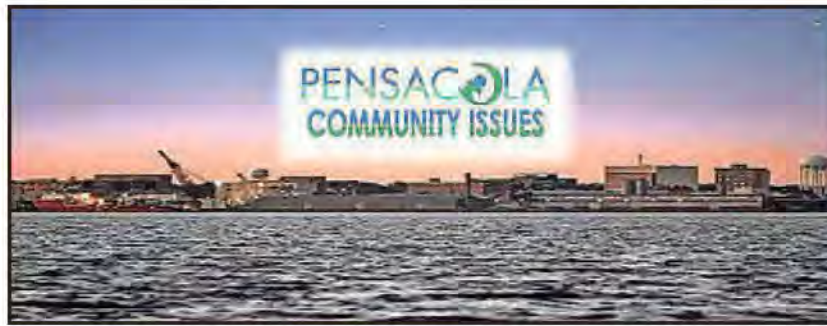


Triumph For Them Not For Us

Some politically powerful people in North Florida secured the services of then Senator Don Gaetz to help gain control of 1.5 billion dollars of funds that BP was expected to pay for the carnage to the Gulf Coast caused by the BP oil spill. The concern of these behind the scenes power brokers was that they did not want our elected officials to have any control over these funds. So Senator Gaetz introduced legislation (which became law F S 288.80) to establish the corporation that would have all BP money funneled through it. When he did it the corporation, Triumph Gulf Coast ended up with five political friends of Mr. Gaetz named to the board of directors. Three are from his home base of Destin, Florida. One lives in Santa Rosa County and one resides in Bay County. None are from Pensacola or even Escambia County. These five will control all appropriations of this 1.5 billion dollars. They will not be directly accountable to the taxpayers or the voters. Did any other citizen other than those who designed this ever see an application for a position on this board of directors? The answer is no. This was done long before most of us had any idea about the feverish back room efforts that were undertaken to get control of the settlement money that would come later. It is entirely possible that these named board members were not involved in the design of this plan. If so they should refuse to participate in it and resign. There is time to do it, it doesn't become operative until money is deposited.

The act ambiguously refers to the "Gulf Coast region" allowing the will of these five directors to allocate the money where they wish. Although Triumph Gulf Coast Inc. is ostensibly within the Department of Economic Opportunity the act makes it clear that no state agency can have any control over anything Triumph Gulf Coast does. Although the act provides for the Board of Directors appointment process to appear fairer than it is, Don Gaetz controlled this from the inception. You don't end up with a majority of the Board from Destin by accident. So did the drafters of this law intentionally allow a legal way for members of this board to achieve a benefit for their respective companies and clients? Yes. The act requires that for a conflict of interest to exist for any board member the board member must personally benefit or have a DIRECT interest in any appropriation of the Board. Clever political wording. If the intent was to prohibit self-dealing the statute should have prohibited



any DIRECT OR INDIRECT benefit to a board member or any group, business or organization in which the board member had any financial benefit or interest. This statute intentionally allows conflict of interest based decisions of appropriation of 1.5 billion outside legislative oversight by five people who are not accountable to the taxpayers. The statute uses countless ambiguous words all suggesting some funding for some grand regional project in the Gulf Coast "corridor" and Gulf Coast "region". Some of the uses of the money provided by statute include such things as "provide or encourage seed stage investments in start-up companies" and "expand high growth industries or establish new high growth industries". The statute is loaded with meaningless high sounding goals that will simply allow money to go where this board wants to send it. Horse trading among politicians is common but where you allow private citizens control over public money and the ability to steer money to "projects" it is predictable they will trade favors to fund what each wants to fund.

The Speaker of the Florida House of Representative, Mr. Richard Corcoran, has expressed concern about accountability of the disbursement of this very substantial amount of money. The Don Gaetz law F.S.

288.80 did not happen on Speaker Corcoran's watch. He is right to demand accountability and transparency. This money should be awarded to the counties impacted and the municipalities within those counties. Doing it on the basis of population with direct payments made to the counties and cities would assure that the money will be spent not based on what a committee of people outside our community want but based on what our elected officials decide is best. But more importantly elected officials are accountable to the voters. The fact that this transformative award of money has been sidetracked through the Gaetz created Triumph Corporation is hardly a triumph for the taxpayers. We will never know the names of the people who got Don Gaetz to do it. We do know this was all in process well before the Pam Bondi 1.5 billion dollar settlement was even reached.

Had this board been established to be fairly inclusive and without potential conflicts of interest it would have looked entirely different than it does now. If Mr. Gaetz wanted to assure transparency he could have selected someone like Andy Marlette of the PNJ for the board. If he wanted people who have a history of doing great things for the community he could have recommended the president of the league of women voters or the president of Impact 100 to his board. He could have included in the statute the need for a professional environmentalist. If he truly wanted to, he could have insisted on inclusion of members from the minority community. He also could have picked someone who lives in Escambia county. There are countless other fine people who would have volunteered to help oversee the proper and fair use of this money if that is what they intended to accomplish with this Triumph plan. That however was never the goal. The goal was to keep elected officials from controlling the spending of the money and to pick who the power brokers wanted to control it. It was brazen to say the least. Taking money from the communities impacted and giving it to political appointees was an in your face abuse of power. The act should be repealed.

Mayor Hayward of Pensacola has called for block grants to the cities and counties and he is right to do so. Having a small fishing village like Destin controlling a majority of this board is a short tail wagging a big dog. Pensacola is the largest City and Escambia is the largest county of the eight counties. Our communities should receive our fair share of this 1.5 Billion dollars settlement and we need our city and county elected officials to control the money. Our legislative delegation should be demanding dismantling of the Triumph Corporation before they get their hands on the money. But, it looks like they are all in favor of preventing our city and county elected officials from controlling the money. They should understand that going along with this will in the end prove this Destin/Gaetz controlled group will have little interest in Escambia County or the City of Pensacola. It will be one boondoggle give away after another. Creating an ostensibly legal way to hand out millions to political patrons was the goal of the legislation. We should stand united that this is an outrage.

Bob Kerrigan