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Time for straight talk about the Rays

In a perfect world, they would speak freely. Tampa Bay Rays executives would appear before Pinellas County commissioners today and explain in stark terms why location is a problem with Tropicana Field.

This would not be the theoretical work of research firms and 30-minute driving patterns; it would be the hard numbers of a business lacking desired revenues.

It would be the exact number of season ticket holders within the city limits of St. Petersburg. It would be the comparison of sales in Pinellas and Hillsborough. It would be the breakdown of tickets sold to corporations and individuals.

In a perfect world, they would ask blunt questions. Commissioners would inquire about the team's finances. Not just vague assertions that the current numbers are unsustainable, but the details of a business in peril.

The Rays do not have to open their books on the steps of the county courthouse, but they have to acknowledge that asking for a \$300 million or \$400 million or \$500 million commitment requires some reciprocal show of trust.

And don't let them say Major League Baseball forbid it. The Houston Astros underwent a certified audit in 1996 to prove they were losing money prior to a stadium vote.

In a perfect world, their message would be heard. Rays executives would not get silly questions about their number of billboards, or the price of a beer or any other knee-jerk complaints that have little to do with the real issue.

A week ago, while meeting with Hillsborough officials, the Rays explained their concerns as succinctly as possible.

In 2008, the Tampa Rangers were 26th in attendance and the Rays were 26th. During the next five seasons, the Rangers made three playoff appearances and averaged 89 wins a season. The Rays also made three playoff appearances and averaged 92 wins a season.

For the Rangers, on-field success was a revenue boon. Texas was third in attendance in 2011. For the Rays, the opposite was true. They fell to 30th in attendance.

In a perfect world, they would challenge the timing. Commissioners would point out the Rays were talking about a new stadium less than halfway through their lease and less than two years after new ownership took over.

Major League Baseball has seen an explosion of new stadiums in the last two decades, but construction usually comes at the end of a lease. The Marlins, Twins, Padres, Braves, Pirates, Astros and Giants were all financially closer to relocation.

If the Rays want to keep the game on a new stadium, they're going to have to be a little more forthcoming about what they're willing to offer in exchange.

In a perfect world, someone would take charge. If not a commissioner, then a business partner.

But someone has to get in front of this story, lest it become a much larger version of a grocery store that closes its doors because the neighbors didn't add up.

The trap is filled with athletes that last baseball (Wash. Nation, Kansas City, Milwaukee, Houston or Oakland), Cleveland, Baltimore, Oakland, St. Louis and sport players and athletes choosing a replacement team.

In a perfect world, their requests happen here.

New oversight for EMS?

Pinellas' handling of the system brings a threat to eliminate its responsibility.

BY ANNE LINDBERG
Times Staff Writer

An influential state senator is so frustrated with Pinellas' handling of the emergency medical services system that he's willing to take control away from the County Commission.

"This is an issue that has not gone away," said state Sen. Jack Latvala, R-Clearwater. "This member of the delegation does not like the decisions the county has made."

Latvala, who made his comments

Monday at the end of a legislative delegation meeting, added that unless the county "starts being more collaborative," he will introduce and work to pass a bill next year that would create a new agency to oversee EMS.

It's unclear how that might work, State Rep. Larry Ahern, R-Seminole, said he was prepared to sponsor a companion bill in the house had Latvala wanted to move forward this year. The idea, Ahern said, was to create an independent board made up

of elected representatives from the county and the 18 cities and fire districts that provide the EMS service.

"It would allow them to decide their fate," Ahern said.

It's unclear whether the board would be able to levy its own taxes, like the Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority or have to go to the county for its funding, like the Metropolitan Planning Organization. The PSTA oversees the county's bus system. The MPO develops plans, policies and pri-

orities that guide local decisionmaking on transportation issues.

Reaction to the idea was mixed. St. Petersburg Mayor Bill Foster supported the idea, saying, "I'm game."

County Commissioner Karen Seel said she believes it's too soon to have that discussion. She believes a forthcoming study of the system will provide solutions that all will find acceptable.

» See EMS, 6B



State Sen. Jack Latvala said he may introduce a bill for a new agency to oversee EMS.

Meet 'Rock-ET Man'



Craig Bernice-Grey cleans up after installing his stone sculpture at the Safety Harbor Museum on Monday. The pieces of the 1,800-pound Rock-ET Man are held together with pins and epoxy. He talked about that and demonstrated stone carving after the installation.

State says inmate site lacks basic security

The Largo re-entry center has a history of escape because it's easy.

BY CRAIG PITTMAN
Times Staff Writer

LARGO — The cameras were in the wrong places, the lights didn't illuminate some key areas and the back fence has been all too easy for an inmate to hop.

A nine-page report from the state Department of Corrections found plenty of flaws at the Largo Residential Re-Entry Center, where two recent incidents led to inmates being charged with violent crimes.

The facility lacked some of the most basic security measures, according to the report. For instance, when state inspectors searched the facility thoroughly, they found "excessive amounts of unauthorized property" including five screwdrivers and six pairs of scissors, leading to 13 inmates being sent back to lockup at a state prison.

When the inspectors asked the inmates why they had so much contraband, "they advised routine searches of the rooms are not conducted by center staff due to staff shortages," so, among the report's recommendations: Start having routine searches.

The review found problems with more than just security at the work-release facility at 16432 U.S. 19 N, which is operated by Goodwill Industries as a base for inmates who have jobs outside. The report notes that 173 of the facility's inmates are in need of substance-abuse treatment, yet there is only one substance-abuse counselor on staff. As a result, drug-addicted inmates were frequently being released without getting any drug treatment.

"This is a good start," state Sen. Jack Latvala, R-Clearwater, said of the report and its recommendations. But it doesn't go far enough, he said. He was particularly concerned about how easily inmates can pass back and forth through the gates on their bicycles. The report found that inmates walk or ride their bikes to employers in the area, and are supposed to come back if they don't find work.

» See SECURITY, 7B

7.5 million
People expected to buy a new television ahead of Super Bowl XLV on Sunday

3.9 million
People expected to buy entertainment centers and furniture ahead of the Super Bowl

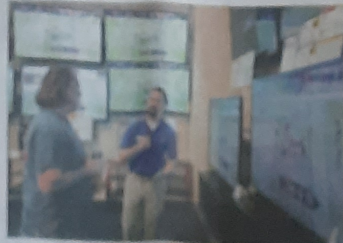
Super Bowl drives sales of TVs

More people will buy one for the game than any other event.

The holiday millions of football fans in January and their parents will bundle around a TV set with a level of urgency and a lot of love. They'll buy the 50th anniversary edition and look for the 40th anniversary edition. They'll buy the 40th anniversary edition.



SUSAN THURSTON
What's to come



Best Buy associate Shante Stronquist explains the features of a Sharp 55-inch LED 3-D television to Wade Johnson on Monday at the N Dale Mabley Highway store in Tampa.

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Transit agencies agree to cooperate

And that's about all. They send a report to lawmakers, but HART isn't open to a merger.

BY JIMMY TRINER
Times Staff Writer

TAMPA — The transportation agencies for Hillsborough and Pinellas counties made one thing clear during a joint meeting on Monday: They're agreeing to cooperate on the future — but as long as no one mentions the "m" word again.

The Hillsborough Area Regional Transit Authority and the Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority both had a mandate from the Florida Legislature to study consolidating the two agencies and submit a joint report to the speaker of the Florida House by Feb. 1.

Both governing boards did just that on Monday — and only that. But there was no joint resolution asking the Legislature to fund a second, more detailed consolidation study. Both

HART and PSTA voted for that in December, but then HART rebuffed and later voted against it. HART feared it would signal to stakeholders that the agency is open to merging with PSTA — and it isn't.

Both sides, though, chose to bury their differences during Monday's public meeting.

"If you look at what the press

Clarification
Florida College professor Andrew Zimbalist is a consultant for Major League Baseball and has consulted for groups opposing baseball's revenue sharing, as well as helping the U.S. Justice Department draft a bill to partially lift baseball's antitrust exemption. A Jan. 21 interview with Zimbalist did not include that information.