

For the Northland Reader, 11 December 2001

By *Duke Skorich*

Can we please start listening now? For too long, people who objected to any development idea, no matter how hair brained, were labeled "anti". The power structure at the Chamber of Commerce and the city administration shook their heads in wonder at the lack of insight these "anti" types displayed.

It's never been about people being anti anything. It has always been about what makes sense and what doesn't. What is good use of public resources and what is not. Those who have been labeled were only asking that plans be weighed fairly before we charged ahead. Too many deals have been made without proper investigation or any real proof that investments would pay off for the people.

It may amaze some, but we're not stupid out here. We all realize the value of good development. We also recognize when something is too good to be true; something many of the city leaders seem to have a problem defining. Does anyone really believe Ken Hogg and the Mayor (as was reported in the Duluth News Tribune) really had no idea the Great Lakes Aquarium could have some financial problems? I doubt the average voter was the least bit surprised to learn the GLA can't make their bond payments. Yet the president of DEDA and the Mayor of Duluth had no idea there were problems. Come on, guys! If the City was at all on the hook to help in case of a shortfall, the president of DEDA and the Mayor (who also sits on the GLA board) had an obligation to check on the financial health of the facility.

No one wants to see the Aquarium fail. It would be terrific if the projected attendance figures were hit every month. Who wouldn't like to know our public support really did bring more people to town to support other attractions and businesses? That's not the point. It's not happening yet, and now we're being asked to pony up and help the GLA meet its obligations.

After all the secrecy and innuendo surrounding the management style at the GLA, it's tough to imagine tax dollars going to bail them out. These are the people who don't want to be considered a public facility when it comes to public questions about their activities, but have been promised public funds to stay afloat when times get tough. But, that's not the point.

All the stories and rumors about the aquarium don't matter any more. Whether the projections were too high and the people pushing the project too trusting isn't an issue any longer. The aquarium, for better or worse, is here and we're likely to see some tax money diverted to keep the doors open.

There are some things we can change, and some things we can't change. There is a lesson in all this: the people know of what they speak and the powerful better damn listen.

We are faced today with two controversial projects involving public resources. It's time to stop letting a small but influential group of people tell us what's good for us. It's time to listen to logic and to trust the people to know what's best in matters that tie up public land or money.

The projections for the Spirit Ridge Gold Course at Spirit Mountain are as inflated as any the supporters of the aquarium used for their iron-clad guarantee of success. Those who support this project do so, in large measure, based on the hordes of people they envision will flock to Duluth. These are mostly well meaning people looking for a solid attraction. They would be well served to take a serious look at what believing projections can bring us.

The folks who believe a marina at McQuade Road will result in no end of good things are, if you'll excuse the expression, in the same boat with our Spirit Ridge friends. There is no evidence, in reality, that another marina is needed. There is reasonable concern about the future costs to maintain such a facility. There are simply too many reasons not to build a marina at McQuade Road, but our friends who support it can't get beyond the promise of success. Logic plays no role in these matters.

We have to look beyond the assurance of the experts when we are promised any project will be the salvation of the area. The most important factor we should use in determining whether to pursue anything that involved public funds is the public. So far, the track record on public opinion versus optimistic dreams is pretty good.

Our city leaders may be the most well meaning people in the world. But, so far, they have given us little in the way of positive results for the great amount of public resources they have committed to development. It's time they started listening to the people who sincerely care about this region. Consultants will come and go. Elected officials move on. It's the people who live to fight another battle, pick up the pieces of a failed plan or pay the bill when promises don't come true.

It's time to listen to the people. Well connected, well financed developers should have no more say in the direction of our city than the average citizen who works for a living, and in their spare time, tries to protect what matters most about our town.

There's nothing wrong with trying a new idea. There is no point in trying to place blame for something that didn't work out. But, it would be a crime to ignore a lesson we should have learned by now. The people know what's best. Let the people guide our most important decisions. In matters of development and public spending, the people tend to be the most objective. There is no personal gain, no legacy being created. It's just the people, moving along, caring about our collective future and sharing an exciting vision about what is possible.