

January 5, 2009

## STATE TRANSPORTATION DEPARTMENT CONDUCTS FUNNY BUSINESS

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 emails 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? I'm not sure even the Great State of Illinois can match that for conflict of interest.

Evans was rammed into office through the muscle of Gov. Sonny Perdue and, as such, obviously owes much allegiance to her benefactor. Even though she works for the Board of Commissioners, who themselves are appointed by legislators in the state's congressional districts, she seems to sometimes forget that small matter.

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

One of the areas targeted for transportation relief was Georgia 400, one of the state's most congested highways, which runs north from Atlanta into Alpharetta and Cummings. Most mornings and afternoons, the road is a giant parking lot. In July 2008, the Crossroads GA 400 Group presented to a subcommittee of the DOT board a proposal to install special lanes to help alleviate the traffic problems on the road. In August, the full board voted unanimously to encourage passage of the project by the board's evaluation committee, which included, among others, Commissioner Evans.

Just prior to the meeting, a letter arrived from Gov. Perdue urging the group to kill the project, claiming it would cost the state over \$600 million. Sources tell me that Commissioner Evans knew the project had been modified to be revenue neutral, but chose not to inform the 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 is 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 the governor even might be on an industry-hunting trip, having heard that Spain's Toro business was up for grabs. Instead of a lawn-mower business, however, he found he was buying a bunch of angry bulls and some guys in tight sequined pants.

In fact, confidential sources tell me that the governor, Evans and Department of Transportation Chairman Bill Kuhlke, of Augusta, were meeting with a Spanish company, Cintra, 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 who are busy collecting some curious e-mails under the Open Records Act. I wanted you to hear it first from me.

Gov. Perdue says he is 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 Gena Evans went against the wishes of her bosses, the DOT board.

Of course, there is always the possibility that another crisis will arise and will necessitate a sudden visit by the governor to Peru to investigate the purchase of a llama farm. Frankly, llamas would probably smell better than what is coming out of the Department of Transportation these days. And that's not funny.