

DeKalb Operational Task Force (OTF) Meeting, Aug 6, 2014

Board Room, DeKalb Medical Center

<Beth Nathan's personal notes>

OTF Members Present: Butler, Ejike, Floyd, Jacobs, McMahan, Millar, Parent, Sjoquist, <+ 2 staff: Phyllis Mitchell and ??>

Public Present: Joe Arrington, Beth Nathan, Mary Shellman, Allen Venet

Meeting started late (6:20p) with Vaughn Irons chairing, having arrived late. John Shelton arrived at 6:35p.

Irons on agenda: (a) Expectations on report contents, (b) Meeting schedule as mailed out by Phyllis, (c) Work Sessions, like this, closed or open? The setup of the OTF says that meeting may but are not required to be public. Legal opinion concurs.

<Irons calls for Committee Thoughts>

- Millar: Bd of Ed closes meetings only for personnel and <?> matters; does anyone know about county standard procedure on that? No response. If our meetings were to be closed, we'd need to explain that to the public. The AJC could still publish a notice of the meeting.
- Parent: This room isn't large enough for a public meeting.
- Irons: Tonight is for getting organized. The minutes of Work Session would be open to the public.
- Jacobs: The website needs to list meetings and locations, even if a notice doesn't go to the AJC.
- Ejike: We've had lots of stuff to read; we need to start focusing on what it is we will be delivering. Who receives those deliverables? Public should be able to attend.
- Floyd: No problem with public listening, but public comments are a waste of time at the meetings. All our meetings should be working sessions until we're ready to decide something. Let's get down to what's going on and there are probably 15 ideas about that in this room.
- Irons: We need a road map.
- Millar: Our subcommittee discussion included CEO-vs-Commission issues and structure. What do we bring back to the full committee? Do we need a consensus on the topic from the full committee?
- Shelton: I think so. Subcommittees need to bring info on impact for further discussion.
- Floyd: At some point we need to get down to details. We need focus on how we do things here, not how they're done in Seattle. We could incorporate the areas north of Decatur on a Sunday afternoon on a paper napkin, but south DeKalb is another question. All these questions are political, not just numeric.
- Ejike: We are beginning to have that necessary discussion now. We need to understand the economic impact of cityhoods. Most cityhood proposals cannot be denied by the legislature. We need to talk impacts and options for the rest of the county in a serious, frank way.
- Shelton: We're supposing cities will be approved (*said in a tentative manner*).
- Parent + Jacobs: It's not that simple, but the cityhood movements aren't like to fade out. All three groups are agitating now about boundaries.
- Jacobs: Maybe we need to look at more than 3 territories BEFORE THE 2015 SESSION. Somebody's got to do it.
- Sjoquist: This involves more compromises than just boundaries. How do other areas handle such incorporations? Are there other options?
- Jacobs: OTF could say countywide that this is what it should look like.
- Ejike: Impact on schools? Boundaries are based on ideology. People are comfortable in certain boundaries. There is nothing wrong with self-governance. What happens to everybody else?
- Butler: People are uncertain about what will happen.
- Sjoquist: People see what will happen if 60% of the population with 1/3 of the tax base is left unincorporated (south of Decatur). Currently it's 80% of the population and 2/3 of the tax base.
- Millar: Make the assumption that there are 3 cities + rest of the county. What does DeKalb do service-wise? The county hasn't been changing after cityhoods. What functions should the county perform?

- Parent: Yes, that's a good question but it doesn't change the analysis.
- Millar: County can cut some costs, like in the police budget.
- Parent: Can we define our job as to find out the truth about costs? Don't assume that cities will move forward even if the Republicans want that to happen.
- <hubbub – everybody talking at once>
- Ejike: Millar is right but reality is that the state House is Republican; we need to use that as a building block. This is about the sustainability of what is left. The economic base isn't looking good.
- Floyd: Cities have additional revenue sources.
- Ejike: The residents of cities that left didn't play well. How can we make this place sustainable?
- Millar: 88% of my taxes still go to the county. We need real numbers. Issue is also efficiency.
- Parent: It is unrealistic to expect the cityhood movements to fade, especially with the CEO indictment and the Commission ethics complaints. The county just looks bad.
- Floyd: Incorporated areas are vibrant and moving, bringing more money into the county. People want access to elected officials and don't have it in the county. There is a quality-of-place issue.
- Irons: Is cityhood the only option?
- Millar: The county problem (unwieldy, unresponsive) is large.
- Ejike: Access to public officials does not generate development. The issues we're dealing with have roots 30-50 years ago, and involve class income problems. Neighborhoods can get things done if they go through the courts rather than the county. We should talk about the truth about why cities happen; it is camouflaged as self-governance. We need to renegotiate service delivery in the county.
- Floyd: We still don't understand the scope of work for GSU and GA Tech.
- Mitchell: A report on Service Delivery is coming (late Aug/early Sept). If the county were to dump an un-mandated service, that would be a problem for cities. Cityhood proposal that is coming will be interactive; we'll be able to move the boundaries around and see the impact.
- Ejike: You can move the lines all you want but if the economic footprint is not there, due to previous cherry-picking, then taxes will have to be higher in the city.
- McMahan: Let's see the cityhood numbers and the cost of services numbers.
- Irons: We need tax dollars bifurcated into residential vs commercial. There's an economic development study showing DeKalb's commercial taxes to be 20% higher than surrounding counties, discouraging business from locating here. It goes back to HOST.
- Jacobs: The city boundaries are less logical in central DeKalb than they were in Dunwoody or Brookhaven. Don't bury your head in the sand, central DeKalb may incorporate. We should be beyond looking at impact and into planning for contingencies.
- Irons: What is the real threshold for becoming a city? People are wrapped into cities for political purposes rather than personal choices. The cities are new creations but they are not holistic. What is the threshold for approving a city?
- Millar: You only need look at charges within cities versus charges for the same service from the county to see efficiency problems ("bloat").
- Irons: Millage rates in new cities are a couple points lower than the county, but 15 points higher in older cities (smaller, primarily residential).
- Millar: That's due to privatization in newer cities.
- Sjoquist: I worked on the Tucker financial study. Cities also get franchise fees and business license fees that are sufficient to finance most of the city costs.
- Floyd: Peachtree Corners, with 3 services pays no millage and contracts those services back to Gwinnett. You wouldn't do that in DeKalb.
- Sjoquist: We need the consultants to identify all the issues. What if there were a county police/fire flat rate? Would the County Commission continue to act as a City Council for south DeKalb if it were the only unincorporated area?
- Floyd: 152 counties don't have police; only a sheriff.
- McMahan: Sjoquist is talking about county-municipality collaboration. The school system and the county didn't talk until the last 1.5 years; now we have new MOUs. It comes down to financials. Let's make a list for the next meeting. Let's get numbers directly from the county and cities without waiting for GSU. Let's look at the Dunwoody tax digest before/after incorporation.
- Sjoquist: Some of that is in the first report.
- Irons: We're spending a lot of time on cityhood questions.

- Ejike: To reduce costs, think of privatization. The School Board must be part of this discussion. Cities have flexibility, the ability to push & pull. Let's look at the economic footprint of what's left.
- McMahan: Let's look at it.
- Millar: Pensions must be discussed. Ethics is huge; how does it mesh with the other problems?
- Parent: Structural problems contribute to ethics problems.
- Floyd: The problem is the people in office.
- Parent: At least part of the problem is structural.
- Floyd: It is impossible to understand how the county operates. There was a Finance Committee meeting to discuss a \$200M contract and nobody showed up.
- Jacobs: I support county manager form but there may be an intractable political problem in trying to change the structure. Ethics and auditing problems must be solved. The Ethics Commission can be fixed via legislation that recommends independence and stable funding and does something with who appoints. The Blueprints group is talking about this.
- Irons: I've never had someone say to me that DeKalb's top problem is its form of government. Ethics and transparency problems have led to trust problems which has led to cityhood movements.
- Millar: City manager form won't happen due to politics.
- Jacobs: We need to be seen as solving "the problems" which may not be the form of govt.
- Mitchell: No specific scope has been developed for Ethics; the topic is wide open. GSU will be coming back with ideas on delineation-of-power problems.
- Irons: Our subcommittee called for more work on power relationship structure within the Org Act.
- Millar: We need to fix "organizational problems" which may extend beyond Org Act.
- Ejike: A proper audit with checks and balances can't come out of the old structure; it cannot police itself.
- Irons: How do we make a list of governance functionality problems? Would best source be county staff? We'd have to tell the Commissioners they weren't invited.
- Floyd: When you try to get financial info, it doesn't happen.
- Irons: Can we get public comment on these issues from businesses and other people? Could staff be interviewed by disassociated 3rd party?
- Sjoquist: GSU maybe.
- McMahan: Communications challenges are a thread in all these problems. We need to step our own game up, asking private sector folks to talk to us. How do we get this done; we don't have much staff.
- Irons: Can Chamber's chair reach out?
- Mitchell: ARC might be able to create a survey for the Chamber. Employee interviews have been commissioned by the county; will check into the scope of those interviews.
- Sjoquist: Have we gone too far? Information problems may be management rather than structural issues.
- Irons: How do we determine where gray areas exist, particularly with ethics?
- Sjoquist: In thinking about ethic scope, we don't need comparisons to other jurisdictions, just a Model.
- Millar: Let's hear from a 3rd party on CEO/Commission power issues.
- Irons: These have been long-term problems. A deeper dive report on Org Act is in progress.
- Sjoquist: A matrix of decision power would be helpful.
- Irons: DeKalb's structure is designed to slow things down, to stop things, including permits, projects and reforms. That is a problem.
- Jacobs: That approach works great at national and state levels, but not at the local level.
- Irons: Do we actually have an Executive Branch and a Legislative Branch or do we have two groups who occasionally collaborate. It seems to switch back and forth. The public does not seem to view the Commissioners as legislators (policy-makers).
- Floyd: There's a lot of duplication of functions between CEO & Commission, like 2 budget preparation bodies and 2 chiefs of staff.
- Millar: Liane had 5 people in her office. There are a lot more now.
- McMahan: Board of Ed now spends \$300K on management while the county spend \$3.5M, though the school budget is so much larger than the county budget.
- Floyd: That's the difference in having politicians or professionals doing the management.

- McMahan: Managers should be certified and know the depth of their responsibility before running for office.
- Parent: Duplication of CEO/Comm management was derived in part from the CEO/Comm power battle.
- Floyd: When the Commissioners couldn't get info, they needed to create it for themselves. Abstaining from voting to ensure a piece of legislation doesn't pass is the height of non-functionality.

<Meeting shifts to wrap-up>

Mitchell: I don't have a laundry list for scope questions.

Irons: The group is starting to galvanize. We can take input all week long, not just at meetings. The new meeting schedule stays with Wednesdays, with one Work Session per month. The difference between the two full session is a differentiation between an info meeting and an open discussion. The info meetings are televised, are a place to take action and to make votes.

Floyd: Is a formal meeting just for listening? What's the purpose of those meetings?

McMahan: Citizen perception is that the OTF lacks confidence.

Millar: There is no need for public comments at the meetings.

Floyd: What do we want to do next week?

Mitchell: All reports start at subcommittee level.

Jacobs: Let's continue this discussion next week.

Millar: Can we have the tables at the Maloof set up so we face each other rather than the audience, to facilitate discussion?

Irons: Next meeting will have a discussion format and approve minutes.

<Meeting shifts to discussion of citizen appointments>

Irons: I have asked each member of my subcommittee to submit 2 nominations. There will be decisions by next week, with diverse geographic representation.

Shelton: I like the sound of that process and will do the same.

Full committee will approve the selections.

McMahan: Can we have that process clearly defined and with names by next Monday?

<8:05 adjourn>

Irons: Read the presentation in advance of meetings. GSU should cover outline of presentation at most, before Q&A/discussion begins.