

Editorial: It's now clear that effort to privatize Lambert airport is none of your business

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What is Alderman Marlene Davis so afraid of when it comes to letting St. Louisans have a voice in the potential privatization of the city's most valuable asset? She and members of the Transportation and Commerce Committee she chairs had a straightforward measure in front of them Thursday to let the public vote on privatization of St. Louis Lambert International Airport, but the committee voted to table the bill — effectively killing it.

The vote was yet another affirmation of why St. Louisans should be deeply skeptical about this highly secretive, closed-door privatization process. Private interests are driving the effort forward with an appalling lack of transparency, and Davis appears to be using her extraordinary powers to ensure those private interests prevail over what the public might want.

Davis not only controls the transportation committee, she also is the only elected official on the Airport Advisory Working Group, the key body guiding this process forward. As we noted Friday, for every one hour the group meets in open session, it holds five hours of secret meetings. These closed-door meetings are where private consultants, investors, airline representatives and other stakeholders jockey for their piece of the pie.

St. Louisans: The airport doesn't belong to Davis or other officials advancing privatization. This is your airport, and if you don't want to lose it amid the great billion-dollar cash grab that's taking place, now is the time to fight back by demanding a public vote. Alderman Cara Spencer has been trying hard to get such a vote approved, but Davis keeps shutting her down.

Equally appalling was the statement Davis made Thursday regarding the proposal by St. Charles and St. Louis counties that they conduct an independent study of privatization and be considered as possible partners in the airport's future management, instead of handing it over to private interests.

Davis scoffed at the notion. "If they want to have some say-so, write a check," she said. "If you don't write a check, go somewhere and sit down and shut up."

We've long suspected this entire process wasn't about improving airport operations but instead was about money — potentially billions of dollars. Davis confirmed it. The people writing the checks and meeting behind closed doors are the ones who have a seat at the table.

The great irony is that St. Louis residents don't pay for the airport's operations or debt repayments. The airport's finances are driven by taxes on travelers — the vast majority of whom reside in St. Louis and St. Charles counties. They already have brought their checkbooks.

But if the pattern fits the shoddy way St. Louis city residents have been treated so far, the last thing Davis and her cohorts would want is for county residents, or any other outsiders, to have a say. So sit down and shut up.

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