

commentary



How Slay can salvage the racial mess he's made

PUNDIT INTENDED • LARRY HANDLIN

Mayor Francis Slay is facing an effort to recall him from a coalition of groups who are opposed to him for a variety of reasons. His position in favor of a takeover of the St. Louis Public Schools and his opposition to proposals for a civilian review board was, among other things, the glue that galvanized his opposition. The most significant action to anger those seeking to recall him centered on the demolition and subsequent resignation of St. Louis Fire Department Chief Sherman George.

Slay has taken several hits on the issue including being booed at the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day festivities. While racial tension is ingrained in the city of St. Louis, Slay faces a challenge with the current anger towards him. In one sense, his ability to seek a third term looks relatively clear if he wishes to run again. The South Side still turns out in higher numbers and population losses on the north side of the city, especially the northwestern quadrant, are significant. At the same time, governing the city from

one ethnic block is a recipe for gridlock and little progress.

So what does Slay do?

The first thing he should have done was endorse Barack Obama. While both Democratic candidates remaining in the race represent historic candidacies, Slay is not having problems with white women. He missed a great opportunity there.

Traditionally, politics in St. Louis is mediated by organizations—whether they are interest groups, neighborhoods or wards. And true to his accomplished political form, Slay works those at every chance.

The problem is that those organizations in the African-American community aren't listening to him and likely will not. So how should Slay overcome that? To be sure he is not going to win the North Side, but he can create an atmosphere where the toxic back and forth on race-related issues are mediated and or tempered.

How? I am glad you asked. Ignore the organizational structure of St. Louis. Actually, do not ignore it; just go around it to reach the North Side.

The traditional way to do such things in St. Louis is to show up at events other

politicians or power brokers are having and connect that way. It cannot happen in the current climate, so the challenge to Slay is to create those opportunities to connect.

Have a picnic in each North Side ward and or neighborhood and have his political organization essentially conduct a get out the vote operation to get people to attend. Free food is always a good attraction to any potential voter in every city and county in America. Instead of get out the vote (GOTV), get out the picnickers (GOTP). Invite non-profits that work in the area to these picnics, because they are always looking for ways to connect with the populations they serve. Conduct free health screenings. Give out books to families. Smile when the protesters show up and be pleasant—and the mayor is naturally a pretty pleasant guy.

The mayor should organize a bike tour and ride through the North Side finding historical sites. And no, not just Crown Candy. There are an abundance of historical sites on the North Side to visit and a bike tour would likely attract a fair number of people from other parts of the city who simply do not know where they might be. The mayor has good relations

with the bicycling activists and it is pretty hard to protest a guy who is moving.

Those are two examples, but the point is to practice guerrilla marketing and not just rely on the typical intermediaries. The point is not to win on the North Side, the point is to be a real person to people on the North Side. Slay is not some head of an evil cabal, he is the fairly white bread mayor of a city strongly divided by race. He cannot solve that problem, but he can make the city more easily governable by simply being around and providing a different model of how to interact with people.

Will he do such a thing? Probably not. His organization is pretty boring, relying primarily on media, traditional events, and the Ward system. And why not? He's been pretty successful to date.

The problem is that politically, St. Louis is stagnant, and needs someone to try something, anything to break the political traditions of old. Slay is a creature of habit, but breaking those habits could be liberating for him, and more importantly, the city of St. Louis.

You can e-mail Larry Handlin at archpundit@yahoo.com.

Letters to the editor

Shame on Hannegan and let's reduce our smoking rates

Dear Editor:

The pro-con columns on smoke free policies in the most recent *Vital Voice* spark three responses in me:

1) I'd like to applaud Chip Schloss for protecting the air we share. The employees and customers of the Atomic Cowboy are healthier due to the bar and restaurant's smoke free policy. And it makes good business sense too; there's less need for cleaning and furniture repairs, fewer sick days for staff, and less replacement of electronic equipment like televisions in a smoke free environment.....Not to mention how attractive a smoke free atmosphere is to the 77% of Missourians who do not smoke.

2) I'd like to offer a big "Shame on you, sir!" to Bill Hannegan. Peer-reviewed research conducted under rigorous scientific protocols clearly demonstrates that secondhand smoke is a public health hazard. We wouldn't go to a restaurant where the owner says "It's my choice whether I store my hamburger at a safe temperature or not; the state should just butt out with all these rules." Employees and patrons alike must be protected from breathing air full of toxic and carcinogenic chemicals, just as we ask for safe and sanitary conditions for food and drink.

3) Finally I'd like to appeal to my beloved LGBT community - We have to take the dangers of tobacco addiction and secondhand smoke seriously and become advocates to change our group norms.

About three out of five LGBT youth smoke, and this will have a devastating effect in terms of premature deaths due to tobacco-related disease (as is our community's past and current history too). As people who suffer from oppression, it is easy to find ourselves self-medicating with addictive substances, but this only leads to sickness and early death. Let's demand that Big Tobacco stop their devious marketing to our community, and let's work together to reduce our smoking rate.

Jeanette Mott Oxford
State Representative - 59th Missouri
House District

LGBT smoking rates up to 200% higher

Dear Editor:

As many communities near St. Louis begin to adopt smoke-free policies, it's natural that we begin to discuss the issue in the LGBT community of St. Louis. The local media coverage has been largely about economics and the impact on bars and clubs. Too often, in the smoke-free debate, the health of workers is overlooked. Everyone has the right to work in a safe and healthy environment. People should not have to choose between a job and their health. What has not been covered in the media is the health disparities in the LGBT community because of tobacco and that the LGBT community is a publicity target for the tobacco industry.

With 4,000 chemicals, and 60 known carcinogens, secondhand smoke is dangerous to nonsmokers. Every major medical

and public health organization agrees that secondhand smoke is harmful. The scientific evidence is overwhelming. The United States Surgeon General stated in 2006 that "the debate is over and the science is clear — secondhand smoke causes death and disease in nonsmokers."

Bar and hospitality workers are among the most exposed and least protected from secondhand smoke and have a significantly greater risk of dying from lung cancer than the general population.

Health regulations are not new to the hospitality industry. Bars and restaurants already implement regulations that protect the health of customers and employees such as not serving rotten food, washing dishes at a certain temperature and not serving undercooked meat.

Some businesses—restaurant and bar owners—continue to complain that smoke-free policies will cost them business. Their concern is genuine, understandable and misplaced—some of that concern is fueled by misleading campaigns funded by tobacco companies and other interests. In location after location where smoke-free policies have been enacted, the only thing that has declined significantly is smoking rates.

LGBT adults and youth have roughly 40 percent to almost 200 percent higher smoking rates than the general population; and bartenders and cocktail servers in LGBT oriented nightclubs are disproportionately exposed to secondhand smoke. This problem is exacerbated by the tobacco industry's attempts to target our

communities by offering to fund events in return for free advertising and smoking environments. One of the best responses we can make is to create clean healthy smoke-free environments for all LGBT public and social events. Better yet, as a community, we can fight for smoke-free environments in all public places.

Muriel Lynn Jones (Blue)
Executive Director, The Lesbian Gay
Bi Transgender Community Center of
Metropolitan St. Louis

Are you a paid shill?

Dear Editor:

I would like to ask Mr. Hannegan, can you please disclose if you are receiving funds from the tobacco industry or one of its funded organizations?

Because the truth of the matter is that tobacco companies have long ago figured out that they can appeal to consumers by painting smoking as a "right" that they should protect at all costs. And they have hired local community activists to do the dirty work for them. Unfortunately, this is often very effective, we have disproportionately high smoking rates in those communities most heavily targeted by the tobacco industries.

Considering you think evidence presented by the Surgeon General, the Centers for Disease Control and the American Cancer Society is not valid, we would like to know if you are being paid by the tobacco industry. Because, we might just want to know if our advice on health and freedom is coming from the PR department of Phillip Morris.

Marta Perrupato
Program Manager, National LGBT
Tobacco Control Network