

THE AIRPORT JUGGERNAUT, RAMPANT DEVELOPMENT AND OUR AILING PLANET

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Last month our county commissioners, in a split 2-1 vote, succumbed to relentless lobbying pressure and agreed to put the question of a new airport, financed by an increase in our property tax, on the November ballot. A week or so later I attended an information meeting in Ignacio, where **Roger Zalneraitis**, director of the La Plata County Economic Development Alliance, presented a dazzling array of statistics purporting to show how we will all benefit from a brand-new state-of-the-art airport. Of the five people in the audience, I was the only local resident not representing an interest group with an axe to grind--except for our intrepid Pine River Times reporter **Carol McWilliams**.

The first question that leaped to mind as I kept listening to Mr. Zalneraitis' polished presentation is an old one: **Who pays the statistician?** Here, my life-long experience with the use of statistics in science is a caution, about how multiple deliberate choices can skew your statistics: What questions to ask? What sample and sample-size to select? What fancy inferential statistics to apply to the raw data? How to present it all to a baffled audience of non-initiates? And ultimately, here as elsewhere, the most bothersome question: **Who stands to benefit?**

The Economic Development Alliance is a sales-pitch organ of the Durango business lobby, backed up primarily by two mega-interests: The tourism-and-ski industry, and their siamese-twin, the real estate developers and sellers. The interests of this 'alliance' that purports to speak for us are as clear as they are transformative: cramming a once-bucolic, sweet-and-easy rural county and its quaint county seat with hordes of paying customers; denuding the slopes for ski lifts; opening once-pristine forests to ATVs and mountain bikes; subdividing productive ranch-land into expensive housing 'units'. They see your county and mine as an enticing source of ever-mounting profits. The rest is smoke and mirrors.

The sales pitch aimed at the less-affluent, statistically-impaired residents of this county boils down to the all-too-familiar **Trickle-Down Economics**: You all benefit, suckers; the poor pay proportionally less, they get new employment opportunities and better services--of which the proposed new airport is but the latest and most visible. But what benefits exactly? And at what unstated costs? Cut-throat traffic? No parking space in downtown Durango? New jobs for educated outsiders? Paved-over ranch land? Increased pollution and despoilation? An overrun *Wíya-má-núuchi* Wilderness? No affordable housing for working folks? Your county being taken over?

The most depressing thing about the advent of Western development, whose latest chapter is our proposed new airport, is how familiar it all is. **John Wesley Powell** saw it coming in the late 1870s, when after his early meanderings in the Colorado River basin he was put in charge of the festering morass of Western mining laws. He fought valiantly and lost, predictably, to an overwhelming development axis--DC-Denver-San Francisco. From then on, the story of 'How the West Was Won' remains depressingly the same: Rapacious outside interests move in to reap exorbitant profits and then condescend to tell you what is in your best trickle-down interest.

It is hardly an accident that the current **Mayor of Durango** has just written an Op-Ed piece (DH 8-28-16) in support of saddling the rest of us country yokels with increased property taxes to pay for *her* airport: In her civilian life, undisclosed in her Op-Ed piece, she sells real estate.

It is puzzling but all too familiar, how a coalition of well-heeled big-business conservatives and educated, environmentally-minded liberals have banded together to push for the proposed new airport. This is the very same coalition that has been pushing for globalization, trade-agreements, unbridled development and resource-extraction across the globe. A core premise of this coalition is that we all benefit. But a growing population of losers trail in the wake of this juggernaut. When poisonous mines, dense subdivisions and despoiled wilderness are left in the wake of 'development', the smart money moves on to trash the next piece of pristine land and peddle the next get-rich-quick scheme. Those who can't afford to move are left behind to cope with the wreckage.

The mirage of perpetual development is an old story, harking back to pre-history, when hunting-and-gathering *Homo sapiens* exhausted the carrying capacity of the planet and made the fateful switch to agriculture some 10,000 years ago. Our first population bomb can be traced back to that fateful move, with the attendant depletion of topsoil by slash-and-burn agriculture, repeated over-tilling and the gradual removal of ancient forests. The Industrial Revolution and the 'winning' of the West is but a late chapter in this sad saga. It is within this global vicious feedback cycle of over-population and runaway development that one can view the local conundrum of our proposed new airport.

Yes, I am told, but it is unavoidable, the price of progress; so why don't you give up your quaint dreams and join the with-it crowd. Well sometimes I wish I could. For, just once, I'd like to be on the winning side. But many of the people I live among are the perennial losers of rapacious development. Someone--other than Donald Trump--needs to give voice to their sad losers' perspective.

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