

"Nobody will lose their homes."

Jack Spiker, KGAB Radio, November 2003



Comedian "Bobcat" Goldwaithe had a routine in which he says: "I lost my job. Well, I didn't lose it, it's just that when I go there, someone else is doing it."

Maybe that is what Jack Spiker meant when he insisted on following me onto Jill Cumer's radio show back in 2003 to tell listeners that he "wished I wouldn't lie. Nobody is going to lose their homes."

I had said that the vote in favor of a new Norris Viaduct would mean that many people along Fifth Street across from the refinery would lose their homes to accommodate widening the street. Any fool would know that a \$15-\$20 million bridge was not going to connect to a 2-lane street and Frontier Refinery had already announced they would not, or could not, relinquish any of their land to widen the street to the south.

So, even without knowing the route the new bridge would take over the railroad tracks, it was easy to determine that it would still go west on Fifth Street and that street would have to be widened.

Why Jack went on the radio and told the lie that he did is hard to figure. The election had been held the day before - that was the purpose of my visit, to discuss the election results and take calls from listeners to that show.

Had the new route taken the same course as the current one, houses on Dunn and Fifth would have had to been taken. As the plans evolved, it became obvious that houses along Dunn, Alexander, Fifth and Sixth Streets would be taken.

What did still lie ahead for Jack at the time was his own re-election bid in 2004. Perhaps he thought if he could mislead Southside voters until after the next candidate's election, he would be in better shape to win another term.

Whatever the reason he went on live radio and deceived both voters and residents who would ultimately be affected, only he can answer.

The pictures on this page were taken on Thursday, March 1, 2007. Houses between Dunn (the end of the Viaduct) and Morrie, where Fifth Street turns south beside the refinery, and along Fifth Street north of the refinery, have been demolished, are raised to be taken away, or are in the process of one or the other.

Over 30 households lost their homes.

To many driving by the old, and sometimes rundown homes in that area, their thoughts might be "good riddance." Many who voted in favor of the displacement will have no regrets. Such is life, say they.

The mayor is apparently one of them.

The Norris Viaduct taking was a more proper use of eminent domain than was the houses taken for the library. No matter what route a new overpass would take in that area, with the refinery in the way, homes would have to be taken. The library could have been built on other parcels - parcels that would not have required confiscation of private property and displacement of elderly and infirm residents.

But there should be no joy in the taking. Ever. There should be empathy for the plight of residents who may have lived in the same home for two or three generations and who do not want to relocate at their age or in their health.

And there should have been candor from the mayor from the earliest date. Once the vote passed that would eventually displace some or many residents, they should have been told. The new eminent domain statute deals with notice but that public taking of property seemed to be shrouded in secrecy. There was no need.

Fair market value would not have changed by being honest with the people facing eviction. And it obviously wasn't necessary to either move quickly OR wait indefinitely because the City still doesn't know how it will finance the construction.

I have been told that WYDOT did a much better job of dealing with owners and renters being evicted than did the County with the library parcel confiscators.

A completion date for a new viaduct has not been set. Readers might remember, in an effort to help the City get the 6th Penny tax proposition passed, the daily newspaper ran a banner headline proclaiming the existing viaduct was "on its last legs." It wasn't. It isn't. And it won't be in the foreseeable future. It is safe. The evidence is that WYDOT has not even restricted truck traffic on the structure. If there were the slightest danger, heavy loads would have been prohibited by now.

That was just another example of the unhealthy relationship between the newspaper and the City. One is prepared to lie or exaggerate to benefit the other - and the other is prepared to serve as a "inside" source of announcements to that favored media on an exclusive, or first, basis.

Now that the people have been displaced, will the mayor go on the same radio program and apologize? Will he say, "I just didn't know that we'd have to take a bunch of homes to accommodate a new viaduct, wider streets, a park and a greenway. I simply did not know that. I did not mean to lie to those poor people tossed out of their homes. Many did lose their homes."