

## Politics fuels Senate's ongoing airport probe

In January 1999, a sudden snowstorm struck southeast Michigan, dumping 12 inches of snow on Metropolitan Airport. Air traffic was disrupted, and hundreds of passengers were left stranded in airplanes on the tarmac. In the following months, the U.S. Department of Transportation investigated to determine what went wrong. Michigan State Senate Republicans also formed a special committee to determine the causes of the air traffic shutdown.



Edward McNamara

The Transportation Department subsequently issued a report stating that Northwest Airlines was responsible for the stoppage of air traffic. The Senate Committee never addressed the snowstorm issue but has formulated numerous statements questioning Wayne County's management of Metro Airport.

Under committee direction, up to 12 state auditors have looked at airport documents over the past two years. They have asked for paperwork that includes more than 30,000 pages of information pertaining to airport contracts, some as old as 30 years.

The airport, over the last 30 years, has had thousands of contracts and business arrangements, yet the majority of the state auditors' questions concern only a handful of contracts. The auditors have never claimed ethical impropriety, yet the committee chairman and newspaper reporters have regularly issued statements claiming the audit reports show unethical management practices at the airport. It has been clear that politics plays an important behind-the-scenes role in the committee's investigation.

Forgotten in this entire matter is that in more than 99 percent of the 5,000 contracts the airport has with vendors and service providers, the rules, regulations and procedures were followed to the last detail. In only a few instances has there been any inference that there was non-adherence to contract-processing regulations. Many of these instances have been reported falsely.

In some cases we have been accused of misdeeds that were merely technical deviations.

We have taken many steps in the last two years to ensure that every business arrangement and contract is above reproach. This includes:

- Establishment of a new system of checks and balances. Every contract decision is double-checked

by Airport and Non-Airport Management.

- Insistence that all contracts be advertised for bids at regular intervals.

■ The concessions program which selected 80 qualified service providers to establish the new restaurants and shops in the new airport terminal has been lauded by airport professionals throughout the country for its ethics, fairness, variety of shopping and restaurant facilities, and pricing. In the new terminal, travelers will pay the same prices that they pay outside the airport.

- Establishment of an Ethics Committee to oversee the awarding of concession contracts.

We have spent millions of dollars making more than 500 improvements to Metro Airport over the last 12 years while working diligently to marshal the resources to build a new terminal. This includes new runways to eliminate take-off and landing delays, new roadways, enlarging entrances to the terminals, new parking decks, renovated bathrooms and new walkways.

This terminal didn't just jump out of the ground on its own. We began seeking airline concurrence and federal involvement more than 12 years ago because we recognized the increasing need for more and better facilities.

This involved frequent trips to Washington, D.C., to get the backing and assistance of President Bill Clinton, Transportation Secretary Federico Pena, U.S. Rep. John Dingell, Bob Carr and many others who helped us get the \$150 million from the federal government we needed to make this project possible. We had to win approval of Congress for a way to pay for the new terminal since the airlines couldn't or wouldn't put up the money.

The airline's share of the cost of building the new terminal is less than 5 percent of the cost. The state government, which talks now of gaining control of the airport, did little to help promote construction of a new airport terminal.

The end result of all this effort is that, with the backing of a friendly national administration, we will have produced one of the finest airports in the world. I find it extremely disheartening that there is such an enormous attention paid to a few supposed transgressions, while completely ignored is the quality of service that Wayne County provides in every area as well as the number of innovative, standard-setting programs we have established.

We have 1,000 employees who are doing an outstanding job of providing services essential to the residents of Wayne County. We are working every day to do the best that we can. We should be judged on the total job that we are doing.

Edward H. McNamara is the Wayne County Executive.



Mike Malott

## Should treatment be forced on the mentally ill?

Here's a dilemma for you - just how much right do we, as a society, have to tell individuals who are mentally ill that they have to take their medications?

Do you and I have the right to force treatment on such a patient because his or her view of the world doesn't match up to our concept of sanity? Should we require treatment even if that person presents no particular danger to others?

Or do we allow mentally ill people to live at the fringes of society even though their illness itself contributes to their decision not to get treatment, and therefore to their decision to remain on the fringe?

State Rep. Virg Bernero, D-Lansing, has little patience for the arguments. "Being homeless and eating out of Dumpsters is not a lifestyle choice," he said. "Schizophrenia" robs you of the ability to make rational decisions. At that point, the illness is in control. When you are hearing voices, you are not free to choose. At that point, the medications are the liberating factor.

He's unhappy with civil libertarians and patients' advocates who would argue that an individual has a right to refuse treatment or drugs. On medication, they can be contributing members of society, proud of their accomplishments, Bernero said. Off medication, he argued, they are unable to cope with the demands of daily life and simply "continue to deteriorate."

One third of all homeless people, Bernero estimated, are seriously mentally ill. And he has some experience with the issue. His brother suffers from mental illness. Bernero explained that he grew up fighting to get treatment for his brother.

That's one of the reasons he plans to sponsor legislation this fall - along with Reps. Andrew Raczowski, R-Farmington Hills, and Tom George, R-Portage - that would essentially force treatment of mentally ill people in some cases.

The bill would allow family members to seek commitment of mentally ill people, and the courts would have the option of putting the sufferer into an outpatient program basically designed to make sure he takes his medicine as prescribed. If the patient still refuses, a judge could put him in a mental hospital.

Current law says that mentally ill people can only be committed if it can be proven they represent a danger to themselves or others. Bernero said he wants that standard eased. He'd like to

see judges be allowed to commit if there is a "potential" of a danger and if the patient is unable to recognize the need for treatment.

This is a discussion that needs to happen in Lansing. Current law was written years ago, and the ability of psychiatry to diagnose mental illnesses and the ability to treat have much improved.

**The question that needs to be answered is whether we really are being compassionate if we allow them the freedom, as we currently do, to opt out of treatments.**

Perhaps more important has been the push in Michigan toward de-institutionalization of mentally ill people. A good idea, perhaps, but without the support systems in place, the end result is often that those with mental illnesses simply fall through the cracks, Bernero said. The end result is that they are not taken care of at all. They can easily fall into homelessness or crime.

Bernero makes the point that when a person suffers from schizophrenia, it is sometimes impossible to spot when that person might become violent. With that illness, he said, a patient with no history of violence can easily become violent.

But the tougher question, the one that needs to be addressed, is whether we are doing mentally ill people any favors by letting them drop out of treatment and eventually drop out of society.

We like to think of our society as a compassionate, caring one. That is especially true when it comes to mentally ill people. The question that needs to be answered is whether we really are being compassionate if we allow them the freedom, as we currently do, to opt out of treatments. Are we doing them any favors if we allow them to live with an illness despite the fact we know that in making their refusals, it made be the illness itself that leads them to that decision.

Mike Malott reports on the local implications of state and regional events. He can be reached by phone at (810) 297-0171 or by e-mail at mmalott@homecomm.net.

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