

Tyrants create a horror show in Westlake

By Dave Lieber
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One of Northeast Tarrant County's smallest towns, Westlake, continues to be the subject of the region's biggest power struggle.

A basic misunderstanding about this epic struggle is that Westlake Mayor Scott Bradley and his supporters in Stagecoach Hills are trying to stop billionaire developer Ross Perot Jr. from building on the Circle T Ranch.

That's not true.

The problem is that Perot has wanted to take over the functions of the town government by levying taxes, changing the zoning, building the infrastructure and doing almost everything else on the Circle T that the town government is supposed to do. Governments provide checks and balances against any developer's actions. That's why, if Perot succeeds, there's an obvious conflict of interest.

Another problem is that a majority of aldermen are trying to deny residents of Stagecoach Hills their rights to vote, to speak freely in public meetings and to be contributing members of their community -- all because the aldermen fear that these residents would "take over the town."

This is tyranny, not democracy.

Perot will certainly develop the Circle T, as is his right. But he wants to do it without government interference. Last year, Perot's top lieutenant, Alliance Development Co. President Rick Patterson, said that Perot views Westlake as a "virtual city" because there's no city bureaucracy, no police department and no road crew.

"Let's keep it a unique town," Patterson said in September. "Let's have, in effect, a virtual city."

At the time, it sounded like a science-fiction plot. If anything, though, events of these past weeks have turned this sci-fi scenario into a horror story.

Several weeks ago, state Rep. Nancy Moffat, R-Southlake, introduced a bill that could give Perot unparalleled power as a developer. According to the bill, Perot would be given the power to tax, build infrastructure and make zoning decisions regardless of Westlake's carefully crafted comprehensive zoning plan.

State Sen. Jane Nelson, R-Flower Mound, introduced a bill similar to Moffat's, later saying that, by her sponsorship of the equivalent bill, she could kill Moffat's bill.

Nelson appears to have been double-crossed by Perot officials, because they had earlier promised her that they wouldn't lobby for any legislative bills promoting their goals as long as Perot and Westlake were involved in mediation.

It's important to remember that Moffat's bill was written by Perot associate Jim Francis, a member of Perot's mediation team.

Last week, another troubling event occurred when Francis telephoned a state election official for information about how to get a Stagecoach Hills alderman candidate removed from Westlake's municipal election ballot.

Why is a Perot associate interfering with Westlake's election procedures? Doesn't this contradict Perot's contention, voiced constantly by his subordinates, that Perot has nothing to do with Westlake's current struggles?

The solution to this dilemma will be decided by the courts. A Denton County judge ruled last week that a temporary restraining order, intended to prevent the aldermen from voting to disannex Stagecoach Hills, was no longer valid. That night, the aldermen promptly voted again to oust Stagecoach Hills from Westlake.

Tomorrow, a lawsuit filed by a Stagecoach Hills resident who wishes to remain a Westlake resident will be heard in a Tarrant County court.

What nobody can explain to my satisfaction is why Westlake could deliver these Stagecoach Hills residents every type of municipal service for two years with no one objecting. But as soon as a Stagecoach Hills resident filed for public office, the neighborhood suddenly became worthy of expulsion.

The aldermen have also fired the town lawyer, who supported Bradley's position, and most of the town's consultants, saying that the consultants' work could be handled by Perot's people and that they want to avoid "duplication."

The aldermen blame Bradley for this mess. But the mayor doesn't have voting powers except in a tie. He wasn't part of that 1995 vote to approve the map that annexed Stagecoach Hills. And the same aldermen who voted two years ago are the ones in office today.

Based on their objections today, it's clear that the aldermen didn't know what they were doing when they voted two years ago.

Sadly, their ridiculous actions in one of the biggest power struggles in Texas show that they still don't know what they're doing.

Dave Lieber's Northeast Beat column appears Sundays, Tuesdays and Fridays in the Star-Telegram.
