin and Washington henhouses.

He has managed campaigns for State Rep. Charlie Geren, State Sen. Jane Nelson and U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison.

Here is a bit of recent bragging from Eppstein to the Star-Telegram's Mitchell Schnurman, concerning 70 campaigns Eppstein helped to manage:

"We won 67 of 'em."

Well, Eppstein understates his prowess. He won 67 of 'em and a million-dollar contract, all about the same time.

The Trinity project is expected to cost over \$400 million, and you can bet that number will rise faster than the river after a gullywasher. The money is supposed to come from the federal government and local and state sources. The changing of the guard in Washington might diffuse Congresswoman Granger's influence and ability to get all the federal money needed.

When trouble such as that happens, good old Eppstein will be there to bail us out — or so say the River Vision folks. He'll be collecting \$12,000 a month as he waits for the chance to get his oars in the water.

This "vision" is sounding more like blind faith at this point.

And there is blindness here, too, within the mainstream media. Columnist Schnurman must have taken a public-relations template from Eppstein to write so glowingly — and worse, so acceptingly about the hiring. (Meanwhile, the alternative-styled Fort Worth Weekly has weighed in courageously and emphatically: "You, dear taxpayer, are getting screwed.")

We should expect outrage, or at least a questioning of authority, from a big-time metro daily — which lets down the city when it does not fight back. Hence the need for alternative and niche-readership publications.

Fort Worth has a long history of having a blind spot in government and governance when it comes to conflict of interest and the appearance of conflict. The public has tired of such abuses before, and it will do so again. If the attitude of city government leaders at all levels does not change, the voters will give them an ethics lesson and a civics lesson in a sweep.

Upon hearing about Eppstein's sweetheart deal, a friend said: "Well, the little guy and the small businessman got screwed." (Shades of Fort Worth Weekly!)

"Don't they always?" asked another.

"They didn't in the most recent election," replied the first. "They spoke loud and clear and showed government you cannot treat the public like that — not and stay in office."

Memo to Austin: Pass a law that controls and limits people such as Eppstein who can work the system to great economic advantage and favoritism while playing both sides of the political street against the middle.

Memo to Fort Worth: Don't wait for a law. Do the right thing, so that you build trust, not tear it down.

And if Fort Worth does not do so, then the Powers That Be will have lots of time on their hands to canoe or kayak up and down the Trinity and stroll along the river, once they have become the Powers That Used To Be.

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