

Autopsy of a political mess

By PHIL LATHAM, PUBLISHER|

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I first met Kay Bailey Hutchison when she was running for Texas Treasurer at a campaign stop in Lufkin. In attendance was then-U.S. Rep. Charlie Wilson, who was just finished with his gun running to Afghanistan warriors we would later come to know as the Taliban.

But I thought a lot of Charlie and when he – a Democrat – told me that Kay Hutchison – a Republican – was a quality person I pretty much believed him.

Through the years I haven't seen much to change my opinion, to be honest. I've interviewed her numerous times and found her not to just be well-informed, but also clear thinking.

So far as I know, the Marshall News Messenger was the first newspaper anywhere to call for her to run for Texas governor, which she thought about, but ultimately decided against doing. To this moment I wish we could get her to reconsider.

I'm one of Sen. Hutchison's biggest fans.

Having said all that, I'm also about dead-solid sure where the truth lies in the flap between Harrison County Judge Wayne McWhorter and Sen. Hutchison's office and it isn't in Washington, D.C.

Sometimes when you run with the big dogs you get, well, to put indelicately, peed on. That's what happened to McWhorter. Politics is rough business and the people in Washington play it at the professional level.

All of this is speculation, of course, and it has nothing to do with who is right or wrong, but here is what I think happened with the politics of the situation, piecing together what everyone has told me. I haven't talked to the senator and don't expect she's going to be calling anytime soon.

When the idea was first brought to McWhorter my guess is that he wanted to know for sure that Sen. Hutchison was going to back the idea for an industrial site at the old Longhorn Army Ammunition Plant. McWhorter would do this because he isn't dumb and would know full well what a firestorm would be about to erupt. McWhorter can stand the kitchen's heat, but that doesn't mean he wanted to get burned.

If Sen. Hutchison's office had told McWhorter, at that moment, that they would support the industrial site only if a public hearing were held with positive results, I'm guessing you never would have heard a word about all this. The waters and emotions at nearby Caddo Lake would have remained calm.

So, when Sen. Hutchison's office says that a public hearing has "always" been a part of the plan, I don't believe it.

A public hearing most likely came into the picture when Sen. Hutchison's office started getting opposing phone calls and somebody, maybe even the senator herself, said, "uh-oh."

Maybe a general retreat was called or maybe someone just wanted to cover their rear, but I figure this was when a public hearing became an absolute necessity.

If it was a retreat, it would have been a perfect political strategy. Demand a hearing because it puts the heat back on the local folks. If they refuse to hold a hearing, the senator wins. If they hold a hearing and the results are entirely negative, the senator wins. If they hold a hearing and by some shocking and miniscule chance the results are still positive, guess what, the senator still wins.

Judge McWhorter didn't exactly refuse to hold a hearing, but he knew (correctly) what the result would be. Whereas a hearing was a no-lose situation for Sen. Hutchison, it was a no-win for McWhorter. A hearing didn't happen because the outcome was already known.

I suppose if those opposed to the site want to take some satisfaction from all this, it could be that those phone calls, letters and emails to the senator did some good, or it sure seems that way.

One other thing of interest local folks should know. Chris Paulitz, a really nice guy, called me from the senator's office a bit upset with the newspaper for running the original story where McWhorter said the senator told him personally that the industrial site would never be more than 100 or 200 acres.

A first he didn't see why it was such an important story that we had to run it without Sen. Hutchison's reply. When I explained that to him, he commenced to set-to on McWhorter, saying that he was absolutely sure that no one in the senator's office, including the senator herself, has ever commented on the number of acres the site might be.

This would have meant, gastronomically speaking, that Judge McWhorter was full of beans.

It is difficult to explain in writing just how firm Paulitz was on this point, but I understood him when he talked to me. He was so kind as to offer to speak "very slowly," so that my East Texas mentality could keep up with the brains of the Beltway.

But when Paulitz contacted me back with a page of quotes (I guess he didn't think he could speak quite slowly enough), there was no mention of McWhorter's statement about 100 or 200 acres.

Then it all became a story based on the lack of a public hearing.

Which leads me to believe that the senator said exactly the quote McWhorter attributed to her.

It has now all become a matter of politics with the only question left to answer is who is going to get blamed that the industrial site did not happen? Funny thing is, it is only the politicians who care.