



GUY: Do meter-contract critics have a plan?

John Guy October 16, 2010



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Opposing a parking-meter contract is a whole lot easier than proposing.

Over an extended period, individuals in Mayor Greg Ballard's administration methodically reviewed alternatives for modernizing city parking meters. They must have considered two obvious alternatives: The first alternative is public funding through sale of bonds, installation by a private contractor, and administration by city personnel. The second is contracting with a private-sector company to do it all, to finance the project, install and administer, and to pay upfront and annual fees to the city.

I have not spoken to anyone involved, but I believe that city officials felt they selected the best alternative, a contract with a private company. However, I doubt they believed the choice was clear, for rarely is a business decision manifestly the best. If clear certainty were a business criterion, nothing ever would happen.

Was it inevitable that opposition would appear? Perhaps, for disagreement is inherent in our democracy. In any case, opposition did appear in the form of blogs, essays, editorials and letters to the editor. To me, the opposition seemed unusually strong and categorical, because parking meters have relatively little impact on public finance, certainly nothing like a sports facility.

The opposition had several characteristics. First, no opponent was a person having decision-making power. Second, unlike the proponents who offered details of a contract, opponents made no positive proposal, except a generality that the city should sell revenue bonds, as if new parking meters would magically appear on receipt of bond proceeds. Third, opposition was general and categorical. Instead of

suggesting modifications in the proposed contract, they opposed it entirely.

Finally, opponents attached themselves to several undocumented and unproven hypotheses. These were that a similar contract in Chicago was a disaster, that the private company had complaints in other cities, and that the Indianapolis Cultural Trail downtown could not have been built had the proposed parking-meter contract been in effect. None of these hypotheses was proven or documented.

In any government context—whether health care, taxation or parking meters—the “loyal opposition” would serve better if it proposed instead of opposed; if, instead of advocating categorical defeat, it offered positive alternatives, in detail.

To some opponents, a 50-year contract seemed long, but none suggested what the length should be. (Holders of applicable revenue bonds would insist on a long contract, somewhere between 30 and 50 years.) They did not say who should be in charge, or how much he/she should be paid to set up a technically complex operation that involves connections to credit- and debit-card processors. They did not itemize the costs of purchasing and maintaining the new equipment. They offered no details. None.

One opponent wrote me that he did not have a proposal, but that the city’s suggested deal “clearly” is not good. One word in that sentence bothered me. It was the word “clearly.”•

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