



Politicians, bureaucrats worship at ‘Ag Mahal’

By Jim Waters

CORBIN, Ky. — I knew that Kentucky League of Cities CEO Sylvia Lovely – like most bureaucrats – would get excited about the chance to celebrate spending the taxes of hardworking Kentuckians on wasteful and unnecessary public projects.

But I didn’t realize how ecstatic she and others would get at a time when Kentuckians – if they even have a job – must work harder than ever to satisfy the needs of wasteful bureaucrats and spending-addicted politicians.

The reality set in when I attended the open house of the David L. Williams Southeastern Agriculture and Expo Center here on Tuesday night.

Lovely took on the persona of a Pentecostal revival preacher as she shook her fists in the air and exhorted guests to stomp their feet while prodding: “C’mon, let’s make some noise out there!”

Her annoying euphoria escaped me as I dwelled on the price of salvation: \$23 million spent on a 132,000 square-foot hall big enough to hold nearly all 7,742 Corbin residents.

Lovely’s call to arms – make that feet – drew little response. Most grimaced at her goofiness. Most didn’t even show up for Tuesday night’s ceremony – probably an omen of things to come for “The Ag Mahal,” especially during these hard economic times.

That aside, local resident Betty Lyttle, who attended the ribbon cutting along with her husband, Ralph, remains a believer.

She envisions the “Taxpo Center” making Corbin a destination point for pilgrims throughout the region and locals staying closer to home for entertainment.

“They don’t have to drive to Lexington now, and this is so easy to get to – right off I-75,” said Lyttle, who’s excited about attending a “Bill Gaither and Friends” concert scheduled later this month. Tickets for the event range from \$23.50 to \$40.50.

Others find the idea of spending \$94.50 (plus concessions) for second-class seats for a family of four just to watch a gospel concert well beyond frivolous spending.

Patricia Nolin, a mother of two young daughters who works at the Huddle House and watches every penny in her budget, shook her head in dismay at the rosy talk of the politicians and bureaucrats trying to justify the unjustifiable.

“That’s blowing money we didn’t have to build something we didn’t need,” she said.

Yes, *a lot* of high-priced tickets must get sold to *a lot* of people from outside Corbin to make this arena worth the \$23-million investment by taxpayers.

Unfortunately, for Lovely and others, history “stomps” on the prospect of that happening.

State Auditor Crit Luallen’s audit of the East Kentucky Expo Center in Pikeville revealed it’s losing cash quicker than a bull flips a rider at a rodeo. Luallen’s office reported that the center ran an operating deficit of \$800,000 in 2006, its second year.

Other communities should take heed before pursuing such costly projects. Dreams about these types of facilities can turn into nightmares when you build it and they don’t come.

Meanwhile, at Tuesday’s ceremony, Gov. Steve Beshear announced an *additional* \$300,000 to “finish” the long road leading up to the “Political Payola Palace.” Yet, no promises for cash came for badly needed repaving of worn local roads. No politicians gushed with announcements about help for Corbin’s library, which struggles to survive, or for new sewer lines to meet local demand.

So, some key questions: If politicians are right about the money-making potential for this project, why wouldn’t a private developer do it? And if the local community really wanted the project, why didn’t the local community pay for it, instead of taxpayers throughout the state?

Private developers invest in projects that offer potential for return. Private developers took a pass on Corbin’s ag center.

That says a lot about its chances for success.

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