

900 Words

More Personal Thoughts on the Special Tax District by Rauf Bolden in Orange Beach *

“That sounds reasonable,” I thought.

People need to know how their tax money will be spent before campaigning for a three-mil tax increase, feeling comfortable with the composition of the Governing Committee, knowing they will work in our best interest, consisting of four members from each municipal area with one non-voting Representative from the Baldwin County Board of Education, chosen by the Governing Committee, seemingly a realistic place to start our discussions.

This initiative will not be on the ballot in November 2016, giving our community time to engage with Council Members, digesting the possibilities before us. As an Orange Beachian, we like to take our time and not rush headlong into contractual-business relationships that may be harder to get out of than they were to get into, ensuring the community-at-large has had time to reflect and debate the consequences before soliciting taxation, is the best way forward.

How did we get here? Over the last decade, both cities collectively championed two election-losing splits from the Baldwin County Board of Education, hiring consultants for advertising and expertise, holding meetings with slide after slide, bordering on death-by-Power-Point, losing the listener, because the presenter knew that he knew better than the people he was presenting to. Orange Beach consists of fishing folk who like to sit on the porch, engaging in small groups, taking a lot of time, being social, building trust in a way I call: old-school.

This writer is not naïve enough to think the Baldwin County Board of Education is going to go quietly into the good night, realizing they will not have a voting seat on the committee governing the tax district, fully expecting them to dig in their heels, but they are in a precarious position. Not compromising lets us leverage the fact that the one-cent sales tax vote in 2018 may not pass without our support, throwing them into insolvency, endangering their pensions, forcing the State of Alabama to take over the school system. Personally, I do not think anyone in Baldwin County wants to see that happen, making it imperative for the School Board to accept our offer – for the children, as they have little room to negotiate.

Gulf Shores wants a High School built on land generously donated for that purpose, being across the bridge. The cost will indebt the Orange Beach taxpayers for a share of the \$60 Million bond to build a school in another jurisdiction. OK, we will have a pretty building, letting Orange Beach Parents pay the toll to drop-off and pick-up their children each day.

Others hold that spending \$25 Million to construct a Middle School in Orange Beach makes more sense, bussing students from Gulf Shores to Orange Beach, solving the space problem at Gulf Shores High School, migrating pupils to the old Middle School, eliminating the toll charge for parents in Orange Beach, leaving \$35 Million in discretionary spending for more teachers, better curriculum and smaller classes. We have an obligation, remaining in the control of these funds, ensuring how they are being spent, having fiscal accountability to the taxpayers is important for governing the district.

My personal worry is the \$60 Million option, envisioning this as the thin-end-of-the-wedge, returning to the electorate in a couple of years for additional taxes,

contrasting the \$25 Million option, envisioning this as a do-it-once-and-forget-it solution with no additional taxes, having \$35 Million in reserves is a more business-oriented approach.

The contract between the Governing Committee and the Baldwin County Board of Education is key, needing safeguards that cannot be overruled, simply because we leaned on the Board, getting them to accept this deal, implying the Board of Education is vindictive is not my goal, seemingly human nature surfaces in a way we are not always proud of.

I worked for a guy once and every year I would ask for a raise and every year I would hear nothing. Finally, I went to the Director, seeing my argument he gave me a raise. Afterward my supervisor would not talk to me and did everything in his power to make my life miserable, so it is human nature that worries me.

As it stands now, the Board of Education will want absolute veto power over any decisions the Governing Committee makes, frustrating the process, being obstructive, making the Committee look stupid because they cannot get anything done, requiring the Committee to go-to-law, holding the process hostage for Board of Education approval, avoiding a nightmare like this through contractual language is the most efficient way to foster good faith between both parties.

Let's go forward with negotiations as if it were a business, talking to our folks, implementing a plan over the next year to engage the electorate in small groups, seeing what objections they have, bringing the final contract back to Council, crafted as a Memorandum-of-Understanding for a Special-Election Resolution in the fall of 2017, perhaps the City Councils in Orange Beach and Gulf Shores can get this done, but not at the expense of a bad deal for our taxpayers.

*Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any agency or department of the City of Orange Beach, Alabama government.