

Stuck in Beeping Reverse

By Maurice Carter in The Covington News – August 5, 2012

From Tuesday night into Wednesday morning, commercial aircraft were diverted from airspace over the southeastern US when pilots reported hearing loud, persistent beeping in the area. Flights returned to normal once FAA investigators confirmed the beeps were coming from a backup alarm sounding as the State of Georgia shifted into reverse. However, they warn the noise may continue for at least a decade.

Obviously not a true story, it's also not an exaggeration.

I won't criticize those who voted against T-SPLOST in Tuesday's referendum. Amid confusion, mistrust, and misinformation, I'm not surprised the measure failed in our Northeast Georgia region and Metro Atlanta. I'm more concerned with how we came to this and how we climb out of the sizable hole we've dug for ourselves and the state.

What's most troubling is people know we have a serious transportation problem impacting the wellbeing of Georgians. In Sunday's newspaper, before the vote, the Atlanta Journal Constitution published polling of likely metro Atlanta voters. An overwhelming majority – 70% - agreed “the region's traffic congestion is deteriorating our quality of life.” Only 27% disagreed. And, yet, Tuesday's vote was nearly flipped – with 63% rejecting the one-percent sales tax. Why?

Was it general opposition to taxes? No, only 48% of those polled said “I do not support this or any other tax increases.”

Was it an issue with the specific projects to be funded if the referendum passed? Apparently not, since 46 % agreed and 47% disagreed with the statement that “when completed the projects will result in improved commutes and less congestion.”

The big difference was voter distrust of state and local governments to effectively execute. I heard that from opponents, and it shows clearly in the polling, where only 34% believed “State and local officials will properly manage and implement these transportation projects.” Sixty percent disagreed. And, among those planning to vote “No,” 91% did not trust officials to end the tax when promised nor to limit spending to the approved list.

We can debate the role of government until the end of time. But infrastructure – especially transportation – is a public need only government can fill. The notion of wealthy individuals and businesses independently building, maintaining, and operating roads, rails, airports, sidewalks, etc. is absurd. So, it can't be we think government shouldn't do it, but rather we think our current governments can't do it.

French historian and writer Alexis de Tocqueville said “people get the government they deserve.” That’s especially true for 69% of registered voters statewide who avoided the ballot box entirely, even with four weeks of early voting.

I wonder, though, if it’s not also true governments get the people they deserve.

We all know we have a problem. We agree it has serious implications. But, we still can’t rally a unified response. The underlying problem is trust.

We have enough documented cases of government corruption to be skeptical. But, the problem goes deeper. For decades, political contests have been decided increasingly by negative, attack-based campaigning. Candidates seldom run on their own credentials, experience, ideas, or solutions. It’s much more effective to spend costly airtime and print space attacking the merits of the opponent. Rather than build a case for one’s own candidacy, it’s easier to breed doubt, suspicion, and skepticism about the alternative. Campaign strategists have become masters at this.

At best, voting is a lesser of two evils decision where 70% of registered voters abdicate the right to choose. Winners are a lukewarm selection by 15-20% of the total electorate, taking office under a cloud of deep-seated doubt that doesn’t magically lift after Election Day. Distrust lingers and festers – even regarding the men and women you voted for!

Politicians gain office dividing the public into camps, playing to narrow self interests, and breeding deep distrust of the opposition. Unity is a casualty of war in the scorched-earth march to power. Small wonder those surviving to be elected leaders are incapable of rallying a deeply divided, distrustful public schooled to seek self interests over shared vision and common good.

Many who admire the efficiency of the private sector seem not to understand how it actually works. In business, winners confront problems directly with decisive action. Those who hesitate, holding out for perfect solutions, are swept under in the wake of the swift and sure. The successful forge ahead to create distance from the pack with less than perfect plans executed with inspired unity.

For lack of clarity, unity, and action, we stall. Not moving forward, we fall back.

Beep... Beep... Beep...