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### Is Something Fishy at the State DOT?

American humorist Will Rogers once said, "I don't make jokes. I just watch the government and report the facts." Could he have been talking about Georgia?

No question that Department of Transportation Commissioner Gena Evans is a laugh a minute. Just for grins, can you top charges of sending via a government computer sexually explicit e-mails that would make Playboy editors blush? What about those knee-slapping news reports suggesting she improperly gave an edge in the business to men she was dating or had dated - both employees and contractors?

Evans was rammed into office through the muscle of Gov. Sonny Perdue and, as such, obviously owes him much allegiance. Even though she works for the State Transportation Board, whose members are appointed by legislators, she seems to sometimes forget that small matter.

For example, four years ago, Perdue helped create a law that allows private companies to partner with state government to provide solutions to transportation problems. One of the law's provisions is that the projects have to be "revenue neutral" so the state doesn't spend dollars out of pocket on the deal.

One of the areas targeted for relief was Georgia Highway 400, which runs north from Atlanta into Alpharetta and Cumming. Most mornings and afternoons, the road is a giant parking lot. In July, the Crossroads GA 400 Group presented a DOT board subcommittee with a proposal to install special lanes. In August, the board voted unanimously to encourage passage of the project by the board's evaluation committee, which included Evans. Just prior to the meeting, a letter from Perdue urged the group to kill the project, claiming it would cost the state more than \$600 million. Sources tell me Evans knew the project had been modified to be revenue neutral - but chose not to inform DOT members - her bosses - of the change. When the matter reached the evaluation committee, she voted against the project and against the wishes of her board members.

Now, here's the funny part: As we know, when the going gets tough, our governor gets going - usually out of the country. During the gas crisis last fall, it seems Perdue decided he didn't want to have to deal with such unpleasantness as long lines at the gas pump, \$4 gasoline and angry and frustrated citizens, so he took off for Spain. I reported then that Perdue might be on an industry-hunting trip, noting Spain's Toro business was up for grabs.

Instead of a lawnmower business, Perdue found something else. Confidential sources tell me Perdue, Evans and DOT board chairman Bill Kuhlke were meeting with Cintra, a company that specializes in transportation matters and, interestingly, is represented by Perdue's former attorney, Robert Highsmith.

I mention this because you might begin to hear more regarding the trip to Spain from state news organizations now busy collecting some curious e-mails under the Open Records Act.

Perdue says he's going to unveil a new "comprehensive" transportation proposal soon. Let's see if the new plan is designed to fit a Spanish company like a pair of tight sequined pants. And let's see if someone will tell us what happened to the Georgia 400 plan, and why Evans went against the wishes of the DOT board.