

OPINION

A tree hugger's lament for Dallas industry

City Hall's MoneyGram Soccer Park blunder pits the wrong people against each other



A recent City Council vote regarding MoneyGram Soccer Park in northwest Dallas has Jim Schutze wondering why, as an avowed tree hugger, he's not particularly pleased with the pro-park ruling. (The Dallas Morning News)

By JIM SCHUTZE

Park advocates notched a victory before the Dallas City Council this week; an industrial developer took a hit; and I'm trying to figure out why I, a tree hugger from way back, am not smiling.

The loser of the day was businessman and political consultant Brandon Johnson, on the short end of a narrow vote he needed to build a concrete batch plant in a heavily industrial zone near Walnut Hill Lane and Interstate 35E in northwest Dallas. The winners were advocates for the nearby MoneyGram Soccer Park, 120 acres containing 19 soccer fields and a pavilion built with city money 10 years ago.

Not actually having gone to med school, I was nevertheless persuaded by testimony that it's bad for kids to engage in vigorous athletic activity in a place where they are likely to suck in large amounts of what scientists call inhalable particulate matter — what I would call concrete dust.

So, the vote was no to particulates, yes to kids. So why no smile?

Start with this: The place the city chose for this park 10 years ago was already surrounded by heavy industry. In more recent overarching land-use policy decisions, the city has reaffirmed that this zone, about midway between downtown Dallas and the northwest city limits, is where industry is supposed to go. So putting a 120-acre athletic park smack in the middle of it 10 years ago was a monumentally foolish thing to do, equivalent to installing slides, swings and a merry-go-round in the median of a downtown freeway.

Some advocates for the park found sympathy from some council members this week when they accused the surrounding industrial users of environmental racism. They even suggested the solution must be to run off the industrial users, who possess long-range and even permanent legal permission to be where they are. This would be the equivalent of protecting the kids on the merry-go-round by tearing down the freeway.

Environmental racism

In spite of my huggerdom, I always balk and even recoil when I hear a certain narrative stubbornly repeated around town in which industry is painted as a bad thing, an enemy of the people. I've lived here more than half of a very long life, but I'm a kid from the Great Lakes region at a time when it was the steaming, bustling industrial hub of the western world. Yeah, a while back.

I grew up among hardworking people who gathered here from around the world to work in those industries. With their good wages, they bought new brick houses,

sent kids to college and retired with great health care and, believe me, they did not do it by riding merry-go-rounds.

Environmental racism is real, there and here. This city has been witness to despicable cases of environmental racism, as in West Dallas, where noxious polluters were jammed in cheek-by-jowl with poor and mainly minority neighborhoods. Permanent damage was done to generations of children.

That's a true and terrible story, a sin that cannot be plowed under with the lead-contaminated soil left behind by polluters like the infamous RSR lead smelter, closed in 1984 only after a heroic battle led by citizen activist Mattie Nash.

So how on this good earth could this city government, whose sole ultimate purpose is to protect us, have placed 19 soccer fields in the middle of a legally defined industrial area?

I assume MoneyGram paid good money for those naming rights, but if the park is to stay where it is, then another name would better suit the tradition it represents. In its present location, the park should be renamed RSR Smelter Park.

Industry's future

At the risk of being drummed out of hugger ranks forever, I can't help pointing out another aspect of this vote: the powerful effect it will have on future location and investment decisions by industry. This is how factories wind up in Mexico.

We ought to be able to agree on this much. We never want kids to breathe in inhalable particulate matter if we can help it. But if we can resolve that problem, then industry is a good thing, not bad.

Industry provides employment, which is even more important than soccer. Employment puts food on the table. No food on the table, no soccer. And industry provides massive support to the tax base. Oh, that — the money to pay for \$31 million soccer parks.

Hugger be damned, I just don't believe the City Council did the right thing this week. The right thing would have been for the city to admit its mistake 10 years ago and sell the park to industry, kind of like taking the merry-go-round out of the freeway. Put the money toward building a soccer park somewhere safer. And name it Mattie Nash Soccer Park.

But did I actually say, "admit its mistake?" Yes, well. There you have it.

Jim Schutze is a longtime Dallas journalist and author of the recent novel "Pontiac."