

Pitman and Jones are Hurting MetraPark and Its Future

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[Comments added]

[This article was almost certainly ghost written by John Ostlund because of the detail in it and Dutcher was not at the meeting.]
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GUEST OPINION: Pitman and Jones are hurting MetraPark and its future

Pitman and Jones Are Hurting Metra holds a special place in our hearts. You would have a hard time finding anyone who doesn't have a fond memory from the fair, a concert, rodeo, or sporting event. I had the privilege of working at MetraPark for 40 years. I worked almost every job, eventually serving as the general manager for 16 years. I've seen just about everything.

If I showed the folks anything, it was how to take care of people. And by all accounts we did that. I am the type to make sure you are treated well, and I would go out of my way for you. It's how we are in Montana, and a job like general manager of MetraPark calls for it.

With all the controversy surrounding the future of Metra's management, I think I can offer some insight as to how we got to where we are today.

Metra has been under assault by two members of our Yellowstone County Commission. There is no other way to put it. We hear them say that they are helping in areas overdue for improvement. I'll be the first to admit that things can always be better, and at times constructive criticism is needed. No one is perfect, and that sure goes for me too.

But commissioners Denis Pitman and Don Jones have hurt Metra and its future. Metra staff have been subject to verbal abuse and arbitrary demands from both of them. It would be one thing to have the commissioners as a group sit down in a public meeting to discuss issues, goals, and set priorities.

That doesn't happen now, although it could with the right commissioners on board. [Actually, competent staff would be have more opportunity for higher pay and bonuses if a private firm was running MetraPark, this the county can not do.]

Metra staff started hearing that our management may be privatized almost a year ago. We thought the issue would go away last summer when the board signed a booking contract with OVG. But it didn't take long to find that Pitman and Jones were going ahead with their plan of privatizing management too.

The public rose up against that, saying the concept should be explored, but not assumed. The two backtracked, to say that it was all a misunderstanding. There would be equal consideration of privatizing and continued public management. I haven't met anyone who believed that story. If you are following recent events, it is clear that lip service to the public is all we are getting.

I don't know about you, but I get tired of hearing that we can't do anything on our own in Montana, that we need out-of-state expertise, because our home-grown talent isn't good enough. [As one who has lived in other states, I will tell you that I detest this backward attitude. What are the chances that a state with our small population, would have a business that specializes in managing venues like MetraPark?] That is what Pitman and Jones are telling you. They are also admitting that they are not up to the challenge of doing the hard work you elected them to do, by rolling up their sleeves, demonstrating common decency to our employees and respecting contrary opinions.

The latest example occurred at a recent commission meeting. The board has appointed three well-qualified people to the unenviable task of reviewing responses from two private management firms. Everyone I've talked to who has any knowledge of what is happening said that both of these commissioners assured everyone that OVG, the firm with the booking agreement from last

summer, would be selected and negotiations would begin to put together an agreement.

To their surprise, the committee unanimously chose ASM Global. Don't get me wrong. I'm sure that both are fine firms with good people. But since the committee didn't choose the company that Pitman and Jones have favored all along, it left them in a pickle. As I understand it, to have both of these agreements in place at the same time would not be a good deal financially to the taxpayer. Our county's finance director felt he needed to let the board know of this problem right away, and not days or weeks later. As you may have heard or can imagine, he was attacked by Jones for overstepping. Since when do you not want to be warned of a financial problem?

He presented a way out for everyone. Take a step back from privatizing, have the board commit to positive direction and leadership for Metra staff, and give it a few years to show that Metra's employees can rise to the challenge, when not belittled and threatened. If by then, we still aren't where everyone wants, then give this option another look. At least then we have a fair comparison.

Commissioner John Ostlund agrees with me, and the proposal by the finance director. I've known Ostlund for 50 years. He knows right from wrong. He knows this is wrong and gets attacked by those two every time he tries to shine the light of day on their dealings.

Maybe another reason Pitman and Jones don't want to wait is because they fear they won't be around long enough for future consideration. With Pitman up for election next month, they may be right.