

Time for lawsuits is over; now make airport prosper

In these times of heightened anxiety and increasingly furious political activity, it's a relief to report that maybe, just maybe, we can get down to business at the new Detroit Metropolitan Airport.

Last week, in a major win for the newly established Wayne County Airport Authority, the Court of Appeals rejected, 3-0, a lawsuit challenging the authority's ability to run Detroit Metro and Willow Run.

Wayne County had operated both airports for years. But persistent charges of cronyism and mismanagement hobbled public confidence, especially as the new terminal and runways at Detroit Metro came into operation. At the urging of Gov. John Engler and Wayne County Executive Ed McNamara, the legislature this spring created a 7-member appointed authority to manage both airports.

Most of the objections came from the Wayne County Commission, which felt its precious turf was being diminished. Ricardo Solomon, the Chairman, called it a "hijacking" and complained about a "hostile takeover" of a public asset.

The Authority started work in April, but was hamstrung by the Commission's decision to sue. The lawsuit contended that in creating an unelected authority the legislature violated both state laws and existing contracts with airport bondholders.

Last week's Court of Appeals decision was blunt and to the point:

"Considering that plaintiffs themselves admit that Metro has been poorly managed for years, and that plaintiffs were the entities responsible for operating Metro for those years, the Legislature's transfer of operational jurisdiction meets the test of United States Trust (an important precedent-setting case). ... The Legislature has the power to regulate the powers and duties of counties in relation to highways and airports."

So be it. Some Wayne County Commissioners are satisfied the legal test has been met. Commissioner Lynn Dankes, R-Livonia, for example, says she supported the lawsuit only to find out if the law authorizing a non-elected airport authority was constitutional. "The Court has now spoken, it's constitutionally proper, and I don't see any good reason to spend more taxpayer money in appealing it."

Sure, the Commission can spend lots of more Wayne County residents' tax dollars in appealing to the Michigan Supreme Court or to the

federal courts. Or it can recognize that the legal issues have been resolved and get down to the proper public business of helping the Authority manage the airport effectively and in exploiting the economic development potential of the combination of Detroit Metro (the nation's 11th busiest in passenger traffic) and Willow Run (the nation's 3rd in freight).

There's a lot to do just now. There is still a fair amount of fine tuning to be done at the new facility: Signage is still inadequate, both inside the terminal and outside, especially off the Eureka Road entrance; baggage handling is sometimes problematic. And Northwest Airlines has just announced it plans on demolishing and replacing the just-built commuter jet terminal.

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Moreover the economic development potential of both airports, if effectively managed in combination, is enormous. Experts say that the main engines of growth in the 21st century are passenger and freight airports linked together into what are called "aerotropolises". Los Angeles International Airport, for example, has created literally tens of thousands of jobs over the past decade. There is no reason the combo of Metro and Willow Run couldn't do the same for the Southeastern Michigan region.

Commissioner Dankes, herself a former state legislator, recognizes this. "There is enormous potential for economic development. Hopefully with new leadership in January, we will be able to be much more involved in pushing that idea."

The time for lawsuits is past. The time to buckle down and get to work is at hand.

Phil Power is the Chairman of the Board of the company that owns this newspaper. He would be pleased to get your reactions to this column either at (734) 953-2206 or at ppower@homecom.net.



Sue-Mason

Instead of hand wringing, state needs to fix FIA

John Engler is frustrated, disappointed and very irritated. Hmmm, sounds like John Engler during much of his tenure as governor. However, this time rather than threatening taxpayers or slashing the budget, he's given Doug Howard a piece of his mind.

It's good that he's being so open with Howard, the director of the state's Family Independence Agency, which can't seem to do much of anything right. But frankly, it's nothing more than the usual posturing that takes place when it comes to the FIA.

The agency's mistakes have been well documented over the years and other than wringing of the hands and mea culpa or two, nothing is ever done to address the problem. Sure, the legislature passed the Binsfield legislation that mandated that a child could be in foster care one year, then a permanency plan had to be developed and implemented. Big whoop.

The idyllic wish to have children grow to adulthood while in foster care, to make children who couldn't be returned to their families available for adoption at younger ages.

Frankly, I think the legislature was far too generous in allowing a year to go by before addressing the issue of permanency. Protective Services might move quickly to remove from dangerous situations, but the FIA makes the tortoise in The Tortoise and the Hare look like Speedy Gonzalez.

I speak from experience. I have two lovely children my husband and I adopted through FIA. We got them both as toddlers - Bobby was 3 1/2, Carolee was less than a month shy of her fourth birthday. Both spent more than two years in what people who deal with FIA call the system. Yes, you read that right. You can adopt state wards from the state. However, you do need patience. When dealing with the state, nothing goes smoothly or quickly.

Our first venture into state adoption ended in a mess that involved a state senator, the state auditor and the state director of adoptions. We were unsuccessful, but two things stick out in my mind about the experience.

The first - FIA was clueless about the child's race. The mother was white and the father ... all they knew was that he was from Highland Park. It was the foster mom who tipped them off.

That oversight prompted a cross cultural study to see what we knew about other cultures - black in general and black specifically. Done by a black and a white adoption workers, we were thunderstruck by one question: What was our nationality? I answered American, my husband did the same.

The response from the white social worker went something like "No, that's not it. We're talking about your nationality. Like I'm a Lithuanian-American." Huh?

These two women who decided that we could only adopt light-skinned biracial children - which the little girl was - didn't even understand the question they were asking us.

We know FIA workers are overworked. Our daughter's adoption worker made sure we knew that every time we talked to her. She had 54 cases. She talked as slow as she worked, and the adoption that should have taken a year max stretched into 18 months.

And we know children can get lost in the system. Every three months Carolee had a new foster care worker and every three months she went back to square one.

They missed court hearings, overlooked the fact that the child had been abandoned by her mother and basically left her in foster care for two years before parental rights were terminated.

If it hadn't been for a diligent, proactive foster mom - the workers would call her a royal pain in the butt - she probably would have languished in the system even longer.

The state pressures private agencies to find permanent homes for the wards it farms out to them, but it does little for the ones that remain in FIA's care.

Granted there's the Michigan Adoption Resource Exchange (MARE) book that's at public libraries. It lists some of the more than 3,000 children available for adoption from toddlers to teenagers to sibling groups, but the state could do better.

FIA needs a major overhaul. Obviously, it won't be done by John Engler, and it remains to be seen if Jennifer Granholm or Dick Posthumus will do anything, since they're too busy beating each other up over Proposal A.

How many more times are we going to have to read about another FIA screwup before something is done?

Children shouldn't be put into a system that has no end and isn't capable of keeping track of them. FIA needs to focus on the needs of the children in its care.

As a friend says, two people can go at it behind a dumpster and create a child and be given more consideration than the people who will care foster that child or adopt him or her.

FIA needs to tell parents what needs to be done and set a deadline instead of giving them one chance after another, prolonging the child's placement in foster care.

In baseball it's three strikes, you're out; in football, it's four downs. If FIA dealt out that kind of tough love to deadbeat parents, it could use the time freed up to get children into permanent homes.

And maybe we wouldn't have to endure yet another report on yet another FIA screwup.

Sue Mason is the Presentation Editor for the Observer Newspapers. She lives in Westland.



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