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### How ethical is our city? We may find out today

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A former Dallas mayor pro tem reported to prison on Tuesday. But a more important measure of city government may come in a council vote today.

Politicians on the take like Don Hill will come and go in any government. The more revealing test is how a city operates on a day-to-day basis.

Openly and transparently, by sound business principles?

Or dominated by sweetheart deals and political calculations?

Today, we find out how Dallas operates.

City Hall reporter Rudy Bush laid it all out in a front-page story Monday. On today's City Council agenda is a proposal that would - without competitive bids - extend two airport concession contracts by more than 12 years.

The contracts to continue running Dallas Love Field shops and restaurants would go to companies with stout political connections.

And Dallas Mayor Tom Leppert is calling foul.

One company is partly owned by U.S. Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson and by state Rep. Helen Giddings. The other is owned by political player and donor Gilbert **Aranza**.

Nothing illegal there, just some serious question of whether the city is getting the best deal possible on its airport space.

And this is not small potatoes. At a time when the city is desperate for money, airport concession contracts bring in millions of dollars in revenue.

"These are some of the biggest nonconstruction contracts that the council will ever award," Leppert noted in a conversation this week.

And though 12 years is a long time to award such contracts, the details of the deal are even worse.

The contract doesn't begin until reconstruction of the Love Field terminal is completed in 2014. And Leppert said the contract includes an option for a three-year extension at the end.

"So we're really talking about 18 or 19 years here," he said.

And did I mention - all without any chance for competitors to offer the city a better deal?

The suspicious nature of this deal is really told in the arguments offered for it.

Council members supporting it talk about the 9/11 attacks and how they hurt airport shop owners.

Yeah, and a lot of other businesses, too. But that was almost nine years ago. Should everyone get cozy deals until 2029?

Preposterous.

Equally far-fetched is the argument that the long, no-bid contracts are a reward for the shop operators suffering through the coming reconstruction of Love Field.

It's precisely that reconstruction that makes this the key time to open the bidding process to all comers.

The new Love Field terminal will debut just in time for Wright amendment restrictions to be lifted. Passenger traffic at the airport will jump dramatically as Southwest Airlines begins offering nonstop flights across the country.

And as of Tuesday afternoon, Southwest had joined with the mayor in asking the City Council to slow down and take a longer look at the concession contracts.

Leppert stresses that he has nothing against the current contract holders or the job they're doing running shops and restaurants at Love Field.

But when it comes to city business, the mayor said, political considerations should not be a substitute for free and fair competition.

Let's see who's willing to vote the other side of that position today.

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