

Don J. Dodd, Publisher

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'Out with the old, in with the new' not always a solidly-built idea

Once again Parsons-3D/I, the company hired by the Beaumont Independent School District to develop a plan to rebuild the district's schools, has come back with a study that is lacking substantial facts and documentation needed to back up its analysis.

This was one of the reasons why a committee of volunteers tasked with making recommendations to citizens about a multi-million dollar bond proposal could not come to an agreement in March. The plan was to have the bond proposal on the May ballot for voters to decide on, but numerous errors in 3D/I's work made that impossible.

Now, as it was explained in this week's lead story, 3D/I has hired an engineering firm to determine whether it would be cheaper to demolish the former South Park High School or renovate it. The school, which has been around for nearly 100 years, is structurally sound, but 3D/I and the CSF Engineers have recommended it for demolition.

One would have to ask, how that can that be possible? But, given BISD's track record is it really surprising?

Why not tear down a perfectly sound building that has withstood a dozen tropical storms and half as many hurricanes? Why not raze a structure that served as the original site of what is now known as Lamar University? Why, indeed?

To get the answer to those questions one would have to ask the 3D/I and BISD's administration.

Per 3D/I's own analysis, this old building was constructed of quality materials. Can BISD say the same thing about its other campuses?

BISD built Martin Luther King Middle School just a decade ago, but it already needs more than \$4.6 million in renovations. The district spent \$34 million to renovate and restore the former Hebert High School and transformed it into Ozen High School. Now, the district is proposing to spend another \$14 million on that school.

Does anyone find it just a little bit odd that BISD can choose to spend so much money on the former Hebert High, yet it wants to demolish its former cross-town rival, South Park?

BISD claims to have the best interests of the community at heart, but if it hopes to have any chance of getting a bond proposal past voters then it is going to have to begin providing accurate information to its constituency. Otherwise, the buildings in this district will rot and fall down before voters approve giving one penny to this administration.

THIS ISSUE...

Froma Harrop

29 A

David Broder

30 A

Joe Conason

30 A

Doonesbury

31 A

Mad 'Plan Colombia' squanders millions, accomplishes nothing

How to make enemies, squander billions and accomplish nothing: That's a U.S. program called Plan Colombia. Its central idea is to slow the flow of cocaine into the nostrils of American night-clubbers by poisoning crops in the Andes.

Five billion wasted dollars later, cocaine surges cheaper and purer into our cities and suburbs. Since 2000, Plan Colombia has sprayed an area the size of Delaware and Rhode Island. Meanwhile, Colombia's coca acreage rose 9 percent last year.

Indigenous peoples have been growing coca in the Andes for the last 2,000 years, give or take a few centuries. These farmers are not keen on having their culture destroyed as they're dragged into our War-on-Drugs lunacy. You can imagine.

So why do we do it? Here's a hint: Almost half of the \$630 million in military aid to Colombia last year was scooped up by U.S. defense contractors. There's money in the madness.

Democrats have started on the road to sanity, though not quite getting there. Now the majority in Congress, they pushed through a House spending bill that lops the share of Colombian aid money going to military (mostly drug-eradication) programs to 65 percent of the total, down from 80 percent. Spending less on a dumb program makes it less dumb, one supposes.

But Democrats have also held up the Colombia Free Trade Agreement, which is none too smart if they want Colombians to sell us stuff other than cocaine. More on that later.

As originally conceived by Bill Clinton and then-Colombian president Andres Pastrana in 1999, Plan Colombia was more into building schools and promoting human rights. Wiping out coca fields played a smaller role. The Republican Congress wanted it to be more about defense spending and prevailed — at which point the European Union decided not to participate.

President Bush has never been a great fan of non-military solutions, and his recent budget request sought to continue Plan Colombia's hard-power bias. Bush sees no weirdness in having U.S. planes dump chemicals on campesinos to stop a drug that he won't deny having taken.

Colombia is a violent place. Marxist guerillas, right-wing paramilitaries and drug gangs

have all committed unspeakable atrocities there. Some supporters of Colombia's President Alvaro Uribe had been linked to right-wing militias accused of killing union organizers.

But nothing in Colombia is simple. Uribe insists he has no direct ties to the paramilitaries, and the government has arrested politicians connected to them. Murders of union organizers are down more than 60 percent from the level in 2001.

So when Democrats refused to extend free trade to Colombia, their agenda wasn't entirely human rights. It was also a pretext to take a stand against another free-trade deal. "They had just let Panama and Peru slip through," says Julia Sweig, a Latin America expert at the Council on Foreign Relations. "Their price was going to be Colombia."

Furthermore, Uribe did a bad selling job during his recent visit to Washington. Accustomed to working with Republicans, he neglected to cultivate the labor and civil-rights groups that Democrats work with.

Sweig believes that House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and other Democratic leaders understand that an agreement with Colombia is needed. It will eventually happen.

Americans should know that their drug users account for much of the estimated \$4 billion in cocaine that Colombia exports a year — with most of that money going to vicious guerrillas and paramilitaries. A free-trade agreement would encourage more peaceful kinds of commerce.

In the meantime, let's acknowledge reality and decriminalize drugs. That would close down international drug trafficking overnight. Really, what Andean peasants cultivate on the sides of their mountains should be no concern of ours.

Froma Harrop maintains especially strong interests in health care, the environment and the lives of women. Her politics often reflect the frustrations of the swing voter.



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