

Editorial: Airport privatization debate risks dividing region along racial fault lines

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Some local politicians appear to be blinded by the dollar signs attached to the potential privatization of St. Louis Lambert International Airport. The phenomenal sums of money that could come the city's way — \$1 billion or more — are being touted by Mayor Lyda Krewson and top black political figures as essential to redistributing wealth and jumpstarting development in the city's most neglected neighborhoods. But beware the dangers of exploiting racial fault lines for the sake of winning privatization.

A crafty argument is brewing that implicitly portrays privatization skeptics as the bad guys: By opposing the current privatization formula, the skeptics are standing in the way of a major funding source required to upgrade black-dominated poor neighborhoods in north St. Louis. Not-so-subtle hints of such arguments already are evident in the pronouncements of NAACP President Adolphus Pruitt, aldermanic President Lewis Reed and aldermen John Collins-Muhammad and Marlene Davis.

Davis' chairmanship of the aldermanic Transportation and Commerce Committee and pivotal position on the Airport Advisory Working Group perfectly place her to greenlight or kill any initiative affecting privatization. Davis has squashed efforts to let St. Louisans vote on privatization. She offered a shockingly blunt message to outlying counties that if they wanted a seat at the privatization table, they should "bring their checkbook." Otherwise, "sit down and shut up."

Too many community leaders mistakenly believe the current privatization formula is the only answer, and that the financial windfall from wealthy private investors would balance the city's budget with the surplus going to upgrade neglected neighborhoods.

Outside counties might actually have a better plan. Rather than telling them to sit down and shut up, perhaps it's worth looking at their best offer. Those counties might well be able to muster the funding St. Louis requires in exchange for adopting a regional management partnership. They have a natural stake in the airport's future because their residents form, by far, the biggest portion of airport users. Bringing them in as partners would mean keeping the airport under elective governance. A private manager would be unanswerable to voters and wouldn't necessarily have to comply with state Sunshine Law provisions.

A partnership could be an important first step toward greater regional integration. Besides, St. Charles County is the wealthiest in the state, and no matter how much it grinds on St. Louisans to admit it, both St. Charles and St. Louis counties are better managed than the city. Their expertise and financial management could yield rapid improvements to airport operations without requiring the city to cede total control.

It's already clear that pro-privatization interests are pumping big money into local officials' campaign coffers. We can only hope that the dollar signs flashing before their eyes don't blind them to the existence of better alternatives.

- Caption: A bulldozer is used to knock down a house in the 1900 block of Burd Avenue in St. Louis in June. Airport privatization is now being touted as necessary to redevelop downtrodden, poor neighborhoods of the city. Photo by David Carson, dcarson@post-dispatch.com

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