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### Council smart to delay deal that looked fishy

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Maybe after everybody involved in this week's Love Field concession drama has a chance to pause and take a few deep breaths and maybe go for a refreshing little walk, they'll realize postponing a vote on the contract was a smart move.

Perhaps they'll even recognize that publicly stated "hey, wait a minute" misgivings over the proposal did everybody concerned a solid favor.

Because if this turkey neck of a quiet, no-debate goodbuddy deal had turned up on the front page after being sealed instead of before, Dallas would have had the PR approximation of a broken sewer main to mop up. This was just a messy little spill.

It's not going to bankrupt anybody to tap the brakes before deciding who gets long-term rights to sell burgers and magazines at soon-to-be-expanded Love Field, where a captive audience of antsy travelers supplies a guaranteed customer base.

City Hall was all set this week to simply extend these concessions - worth many, many millions of snack food dollars - to the current contractors.

Whose principal owners include three heavyweight political players with strong ties to City Council members.

Without soliciting any other bids. For a generously lengthy 12-year minimum term. And sans public debate, as part of the council's routine, rubber-stamp consent agenda.

The contract holders include familiar local names: U.S. Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson, influential political donor Gilbert **Aranza** and state Rep. Helen Giddings.

If their council supporters seemed touchy and defensive when questions surfaced about the deal, Giddings was utterly livid. During Wednesday's council meeting, she bawled the mayor out to his face, then took square aim at us media vermin:

"My integrity has been impugned," she raged. "I am sick and tired of reading in The Dallas Morning News my name. ... We need to be sure we don't allow the newspapers to lynch people in this town."

Lynch - that's a serious term describing a repugnant act of racist violence. What will it be if she has to bid for a contract along with everybody else? The Holocaust?

Angry and offended, Giddings cited a long list of her community service and civic accomplishments. This drew sympathetic agreement from some members of the council, but to less sensitive ears it might have come across as "you owe me."

Look, I don't mean to be flip. But these are seasoned veteran politicians, people who ought by now to know that the perception of cheesy dealing can be as damaging as the real McCoy. If anything, Dallas city staff and council should have taken extra measures to make this particular contract as public and competitive as possible.

And before anybody gives voice to a muttering suspicion that this is stuff good-old-boy white dudes do for each other every day of the week, let's review a story from the back-when files about another juicy contract to serve a captive consumer market - the Dallas County Jail commissary.

In 2002, former Sheriff Jim Bowles was rung up soundly for handing the snacks-for-inmates contract to a personal pal after other vendors offered better bids.

No technical violation was proved, but the deal's unsavory appearance cost the sheriff his next primary election.

This is a similar circumstance. There's no reputation-impugning going on here, other than to point out that some of our elected officials have been remarkably tone-deaf to how this might sound to all us ordinary, unconnected Lawnmower Joes and Lunchbucket Janes.

So it really was a wise move to slow this train down. Trust me: This way, there won't be anything to impugn.

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