

Lambert owns 1,000 acres of vacant land. St. Louis wants to figure out its development potential

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ST. LOUIS - As it begins its review of 18 potential bidders to lease St. Louis Lambert International Airport, a city committee is hiring a consulting firm to review the development potential for more than 1,000 acres of vacant land owned by the airport.

The Airport Advisory Working Group voted Thursday to contract with Cushman & Wakefield, a global real estate firm with a large St. Louis area presence, to analyze the property and recommend commercial, industrial and other uses.

The information provided could aid bidders in preparing their proposals for Lambert and help the city structure a lease deal if officials decide to go ahead with one.

Cushman & Wakefield will be paid \$60,000 for a "highest and best use" analysis and on a per-hour basis for further advisory services.

An overall estimated figure wasn't announced but it's likely to be a relative drop in the bucket compared to the several million dollars already paid to the city's existing privatization team of 18 consulting firms.

As with the other consultants, a nonprofit funded by political megadonor Rex Sinquefeld will pay the real estate adviser and be reimbursed from the lease proceeds only if a deal is eventually reached.

"These sorts of supplementary advisers were envisioned in the overall contract that we signed with the city, so this is not a surprise," said Glenn Muscosky, managing director of Moelis & Company, the working group's main financial adviser.

Airport Director Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge said the land, some of it formerly occupied by homes, was bought over the years mainly for noise mitigation or in connection with the new runway that opened in 2006.

Because of the type of bonds used to pay for those buyouts, she said, the property can only be used for governmental purposes until the debt is paid off.

One city requirement for any company chosen to lease Lambert will be to provide money to pay off Lambert's debt of about \$600 million. If that happens, all the vacant land could be developed.

As it stands now, Hamm-Niebruegge said, the debt is being paid off more gradually although "aggressively." She said some pockets of land had been freed up previously for possible private development and more would be available over the next five to seven years.

Meanwhile, the working group decided to meet Tuesday in closed session to begin discussing the 18 responses submitted last week to the city's "request for qualifications" issued by the city to potential bidders.

Muscosky said he and other consultants recommend that the committee pare the list down before inviting representatives of some of the companies for face-to-face visits.

The working group voted Thursday to make airport management experience the main factor in deciding which companies and teams of firms from which to seek actual bids.

That will be given a weight of 40% in its scoring criteria, the group said.

Weighting of 20% will be assigned to a would-be bidder's experience at delivering a significant capital expenditure program, 20% to its record in completing public infrastructure transactions, 10% on its record developing property adjacent to airports, and 10% on its record of managing public infrastructure for the benefit of its community and region.

Muscosky said the scoring would be only one part of the evaluation on who advances to the next round.

- Caption: Passengers make their way to the check-in counter in Terminal 2 at St. Louis Lambert International Airport. Photo by J.B. FORBES, JFORBES@POST-DISPATCH.COM

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Messenger: From day one, city's lead consultant has had end goal in mind — privatize Lambert

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First Rule media company has a punchy slogan.

“Give us the end goal,” it says. “We’ll direct the way.”

Indeed, that’s what lobbyist Travis Brown has been doing, with Mayor Lyda Krewson’s blessing, as he’s directed the city down the runway toward privatization of St. Louis Lambert International Airport over the past couple of years. Some city officials want desperately to believe that what they are doing is studying privatization, to figure out if it makes sense. But for Brown, the end goal has always been clear.

That became even more obvious last week as one of Brown’s employees invited community leaders to the screening of a pro-privatization propaganda film produced by First Rule, one of his companies.

The invitation I saw came from Andrew Smith, who recently left the St. Louis Regional Chamber to work for First Rule as the Missouri Hyperloop project liaison. You might have heard of the Hyperloop. It’s the futuristic transportation concept that would move travelers and freight at incredible speeds through pneumatic tube-like structures, making the trip between St. Louis and Kansas City about 23 minutes. I’m not sure what the Hyperloop has to do with airport privatization other than the fact that billionaire Rex Sinquefield is involved in both projects, but when it comes to Travis Brown’s companies — all operated under the umbrella of Pelopidas, LLC, the company he owns with his ex-wife and business partner, Rachel Keller — there is little separation between any of them.

In fact, that’s one of the points Keller makes in her ongoing lawsuit against Brown, in which she accuses him of “looting” the company, in part by spending their joint income and resources on some of Brown’s personal pet projects, like multiple First Rule subsidiaries in Florida.

Here’s how Brown describes the business relationship between the various entities, on the website of Heartland Hyperloop, a nonprofit he created with his friend and fellow lobbyist Steve Tilley:

“Travis serves as President for Grow Missouri Inc., which is responsible for various public outreach efforts in Missouri, including FLY314. He also serves as Chief Executive Officer of First Rule, a Saint Louis based government and public affairs network.”

Grow Missouri, of course, is the nonprofit leading the privatization project team that includes a bevy of consultants paid approximately \$800,000 a month by Sinquefield.

Grow Missouri is First Rule is Hyperloop is FLY314 is Rex.

And this is what bothers Paul Payne.

The city’s budget director, and member of the Airport Working Group that is studying the privatization of the airport, Payne spoke up at the Oct. 24 public meeting of the group, and again a week later, upset that the First Rule propaganda film was produced and being marketed without the knowledge of the other public officials working on the privatization project. The film’s existence and planned screening was revealed when Payne received a copy of an invitation to it, and Payne wasn’t happy about it. Such a move likely violates Brown’s contract with the city to manage the privatization process, which requires coordination on public communication.

“I was taken aback,” he told fellow members of the Airport Working Group. “This troubles me.”

Airport Director Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge shared Payne’s concerns.

But longtime Sinquefield attorney Marc Ellinger, who is being paid \$80,000 a month plus expenses to work on the airport privatization effort, told working group members that Brown’s work on First Rule was not connected to his work on Grow Missouri.

“First Rule is not an entity of Grow Missouri Inc.,” Ellinger said. “To the best of my knowledge this was not something that was done with the knowledge of ... Grow Missouri.”

Ellinger might want to brush up on his knowledge.

The same Brown employee, Jessica Oldham, who certified the most recent Grow Missouri document that discloses Ellinger’s quarterly haul of \$251,205 for being Sinquefield’s yes man, was listed as the RSVP contact for the First Rule movie.

Where does Grow Missouri end and First Rule begin? Perhaps the propaganda movie could answer that question. For now, its screening has been postponed.

But it's not like the damage of the city's head consultant already having his mind made up on airport privatization is likely to change anything.

It's the same as it ever was, since at least March 16, 2017. That's the day that Brown, on behalf of Grow Missouri, signed a memorandum of understanding with the city, agreeing to advise the city through the early stages of the privatization process. Part of that early process included drawing up a request for proposals from companies that would be interested in advising the city on the legal and financial issues all the way up to a possible lease of the airport.

Nearly every one of the bidders, most of them big international companies like Credit Suisse and Ernst & Young, advised the city not to adopt a "success fee" model where a group of consultants working as a consortium would be ultimately funded or reimbursed out of the proceeds of the lease.

"It is our experience that advisor consortia, coupled with a single success fee establish a significant conflict of interest," one of the bidders wrote. Others agreed.

The city didn't listen.

Grow Missouri won the bid that it helped write and the conflicts of interest have only multiplied since then.

"The fix is not in," Krewson said at the time.

Tell that to Paul Payne.

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- *Index terms: tony messenger;commentary;local-government;st. louis lambert international airport;travis brown;pelopidas;first rule;paul payne;lyda krewson;airport privatization; COLUMN*
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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

- Index terms: *commentary;lewis reed;lyda krewson;adolphus pruit;st. louis lambert international airport;airport advisory working group;marlene davis;local-government; EDITORIAL*
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18 potential bidders line up to lease Lambert

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ST. LOUIS — All the contestants in the controversial high-stakes derby to lease St. Louis Lambert International Airport are now out in the open, as the city announced Friday that 18 companies and teams of firms have turned in applications.

A city committee, the Airport Advisory Working Group, will now review the submissions and decide which to seek bids from.

One prospective bidder on the list had previously disclosed its interest publicly — STL Aviation Group, a consortium led by California-based Oaktree Capital Management that hired several politically connected lobbyists. The group includes a company that runs airports in France and elsewhere.

But a prominent no-show was Ferrovial Airports, a Spanish company that had hired former Mayor Francis Slay — now an attorney in private practice — to help lobby for it.

The list does include various other firms that hadn't figured in political speculation over Lambert privatization over the past year.

Among them is Lambert Gateway Partners, a consortium including the Public School and Education Employee Retirement Systems of Missouri and Blackstone Infrastructure Group, among others.

Another teacher group also declared its interest — the Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan Board, which is working with Ontario Airports Investments Limited and Copenhagen Airports International.

Among other applicants are Netherlands-based Royal Schiphol Group, which runs airports in Amsterdam, other Dutch cities and elsewhere, and Luxembourg-based CAAP, which also is involved with various airports.

The 18 entities responded to a "request for qualifications" issued a month ago by the airport working group. The deadline for submissions was 5 p.m. Friday.

Other applicants are AENA Internacional, AMP Capital, Atlantia, daa International, Global Infrastructure Partners, GRID Realty, Manchester Airports Group, Momentum Aviation Partners, Morrison & Co., Odinsa, OMERS Infrastructure and Fraport, Public Sector Pension Investment Board/AviAlliance and Vantage Airport Group/Corsair-Vantage Investment Partners.

Paul Payne, the working group's chairman, said the panel's next step will focus on whether potential bidders have the operational and financial capacity to run Lambert.

Payne, who also is the city budget director, has said objectives are improving Lambert, generating revenue to spur "transformational changes and benefit" for St. Louis and aiding economic development in the region.

The privatization study was begun by Slay near the end of his tenure in 2017 and continued by Mayor Lyda Krewson.

Comptroller Darlene Green and other critics have complained that the process has been set up to favor special interests.

Criticism has focused on the involvement of Grow Missouri, a nonprofit funded by political megadonor Rex Sinquefield, which is one of several consulting firms advising the working group.

Sinquefield funded the city's application to the federal government to be allowed to consider privatization and is paying the consultants, with reimbursement only if a deal is reached.

The working group expects to decide by early next month which companies to seek bids from. Payne called the 18 submissions "a healthy response" and said more details about the respondents may be released next week.

- *Index terms: local-politics;local-government;st. louis lambert international airport;airport privatization;oaktree capital management;public school and education employee retirement systems of misso;blackstone infrastructure group;airport advisory working group;#breaking;ferrovial;francis slay;paul payne;lyda krewson;darlene green*
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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.

- *Index terms:* commentary;marlene davis;airport advisory working group;st. louis lambert international airport;transportation and commerce committee;cara spencer;local-government; EDITORIAL
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Editorial: On Lambert's privatization, no one knows what goes on behind closed doors

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The St. Louis County Council was poised to consider a resolution Tuesday urging St. Louis city to be more transparent in its deliberations regarding the proposed privatization of St. Louis Lambert International Airport. Action was postponed, however, after privatization activist Adolphus Pruitt told the council, “if you go to fly314.com, everything about the airport and the working group is posted online.” The council should keep that resolution handy before taking Pruitt at his word.

Council members and airport users absolutely should visit that private website and judge the transparency of this privatization process for themselves. What visitors will find in the “transparency portal” of fly314.com is a website jam-packed with hyperlinks to impressive-looking meeting schedules, videos, press releases and publicly available research reports.

What they won’t find is useful information about all the substantive deliberations occurring behind closed doors, where this process actually is being driven. Hyperlinks and press releases do not equate with transparency.

Mayor Lyda Krewson’s administration, working in tandem with private consultants, has constructed a process designed to be opaque and unfathomable. The lack of transparency is evident in the links on fly314.com to the meetings convened so far by the Airport Advisory Working Group. This group, which includes one elected official along with six appointees, is the primary body conducting the nitty-gritty details of agreements with lawyers, airlines, consultants and other stakeholders.

This very, very busy working group has met 26 times this year and spent an average of 17.4 minutes per meeting in open session, where the public could watch and learn. The total time spent in open session was just under eight hours. But the working group, which must abide by state open-meetings law, has spent more than 41 hours behind closed doors. That’s five hours of secret meetings for every one hour open to the public.

In all these hours behind closed doors, the group’s members would have us believe that they complied 100% percent of the time with Missouri’s Sunshine Law — never once discussing business in private that the law says should be discussed in public. That’s sure a lot of secret talking for a process supposedly dedicated to transparency.

What’s discussed in public can often be inscrutable. During the 15-minute working group session on Oct. 4, Deputy Mayor Linda Martinez announced that the city has reached a preliminary framework agreement with major airlines and cargo carriers that represent 80% of airport traffic and 85% of weighted cargo. That’s great, but agreement on what? The working group’s minutes don’t elaborate, and no documents in the “transparency portal” explain what she was talking about.

The reasons to distrust this process are mounting by the day. Millions of airport customers from around the region have every reason to be concerned, which is why the County Council — and the Board of Aldermen — are justified in demanding real transparency.

- *Index terms: commentary;st. louis lambert international airport;sunshine law;mayor lyda krewson’s administration;transparency portal;behind closed doors;airport advisory working group;adolphus pruit;local-government;local-politics;Linda Martinez;fly314.com; EDITORIAL*
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Editorial: Idea for independent airport-privatization study gets frosty Krewson response

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St. Louisans might overwhelmingly support the idea of privatizing St. Louis Lambert International Airport. Then again, they might overwhelmingly hate the idea. Mayor Lyda Krewson and other supporters of the current privatization process would never know because they've steadfastly avoided letting voters have a chance to weigh in. The process has been so heavily rigged against input from all but a tiny sliver of paid consultants and airport interests, the public really has no idea what's being planned in their name.

Yet now Krewson is claiming victim status in the information freeze-out. She wasn't consulted before St. Charles and St. Louis counties sought to fill the information vacuum by proposing their own independent study of privatization and regional airport governance. "I do think the fact that we had no heads-up on this, not even a courtesy call — 'Hey, we're going to study your airport' — is not exactly in the spirit of cooperation and regionalism. It's not very neighborly," she told the St. Louis Business Journal.

It must feel awful to be left out of the loop like that. Awfully ironic, that is, considering how she neglected to inform either the St. Louis County executive, County Council president or county police chief of her proposal last spring for the county to provide 42 officers to help patrol the city as violent crime escalated. Krewson did, however, share her proposal with a private business executive.

Communication between Krewson and other top leaders in the region has degraded to an abysmal state. No wonder the region is so fractured and inefficiently managed. Given how the privatization process has unfolded in secret so far, why should St. Louisans trust any proposal that excludes local voters from having a say and, as St. Charles County Executive Steve Ehlmann notes, shuts out 88% of the regional travelers who use the airport?

A lack of independent analysis and oversight has tainted the privatization process from the beginning. The person funding the consultant study, campaign megadonor Rex Sinquefeld, has a direct interest in privatization. The consultants won't get reimbursed by taxpayers for their work unless privatization proceeds. The result sure seems predetermined.

An independent study, including a review of regional-governance potential, is a great idea, offering far more credibility and greater likelihood of public acceptance than the one Krewson's administration is pushing. If the governments of St. Charles and St. Louis counties are willing to pay for it, more power to them.

Krewson suggests that outside counties' interest in Lambert is driven by a desire to get a piece of the financial windfall from privatization. Did she consider that they might be trying to guard this vital regional economic asset, used primarily by their residents, from being driven into a ditch? Neighborly communication is the first step toward fixing the airport, reducing crime and improving regional cooperation. Krewson might try it sometime.

- *Index terms: commentary;lyda krewson;rex sinquefeld;steve ehlmann;st. louis lambert international airport;st. louis county executive;local-government; EDITORIAL*
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Messenger: As St. Louis heads down runway of airport privatization, a consultant upgrades to first class

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- Readability: >12 grade level (Lexile: 1380)

Toby Merchant is good at math.

The Cincinnati-based attorney is a partner with the Washington, D.C.-based law firm Squire Patton Boggs. That big-name law firm is one of more than a dozen consultants being paid by billionaire Rex Sinquefeld to manage the process by which the city of St. Louis might lease out St. Louis Lambert International Airport to the highest (or most well-connected) bidder.

Merchant recently added another team to his portfolio.

He is also the chief operating officer and general counsel for McKenna & Associates, one of the other consultants working on the airport privatization process.

I became interested in Merchant's employment when Gerry Connolly posted the sign-up sheet to a recent Airport Advisory Working Group meeting on Twitter. Connolly is a city resident and researcher who has been watchdogging the privatization process.

There, on the top of the sign-in sheet, was Merchant, the Squire Patton Boggs attorney, signing in as representing McKenna & Associates.

It's not the first time he represented the company founded by Andrew McKenna.

When the National Rifle Association became embroiled in a nasty legal dispute with one of its key vendors, McKenna, a dark-money fundraiser for the NRA, got caught up in that spider web of alleged deceit and big spending. According to internal memos reported on earlier this year by *The New Yorker* and *The Trace*, "McKenna provided 'vague project names,' failed to 'attach support' for invoices, and operated with 'no contract for current work.'" The memos also allege that McKenna hired the wife of the then-chief operating officer of the NRA at the same time he was raising money for the gun group.

Nothing to see here, McKenna's attorney told reporters at the time.

The attorney was Toby Merchant.

Any accusation that there was any problem with McKenna's work for the NRA was "demonstrably false," Merchant said.

Last week, I emailed Merchant to ask him whether he was working for Squire Patton Boggs or McKenna.

The answer?

Both.

Merchant didn't respond to my email, but another Squire Patton Boggs attorney working on the airport privatization effort, Alethia Nancoo, did:

"Mr. Merchant is transitioning his practice at Squire Patton Boggs and at the same time coming up to speed at McKenna & Associates," Nancoo wrote. "McKenna & Associates has been a firm client of Squire for nearly six years."

For people familiar with the practice of law and concerns over legal ethics, this might seem a bit odd, having one attorney working for two different entities involved in a project. But the airport privatization effort is like none other.

All of the consultants have signed contracts that say the city of St. Louis is their client, though they are being paid by Sinquefeld's nonprofit, Grow Missouri. And they are being paid well, in the range of a collective \$800,000 a month.

This is where Merchant's math skills come in.

Since the contracts with the city to provide "independent" advice were signed in 2018, Squire Patton Boggs, one of three law firms working on the project, has been paid more than \$425,000. McKenna, on the other hand, has been the highest paid consultant, earning

more than \$1.6 million. And unlike the law firms, McKenna has the possibility of a massive windfall if the privatization goes through, sharing in both a possible bonus of up to \$10 million if the deal gets done in 24 months; and a “success fee” of millions of dollars that would come out of the money a firm would pay to the city for the right to run (and profit off of) its airport.

If airport privatization goes through, Merchant is in line to cash in.

Of course, from day one, that’s been the whole point of this exercise.

Former Mayor Francis Slay, who started the process, is prepared to cash in as a lobbyist for one of the companies, Ferrovial, that will likely respond to the request for qualifications issued by the city this month. His former chief of staff, Jeff Rainford, was a lobbyist for Oaktree Capital, another of the firms lining up to bid. Another former chief of staff, Mary Ellen Ponder, works for the Sinquefield lobbyist, Travis Brown, who is directing the entire charade. The city’s lobbyist, Jeff Aboussie, is also listed in Grow Missouri’s documents as one of its consultants.

And, Sinquefield, of course, stands to make money on all sides of the deal, as the investment firm he co-founded and still owns, Dimensional Fund Advisors, manages mutual funds that hold hundreds of millions of dollars in shares of the financial adviser to the city, Moelis, as well as the key airlines and at least one of the companies, Macquarie, that also could bid on the project.

All of those colliding interests have one goal in mind, says city Comptroller Darlene Green, who is opposed to the privatization process, and it is not to serve the taxpayers.

“The process exploring privatization of St. Louis Lambert International Airport has been designed by and for special interests,” Green said in a statement. “Unsurprisingly, this RFQ is shaped by assumptions to appease those interests, and I have no confidence that this process will yield an outcome supportive of public interest.”

Nancoo, by the way, says her firm has no issue with Merchant’s job switch.

“We see no conflict with an individual leaving one firm which currently represents the City to join another firm that also represents the City as it explores a potential P3 (public-private partnership) for the St. Louis Airport,” she wrote in an email. “Any suggestion of a conflict would be utterly misleading.”

Nothing to see here, say the folks pushing St. Louis down a runway toward privatizing its greatest asset. Just a whole lot of people lining up at the public trough, with little accountability on how the public’s money is being spent.

• Caption: Travelers await their flight at Lambert-St. Louis International Airport. St. Louis officials are continuing to explore privatization options for operation of the airport. Photo by Cristina Fletes, cfletes@post-dispatch.com

• Memo: Tony’s Take

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Company seeking to run Lambert airport hires former City Hall lobbyists and Sinquefield ally

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JEFFERSON CITY — One of the companies that wants to operate St. Louis Lambert International Airport has hired a new team of lobbyists with links to former Mayor Francis Slay and wealthy privatization backer Rex Sinquefield.

Five months after former Slay chief of staff Jeff Rainford departed as the lobbyist for STL Aviation Group, the New York-based firm hired lobbyists with the Nexus Group, including former city of St. Louis consultants Rodney Boyd and Brian J. Grace and former Sinquefield associate Kate Casas.

STL Aviation, which is owned by California-based Oaktree Capital Management, is among the groups vying to draft a proposal if the city decides to seek an outside operator for the airport.

Missouri Ethics Commission records show the Nexus team registered three days after a city committee voted to issue a “request for qualifications” from companies that want to lease the city-owned facilities.

The companies or teams of companies have until Nov. 1 to respond. After that, the working group will decide which ones will be asked to submit bids.

Rainford left in May after St. Louis Mayor Lyda Krewson questioned why companies were hiring lobbyists to push the privatization agenda.

Krewson said if the city decides to seek proposals to run the airport, all will be evaluated on the strength of the proposal, “not on who their lobbyists are. Frankly, they don’t need a lobbyist at all.”

Rainford told the Post-Dispatch at the time his departure was not in response to Krewson’s comment.

The new lobbying firm, which was formed last year, represents a who’s who of major companies in Missouri, as well as civic groups and governmental bodies.

Along with working with Slay during his tenure, Boyd and Grace represent Clayton-based health insurance giant Centene, prescription benefits manager Express Scripts and the St. Louis Blues hockey club.

Casas worked for Sinquefield in 2014 on a failed campaign to ask Missouri voters to eliminate teacher tenure. She also is registered to lobby for a lengthy roster of companies, including Tesla, Lyft and Spire.

Sinquefield, a retired financier and political megadonor, funded the city’s application for privatization to the federal government and is paying the consultants, with reimbursement only if a deal is reached.

Oaktree, which owns STL Aviation, declined a request for comment. In March, Toronto-based Brookfield Asset Management Inc. announced it was acquiring Oaktree in a \$4.8 billion deal.

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Privatizing Lambert airport may move a step closer with move by city committee

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ST. LOUIS — A city committee may be poised to make a major move toward privatizing St. Louis Lambert International Airport — issuing a “request for qualifications,” or an RFQ, to companies interested in leasing the city-owned facility.

“Possible vote on issuance of RFQ” is the final item on the agenda for Wednesday’s meeting of the Airport Advisory Working Group.

For months that panel has held off a decision as city officials conducted behind-the-scenes discussions with Lambert’s airlines on what should be sought in a possible lease.

The panel’s chairman, City Budget Director Paul Payne, confirmed that this is the first time that one of its agendas listed an RFQ vote as a possibility.

He declined to comment on whether the city and the airlines had reached agreement on what to seek from bidders.

The working group has four voting members: Mayor Lyda Krewson, Aldermanic President Lewis Reed and Comptroller Darlene Green, or their designees, and Payne.

Three other members don’t have a vote — Airport Director Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge, Alderman Marlene Davis, D-19th Ward, and City Counselor Julian Bush.

After companies respond to an RFQ, the committee pick ones from which to seek actual lease proposals.

As it stands now, any final deal would require approval of the Board of Aldermen; the city’s top fiscal body, the Board of Estimate and Apportionment; Lambert’s airlines and the Federal Aviation Administration.

Critics of the contentious privatization idea have been pushing to require a citywide vote, as well.

Supporters of considering privatization, including Krewson and Reed, have said it could maximize city revenue and improve the airport.

Opponents, including Green, say the city shouldn’t give up control of such a key asset and that a private operator would put bottom-line profit ahead of public service.

Critics also have blasted the involvement of retired investor Rex Sinquefield. A Sinquefield-funded nonprofit funded the city’s application to the FAA and is on a team of consultants advising the city on the issue. Sinquefield is paying the consultants and will be reimbursed only if a lease deal is approved.

A city document issued last week projects that once an RFQ is issued, it would take about a year to complete the entire privatization process if that’s what is eventually decided.

- *Index terms: st. louis lambert international airport;airport privatization;airport advisory working group;lyda krewson;darlene green;lewis reed;paul payne;local-government;local-politics;major-industry*
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