

**Jacksonville Mayor Peyton Calls Bombing of Islamic Center Mosque “Unacceptable”**

— From the “really going out on a limb” file. Headline from a posting on FirstCoastNews.com after last week’s apparent hate crime at the Islamic Center of Northeast Florida, where a primitive pipe bomb was detonated.

**Pack O’Poop**

Proof of a trend we’ve noticed lately: People inexplicably picking up dog poop in bags, then



dropping the bags back on the ground. Just like the feel of warm plastic, folks? Because not only are you not part of the solution, you’re grossing us out.

**Or Even a Pontiac**

**“Downtown does not have a unique vibe.”**

— From a report issued in March 2010 by the Downtown Improvement District non-profit Downtown Vision, Inc. Titled “Turning the Corner: Rethinking and Remaking Downtown,” the report examines the problems holding back the rebirth of downtown Jacksonville, and criticizes past revitalization attempts, including the razing of the historic black-dominated and ethnically mixed neighborhood of LaVilla.

**Comic Genius**

**“Bring your own subtext.”**

— Advice of **Joss Whedon**, filmmaker, producer, sage and writer responsible for both “Buffy the Vampire



Slayer” and the online musical “Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog.” Whedon is the topic of discussion at a Flagler College conference held in St. Augustine June 3-6 titled, “The International Slayage Conference on the Whedonverses 4.” For more information, go to [slayageonline.com](http://slayageonline.com)

**Gluten-free Maximus**

Chocolate-chip cookies, chocolate cupcakes, carrot cake, oatmeal cream pie

— Some of the sweet treats offered by the new all-gluten-free bakery at Native Sun Natural Foods Market on Baymeadows Road.



Walter Coker

**Is Jacksonville making a mistake by letting former SMG General Manager Bob Downey just walk away?**

**B**ob Downey didn’t expect to have fun at the 2005 Super Bowl. As general manager of SMG, the company that runs Jacksonville’s Municipal Stadium and several other city venues, he knew he was in for a long day of work — and a fair amount of stress.

But he did not anticipate the city’s inaugural Super Bowl being ruined, which very nearly happened. As Downey recalls it, sometime in the early afternoon, as fans began arriving for the game, the stadium’s toilets began flushing continuously. At first a mere annoyance, noticed only because of diminished water pressure, the glitch eventually began to overwhelm the stadium’s sewage outflow. Water — and worse — backed up into the facility’s basement. Downey remembers 300-pound football players tiptoeing through the sloshy hallways, water rising in the corridors where former presidents Bill Clinton and George Bush waited with their Secret Service agents, and a manhole cover — the one impossibly positioned under halftime act Paul McCartney’s sound equipment truck — rising up with the water pressure.

Downey recalls the incident with surprising equanimity. The only nod he makes to the panic he felt is acknowledging he blew off Mayor John Peyton, who was seeking an introduction to the Tuskegee Airmen in attendance. “I told him, ‘I’ve got other things going on here,’” he recalls with a chuckle.

The fact that Super Bowl XXXIX didn’t devolve into Toilet Bowl XXXIX is due in large part to Downey’s swift thinking. Staff started sandbagging flooded corridors. The fire department was summoned, and began pumping water out onto the stadium’s sidewalks. Finally — the hardest decision to make — Downey ordered the water to the toilets cut off.

It wasn’t a pleasant afternoon. But the experience that Downey gained that day — a crucible of national attention, NFL expectations and tender city egos — could not be replicated. If the job of a facilities manager is to anticipate disaster and supervise the mundane, the sound of a thousand toilets flushing is the Zen garden of management know-how.

But Bob Downey is leaving town, taking with him his 15 years’ worth of experience running the city’s entertainment and sports facilities, and another 20 years’ experience running RFK Stadium in Washington, D.C. That alone might not be such a huge deal — managers aren’t forever — but Downey’s resignation comes amid serious allegations about his former employer, SMG, whom Downey says tried in a variety of ways to rip off city taxpayers. It also comes as the city prepares to either renew or rebid SMG’s contract to manage the city’s facilities — something that hasn’t happened since at least

2002 (and some might even say 1992, when the city entered into its first contract with SMG).

At stake are the exclusive rights to operate Jacksonville’s entertainment, meeting and sporting venues — the Stadium, the Baseball Grounds, the Arena, the Prime Osborn Center and the Times-Union Center for the Performing Arts — and more than \$25 million in taxpayer dollars. But that price tag is far from fixed. Some two decades after the city’s romance with privatization began, there is a wealth of data that suggests it is a Faustian bargain at best. Whether it’s prison health care or the War on Terror, evidence abounds that the business-does-things-cheaper line is a ruse. Even in Jacksonville, there is mounting evidence that the city could manage its own affairs more cheaply. An April 15 analysis by the City Council Auditor’s Office found that the city could operate the Trail Ridge Landfill for less than any private company, possibly saving \$405 million in 26 years. And just last week, auditors suggested JaxPort begin doing its own dredging in house, rather than paying private contractors millions each year to do it for them.

The city’s original 1992 contract with SMG was one of Jacksonville’s most significant privatization efforts, and certainly its highest profile. There’s reason to wonder if there isn’t a better model, however, and exploring that possibility would take more than just an auditor’s review. Although the Council Auditor

is currently examining SMG's books — and could, in fact, recommend the city reclaim some of those operations — revising the contract would require the help of someone with experience. As someone who knows the job, the players and the various ways in which management can heed a contract (or not), Downey could conceivably help protect taxpayers and save millions.

Downey himself sees these possibilities. That's why he offered to help city officials as they prepare for bidding the contract, vetting candidates or even helping oversee its implementation.

So what about Bob? Well, he's in Lexington, Ky., helping the Kentucky Horse Park organize

the World Equestrian Championship Games 2010. And he has no plans to return to work in Jacksonville.

"I offered," he says with a shrug. "I guess they didn't see the value."

The troubles between Downey and his bosses at SMG weren't public knowledge until mid-April, when a front-page story about his resignation appeared in the Times-Union. But behind the scenes, tensions had been building for months.

According to Downey, he first angered his bosses at SMG when he pressured them to

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## Walter Coker's Through the Lens



Cabbage bowling, Hastings Potato and Cabbage Festival, May 8

## Bouquets & Brickbats

**Bouquets to Shorty Robbins, chief of recreation and community programs for the city of Jacksonville**, for importing a Los Angeles idea to keep teens out of trouble over the summer. From June 18 to Aug. 7, five Jacksonville community centers will be open and fully operational from 7 p.m. until midnight. The city's Recreation Department will organize basketball games, educational activities, family competitions, movies in the park and other activities, and the swimming pools at four of the sites will remain open.

**Bouquets to Dale Clifford, chair of the University of North Florida's Department of History**, for sending university interns into the community to help catalog and preserve local history. The Jacksonville Historic Preservation Commission awarded the school's History Department a 2010 Historic Preservation Award for the work of two interns last year who helped catalog family collections at the Jacksonville Historical Society and scanned documents from the collections as a first step toward online access to the material.

**Bouquets to U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson (D-Florida)** for always staying on the right side of the offshore drilling debate. As the Gulf waters flood with oil, scores of lawmakers are rethinking their recent embrace of "Drill, Baby, Drill." It's worth remembering those legislators who've always been cognizant of the risks to Florida's coastline — and the courage to stand up to Big Oil.



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abide by their contractual promise to seek local bids for insurance. Downey himself pushed for the provision, since he'd heard cheaper rates were available outside of the SMG-negotiated insurance pool. That proved true; Downey says it saved the city some \$300,000.

But the change represented a diminishment of SMG's revenues, Downey says, and irked his bosses in Philadelphia.

A larger rift arose after SMG and Downey both persuaded the city to drop its former food service provider, Levy Foods, and switch to an SMG-owned subsidiary called Savor. The city agreed in 2008 to the no-bid contract for concessions and catering, with the promise of some \$342,000 in savings. But Downey says he quickly discovered that Savor was "a shell game" — not a fully functioning food service company, but a fully dependent arm of SMG. And the claim of savings, Downey says, was based on a business plan that relied on the labor and support of SMG staffers.

Barton for three weeks after that. Something similar happened when he met with Adam Hollingsworth, Mayor Peyton's chief of staff, on Feb 9. Downey says he suggested ways in which he might be able to help the city watchdog its privatized facilities, simply by becoming a direct employee of the city.

"They already paid my salary [indirectly]," notes Downey. "And I think I'd demonstrated my desire to help save the city money." In addition to forcing Savor to pay its share of labor costs, and helping reduce insurance expenses, Downey notes that he'd pressured the city to force Veterans Memorial Arena contractor Turner Construction to finish the uncompleted upper walls of the facility, instead of paying another contractor some \$1 million for the work.

But Hollingsworth expressed little interest in turning Downey into a city employee. Downey says he offered only to "make sure they treat you fairly."

Downey responded to this offer in writing on Feb. 10, saying he thought fair treatment

## **SMG told the Times-Union that the economy forced the company to freeze salaries, but Downey disputes that, noting that virtually every other employee under him got their recommended raises.**

"If Savor's intent was they were going to get free labor from me and everyone else so they could get a profit, well, that's not fair," says Downey. "And that's not how we represented it to the city."

In fact, the no-bid contract and the proposed savings were based on the presumption that Savor was an independent affiliate. Downey suggests it was deliberate deception.

"SMG was trying to impose on me to do things that were unfavorable and unethical, I believed," he says.

The tension with SMG upper management began to manifest in tangible ways. Downey notes that SMG President Wes Westley refused late last year to authorize his 2.5 percent raise, commensurate with all other employees, and refused to explain why. (SMG told the Times-Union that the economy forced the company to freeze salaries, but Downey disputes that, noting that virtually every other employee under him got their recommended raises. And, in fact, a copy of the SMG Compensation Adjustment Form for fiscal year ending 9/30/2010, shows Downey's raise scratched out in pen, with all other raises intact.) The company also told him to cancel a planned conference trip to Orlando, which Downey says they'd pre-approved.

By February, the tensions between Downey and SMG were apparent to observers. Ron Barton, head of the Jacksonville Economic Development Commission, which administers the SMG contract for the city, sent Downey a Feb. 5 e-mail. In it, he requested concert tickets for his niece. But he added this: "I am working on your behalf but you need to stop poking your bosses in the chest. PLEASE."

Downey responded back, "I don't know how I've poked anyone in the eye. That's a Paul Harden term."

In fact, Downey had gotten a visit from SMG attorney Paul Harden on Jan. 11. "He told me, 'Wes is going to fire you,'" Downey recalls, though Harden offered to work out a deal in which Downey could stay on until June, to help SMG get an extension of its contract.

Downey, in turn, sought out his allies — including Ron Barton, with whom he met on Jan. 12. According to Downey, Barton was surprised to hear Downey was going to be fired, and promised to call Paul to discuss it. But Downey says he didn't hear back from

would include the few months of the raise he'd been denied, payout of his remaining vacation time and a small severance — one month for each of the 15 years he'd worked for SMG. Downey didn't hear back from Hollingsworth until April 15, after the article appeared in the Times-Union. In his e-mail, Hollingsworth asserted the city was "committed" to Downey "be[ing] treated fairly," but added, "employment issues between you and SMG are best addressed directly between you two."

For its part, SMG denies it threatened to fire Downey, and denies his claims that it in any way mishandled city tax dollars. In an April statement, company spokesman Michael Munz said, "At no time did SMG intend to fire Mr. Downey ... The allegations being made in the media by Mr. Downey are without merit and false at best. He is using calculated political and public relations tactics to pressure the company into a severance package."

**D**owney wasn't fired. He left, he says, because he knew SMG wanted him out, and his only apparent support system — the city — failed to back him. From the city's perspective, Downey's departure is the result of a private employment dispute. Downey disagrees. Not only did his troubles with SMG arise directly from his efforts to save the city money, he says, but, "I had protected the city. I saved the city hundreds of thousands of dollars."

Downey's claims about SMG have in part driven the ongoing audit of the company's finances, which may wrap up this month. Downey has worked closely with auditors, and says they've promised he will have a chance to review their findings before they're made public. He expects their review will vindicate him, and prove his value to the city.

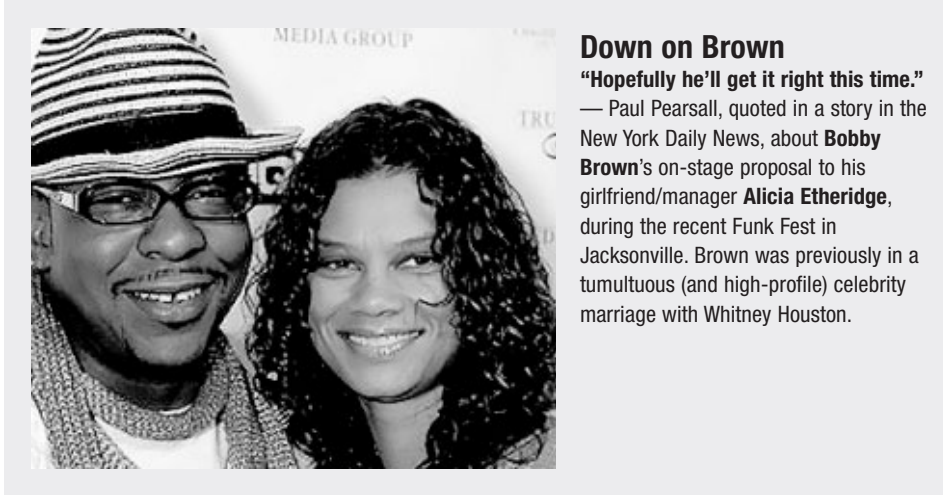
But it may be too late. Downey had hoped to help the city renegotiate its contract with SMG — this rare opportunity for the city to correct contractual misunderstandings, demand greater accountability, and tighten up city oversight. But he's as good as gone.

"I offered to help," he says. "But I the city was weak and they were not willing to back me up. And so I quit." □

Anne Schindler  
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**“I’d rather play for a hundred people who are totally passionate about what we are doing instead of 10,000 into it because we have a Hot Topic T-shirt.”**

— Eric Powell of 16Volt, p. 25



**Down on Brown**

**“Hopefully he’ll get it right this time.”**  
 — Paul Pearsall, quoted in a story in the New York Daily News, about Bobby Brown’s on-stage proposal to his girlfriend/manager Alicia Etheridge, during the recent Funk Fest in Jacksonville. Brown was previously in a tumultuous (and high-profile) celebrity marriage with Whitney Houston.

**Oil Futures**

**“Under my leadership, this newspaper has grown faster than any other time in its existence. The reason is because we are doing a lot of things right. That includes making sure we don’t spend our time writing about things that don’t make a difference to our community.”**

— St. Augustine Record Editor Peter Ellis, responding to e-mails from St. Augustine activist Ed Slavin who needled the newspaper for failing to cover a resolution by St. Augustine Beach Commissioners opposing offshore drilling two months after running a front-page story on the St. Augustine City Commission’s denial of a similar measure. (The following week, the paper did write a piece on the Beach resolution.)

**Caffeinated Response**

Reacting to the Tea Party anti-government conservatism, liberals have organized Coffee Party

USA. The newly formed Jacksonville chapter explains on its Facebook page that Coffee Partiers believe the federal government is not an enemy of the people, but an expression of its will, and call for participation in the democratic process. For more information, go to [coffeepartyusa.com](http://coffeepartyusa.com)

**Give It Away, Now**

**“Whenever government gets involved in something this massive, they will mess it up every time.”**

— Jacksonville City Councilmember Daniel Davis, explaining to Westside residents last week why he supports a deal that will allow Ross Perot’s Hillwood company to manage the massive redevelopment of city-owned real estate at Cecil Field. Opponents say the city is selling the land to Hillwood too cheap, and are demanding a professional appraisal of the property’s value.

