



## No 'roads' scholar needed to figure out the problem

By Jim Waters

Former Gov. Paul Patton called himself "Kentucky's Education Governor." Will Gov. Steve Beshear, Patton's political heir to Kentucky's gubernatorial throne, become its "Transportation Governor?"

Beshear said recently he wants to change the "culture of corruption" at the state's transportation cabinet to one of integrity.

It's good talk that we've heard before.

The man Beshear beat for the job, former Gov. Ernie Fletcher, also promised to clean up the cabinet, appointing retired Air Force Gen. Maxwell Clay Bailey as transportation secretary. By all appearances, Bailey had high ethical standards. But he left quickly.

Enter former Williamsburg Mayor Bill Nighbert, who's been indicted twice.

Nighbert was first indicted in September 2005 for his role in the merit-hiring scandal that made Fletcher a one-term governor. After a yearlong FBI investigation, he was indicted again Sept. 3, along with his contractor-buddy Leonard Lawson, for alleged bid-rigging on highway projects.

Presumed innocent, Nighbert comes surrounded by "smoke," which usually leads to fire when the feds get involved.

Corruption through the decades in the state's transportation cabinet spreads itself evenly between political parties and looks like a shopping list from a corruption.com Web site: transportation officials operating under the influence of a select group of contractors; multitudes of no-bid contracts; change orders that rarely decrease the cost of projects to taxpayers; and politicizing jobs at state highway garages.

What causes all this? The answer is found somewhere in Deep Throat's advice to the Watergate reporter in the movie "All the President's Men": "Follow the money," he advised. "Always follow the money."

I hope Joe Prather, current transportation secretary, and Beshear take on the spirit of former Highway Commissioner Henry T. Ward.

"Hammerin' Hank," as Ward became known, followed Earle Clements, who, while a respected former Kentucky governor and U.S. Senator, drowned in a sea of political conniving that occurs when cunning politicians and crooked contractors get anywhere close to one of the state's largest line-item budgets.

Out went Clements; in came Hammerin' Hank, who cleaned up the mess.

In her excellent exposé on Kentucky's historical transportation figures, the Georgetown News-Graphic's Sharon Roggenkamp wrote, "Ward demanded less politics and more engineering. Morale improved, bidding procedures cracked wide-open and laws were followed."

So, where's 1960 when you need it?

The question now becomes not whether Prather can succeed in cleaning up the department – he's got the reputation and determination to do it. But can the modern equivalent of Hammerin' Hank's "more engineering" get done?

Cleaning up current corruption alone will not make Beshear the "Transportation Governor."

That requires developing a 21st-century transportation policy which relies not on higher taxes but new, innovative ideas: toll roads, privatization and more-efficient use of taxpayers' money – all leading to less congestion on our highways and more economic development and prosperity in our future.

The road sign for progress requires Beshear to order an audit of all state transportation operations by Crit Luallen's State Auditor's Office. Luallen's work sends politicians to jail and uncovers scandals resulting in fewer taxpayers getting stiffed by crooks.

Luallen should be turned loose to audit the transportation cabinet, including associated boards, authorities and commissions – entities that host corruption like a dog hosts a tick's drinking habits. Her office's audits can help determine whether the network looking out for the state's highways also is properly addressing critical future transportation needs.

If Beshear and Prather want to create a Hammerin' Hank-like legacy, they must not get distracted like teenie-bopper drivers applying makeup and jabbering on cell-phones while operating tons of steel. They need to continue replacing "I-bribe-bigger-than-you" contractors and their bureaucratic cronies.

These deadbeats want roads to nowhere that go by their front doors before Kentucky gets badly needed bridges, repairs its aging highways and ensures future transportation priorities are on track.

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