

Shielding names of companies offered relocation incentives is nothing new

Flat-out not knowing them is something else

By Matt Reed

Watchdog columnist

Decent politicians can make surprisingly reckless calls.

No, I don't mean New York Gov. Eliot Spitzer phoning to meet call girls. I mean Brevard County commissioners deciding to pledge \$1.8 million in taxpayer money — your money — to a company they know almost nothing about in hopes of luring jobs.

The deal is code-named Project Jaguar. Commissioners don't know the name of the company (could it be IBM, Citgo, Dubai Ports World?) nor the land it's scouting (ranchland, wetlands, a spot at KSC?). They don't know because the county manager and the Economic Development Commission, who do know, signed secrecy agreements and won't tell them.

Shielding names of companies that seek moving incentives is nothing new. Flat-out not knowing them is something else. Trust us, commissioners are telling you, because we trust these other officials.

But that's too much trust to ask for.

I'm reminded of the team-building game we've all played at corporate or church retreats. The one where you stand with your back to the team, then fall and trust the group will catch you. Only this time it's Chuck Nelson, Mary Bolin and Helen Voltz doing the catching. And they're wearing blindfolds. Would you take the plunge?

You already have.

Digging for details

To be fair, Project Jaguar could yield a good return for taxpayers. The company would use the cash to get settled, then pay more than twice that much in taxes over 10 years. It could bring great jobs just as the shuttle program ends.

But these deals sometimes go badly. The company could ditch its plans, keep the money and let taxpayers wait years to collect a lien against the property.

Regardless, it's the unprecedented secrecy that has us concerned. So *Watchdog* reporter Jeff Schweers did some digging.

The deal appears to sidestep past procedures followed by the county and EDC, which usually offer tax abatements instead of cash up front, he found.

An examination of two prior agreements with companies that sought breaks revealed a paper trail of application forms with detailed company information, worksheets, and memos between county and EDC staffers. In that process, the commission called for public hearings before granting benefits on

taxpayers' behalf. Companies' identities, initially secret, went public when commissioners brought applications to a vote, said Trudy McCarthy, operations manager for the EDC.

Those opportunities have passed in this deal.

Seeking sunshine

The company wants to build a headquarters and manufacturing plant and employ 200 people with salaries starting at \$50,000, EDC chief Lynda Weatherman says. Sounds good. I think.

If the mystery company's executives are reading this, I'd like to tell them: Welcome. Brevard is a great place to do business, with cheap land, strong transportation and a superb work force. Florida ranks fifth for business-tax climate, behind Alaska, Wyoming and South Dakota.

But taxpayers here believe in open government. Voters passed the nation's best public-records laws, and their governor has declared today through Saturday "Sunshine Week." We don't permit black-budget spending like the Pentagon. We hate surprises.

And our households have been badly burned by politicians who put fear of upsetting business ahead of their constituents' trust. That's how state lawmakers rolled over for insurance companies year after year, leaving us all to pay the price.