

Numbers Game

THE JACKSONVILLE TRANSPORTATION AUTHORITY HAS SPENT THE past five years painting a numerical portrait of need: There are more than 6,000 bus stops in JTA's service area, the story goes, but only 350 covered shelters — a measly 6 percent. As a result, Jacksonville needs to partner with billboard companies to finance the construction of new shelters.

JTA officials have presented these numbers to anyone who would listen: the city's Planning Commission, the City Council, the Times-Union editorial board, the Jacksonville Economic Development Commission, JTA's own board of directors. And last week, the council voted 10-6 to gut the city's sign ordinance to allow hundreds of new, ad-financed bus shelters.

Funny thing about JTA's figures, though: They're complete bunk. As it turns out, there aren't 6,000 bus stops in Jacksonville — not even close. The actual figure is more like 3,660, roughly half what the agency claims. How to explain the difference? Well, as JTA officials acknowledged this week to Folio Weekly, they have a rather creative way of counting things. In JTA's Bizarro World, a "bus stop" isn't an actual physical place where people stand to wait for a bus. It's a vague arithmetic concept, one that multiplies a location by how many bus routes visit there each day. Five busses stop at the corner of Park and Herschel each day? That's FIVE bus stops, according to JTA.

Quite a concept, when you think about it. Using this calculus, Jacksonville International Airport has not 20 gates, but 99. And the Mathews Bridge isn't a single span, but 66,500 individual river crossings.

For those of us who occupy this side of the looking glass, however, JTA's accounting method is patently absurd. It certainly isn't the industry standard; Miami, Atlanta and Orlando count bus stops by the number of "signs in the ground." And Virginia Miller, spokesperson for the D.C.-based American Public Transportation Association, says, "I've been here six years, and I've never heard about that [counting method]."

Nonetheless, the 6,000 figure has acquired the veneer of truth. The Times-Union has used it no fewer than 14 times since 2005, the same year JTA began a renewed push to build shelters. And that timeline may be no coincidence. A sizable part of JTA's case for partnering with billboard companies to build shelters is that the city's ratio of shelters-to-stops compares unfavorably to that of other cities. The more "bus stops" the JTA counts, the lower the city's percentage of shelter stops, and the stronger its argument.

Spokesman Mike Miller vehemently denies there was any ill intent in the misleading numbers. He concedes that the actual number of physical bus stops differs from JTA's rallying cry of 6,000 (he says the number is closer to 4,300), but he wouldn't explain why they used the

inflated number, other than to say, "This is the number we use and have used."

Miller also wouldn't speculate on whether these revelations might prompt some councilmembers to rethink their support of the measure. Nor would he speculate whether JTA's own board would be surprised to learn how agency staff calculate bus stop data.

But Councilmember Warren Jones, who has pushed the shelter bill almost since its inception, told Folio Weekly he was "disappointed" to learn about the discrepancy and added, "The [JTA] board needs to address it." JTA Board Vice Chair Michael Cavendish, who insisted that the changing numbers don't in any way diminish his support for additional shelters, said he'd be "surprised" if the issue didn't come up at the next JTA board meeting.

Of course, the primary issue isn't bus stops — it's credibility. If JTA can't even take a proper inventory of its own infrastructure, what other numbers are off?

As it happens, some rather important ones. In recent years, the JTA has asserted that the most significant cost of shelters isn't building them, but maintaining them. They've variously claimed that the cost of maintenance is \$3,500 a year (T-U 7/25/07), \$950 a year (T-U 8/10/07) and \$1,200 a year (JEA Director Mike Blaylock, speaking at the September Planning Commission meeting).

But an analysis of JTA invoices from October 2007 to October 2008 shows that the cost of cleaning and maintaining shelters (including repairs, graffiti removal and pressure-washing) totaled \$94,985. Divided by 350 shelters, it comes out to a mere \$271 a year.

JTA's inflated estimates appear to be the result of rolling in the costs of maintaining *any* bus stop (mowing grass, emptying trash cans) — not just those with shelters. By piling those costs into the shelter estimate, the maintenance figures seem prohibitively expensive, bolstering the case for bringing in outside advertising dollars.

Whether that was the goal or just more fuzzy math from JTA isn't clear. What *is* clear is that the City Council voted to approve a bill based on unreliable and misleading data.

Fortunately, there's one number that can remedy the problem: 10. That's the number of days that Mayor John Peyton has from last Tuesday's vote to veto the measure. It's a necessary corrective to JTA's accounting methods, and would go a long way toward assuring Jacksonville residents that the city's leadership can still be counted on. □

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