

Editor's Note

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It's What's for Dinner

Nothing says victory like a high-end liquor and thick steaks, at least in the privileged all-white world of Jacksonville politics. And that's just what was on the menu when Jaguars lobbyist Paul Harden was joined by some of his most compliant toadies on the council at Ruth's Chris Steakhouse last Tuesday.

The dinner, attended by a handful of Jags reps, along with Councilmembers Stephen Joost and Richard Clark, was arranged to celebrate the council's vote that night, which allows the Jags to keep the city's portion of the stadium naming rights revenue. The deal, worth \$4 million a year to the team, deserves to be celebrated — not by taxpayers, perhaps, but certainly by the team. Councilmember

that he'd been tired and hungry after a long day of work (although that contradicts the e-mail his aide sent to Council President Jack Webb, which said Clark was leaving "due to family reasons.") But even if his second answer was truthful, it's worth noting that Councilmember Warren Jones, who is recovering from surgery, attended the meeting with *staples in his freaking head*. That's right: seven of them.

Pressed by the T-U about the wisdom of celebrating with the folks to whom he'd just given a \$16 million windfall, Clark grew peevisish. "I'm not going to constantly look over my shoulder and second-guess everything I do." Honestly, *Richard*, if deciding not to party with the lobbyists you just stroked in council chambers requires a "second guess" to know it's wrong, your judgment hasn't improved much since you spent \$3,000 in public money to attend last year's Paris Air Show.

Clark isn't alone in his lack of common sense, of course, or even his passion for expensive cuts of red meat. Joost was there, too. And the whole of the council — with the exception of the three who voted against the deal (Ronnie Fussell, John Crescimbeni and Clay Yarborough) — are suckers for the Jaguars and their gospel of civic prosperity.



While nobody has produced a tape of the dinner conversation, anyone who thinks the Jags deal didn't come up at the meal shouldn't be operating heavy machinery.

Art Shad expressed as much in a story in the Times-Union last week. Asked about the dinner, he said, "It's just human nature to go out and break bread and celebrate a victory."

It's telling that Shad, a longtime Harden ally, would describe the vote as a "victory," since it was more like a handout, but it's probably an apt description of the mood at the restaurant. You can almost hear the high fives a week later. But Shad's attitude mirrors that of many officials, who fail to see anything amiss in the steakhouse rendezvous.

So what's wrong with it? Well, for one, both councilmembers skipped out mid-meeting, missing 10 votes and the public comment period. Observe that attending council meetings is their job (a part-time gig for which they are paid \$45K a year). Neither man has any proof that he paid for his own meal (conveniently, both were carrying enough cash to pay for the expensive meal, though they insist they hadn't anticipated the "impromptu" celebration). Plus councilmembers are prohibited from discussing city business without providing access to and public notice of their meeting. And while nobody has produced a tape of the dinner conversation, anyone who thinks the Jags deal didn't come up at the meal shouldn't be operating heavy machinery.

Richard Clark excused his hasty exit from the meeting, telling T-U reporter Tia Mitchell

Anyone even passingly familiar with the city's finances knows that simply having an NFL team does not bring good fortune. But the city is so brainwashed into believing the link exists that it parrots the line without question. "What's good for the Jaguars is good for the city," Council President Jack Webb intoned on WJCT 89.9 FM recently. "And what's good for the city is good for the Jaguars."

No matter that this simply isn't true. What would be good for the Jaguars would be to lock down a lucrative new deal in a city that can afford to give it a new stadium, sellout crowds and plenty of lap dances. What would be good for the city would be to reclaim a shred of identity not dependent on either a pro sports franchise or the idiotic boosterism that attaches to such.

In truth, this team that was supposed to infuse a second-tier city with big-league confidence has actually drained Jacksonville's sense of self-worth. In trying to persuade his colleagues to approve the naming rights deal, Councilmember Reggie Brown explained, "Without this team, let's face this, folks: People don't really have a reason to stop here."

That kind of attitude smells like defeat. Or maybe it's steak. Go, team. □

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