The Albert Whitted Airport Controversy

A Case Study

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Introduction

On November 4, 2003, residents of St. Petersburg, Fl were asked to vote on charter amendments that would determine the long-term future of the bay front property on which historic Albert Whitted Airport currently sits. The vote was to determine whether residents favored keeping the airport open indefinitely, or wished to close it and create a new waterfront park on at least half the property, leaving the other half for mixed-use development. As the results from the ballot revealed, the general consent of the St. Petersburg electorate regarding the fate of the airport was crystal clear. Residents resoundingly voted in favor of keeping the historic airport open by a margin of 3 to 1.

However, events leading up to the vote were much more hotly contested than the final results of the ballot turned out to be. The dispute more or less transformed the community. Residents took sides, positions hardened, facts became confused with rhetoric, front lawns became littered with signs depicting household’s position on the airport, editorial sections of local newspapers were filled with reader’s opinions on the subject, and conversations on the topic could be heard in such places as local taverns as the dispute captivated the attention of the entire community. The referendum caused residents to diverge into two sides: One for keeping the airport open, the other for closing it and creating a waterfront park. In short, the dispute evolved into the classic example of the “Spiral of Unmanaged Conflict” (Carpenter & Kennedy, 2001, pp. 11-17).

The purpose of this case study is to examine the dynamic nature of the dispute. In doing so, it will briefly outline the history of the airport, including some of the prior attempts at closure; the principle issues underlying the current dispute, including the role of actors, the growth of the various interest groups, and the process for which respected positions were
formulated and expressed; the involvement of the voters; and the current state of the airport. In conclusion, this case study will address the question of whether or not the referendum was the most appropriate and productive method for reaching a public agreement.

**History of the Airport**

The airport has a long and decorated history. It is considered by historians to be the birthplace of commercial aviation. In 1914, the first ever scheduled flight in the world began operating between an airfield on the current site of Albert Whitted Airport and Tampa, St. Petersburg’s neighboring city across the Bay. In 1923, the airfield was officially given its name after a St. Petersburg native and Navy Lieutenant pilot who served in WWI and also gained a locally famous reputation as an expert, some might even say, daredevil pilot. The airport contributed to the effort in WWII by hosting the War Training Service program for naval cadets entering combat (Hartzell, April 23, 2003). In 1934, National Airlines, which was the first successful commercial airlines in the world and which later merged with Pan Am Airlines, was born at the airport (Moncada, May 25, 2003).

The airport’s history is not just significant for this case study in its own regard, but because its history was often cited amongst airport proponents as a key reason for its preservation. “Many people who know the airport’s history see it as a David and Goliath thing,” says one airport supporter (Hartzell, April 23, 2003). “It’s a very important historical and economic asset to the city. And I feel that there are many voters—and I’m hoping a majority of voters—[who] feel the same way,” says another preservation advocate (Mocada, September 1, 2003). The latest controversy even encouraged the nephew of the most famous Whitted, Eric, to become involved in the debate, whereas in previous closure attempts he remained largely out of
the picture. He joined the Albert Whitted Preservation Society, staked a “SAVE THE AIRPORT” sign in his front yard, and reflected fondly on memories passed down from his father about the uncle he never met during airport preservation gatherings (Moncada, May 25, 2003).

Prior Attempts at Closure

The current controversy was not the first time the survival of the airport has been in question. There have been many attempts throughout the airport’s history to close it and put the prime land to other use. Opponents of the airport often argued for its closure by labeling it a playground for the wealthy, or by claiming the benefits of the public land were merely being enjoyed by a few, or by insisting that the property could be developed in a way that better maximized the property’s valuable utility. The following are brief descriptions of prior attempts at closure as well as documentation of influential groups who called for its closure.

• In 1935, Bayboro Investment Co. asked the City Council to close down the airport, saying the land was intended for wharves (Johnson, November 2, 2003).

• As early as 1940, the St. Petersburg Times Editorial Board began calling for its closure (Johnson, November 2, 2003).

• In 1958, the acting city manager attempted to close the airport in favor of private development, but opposition from a newly formed organization called the St. Petersburg Pilots Association stifled his efforts.

• Then, in 1982, a City Council subcommittee proposed closing Albert Whitted, building a convention center on part of the site, and allowing the University of South Florida, St. Petersburg, which is located on neighboring property, to expand onto the airport. The City Council overruled its own subcommittee in favor of preserving the airport.
In 1991, the City Council was accused of holding secret talks with the National Marine Fisheries Service regarding transforming the airport property into a marine science center. Ultimately, the marine science center was located on the Southwestern-most portion of airport property, adjacent to the Port of St. Petersburg.

The Current Controversy

The most recent attempt to close the airport began in 2002 when the city’s economic development director, Ron Barton, submitted a plan that had been in the works for a year to convert the site into a waterfront park and urban mixed-use community. Though the City Council unanimously rejected the plan, the decision angered local activists because, they argued, it was made behind closed doors without public involvement. Resentment from the council’s decision triggered the activists into forming the group called Citizens for a New Waterfront Park (CNWP). CNWP began a campaign drive to gather enough signatures to put the issue on the upcoming ballot (Johnson, November 5, 2003). To counter CNWP, opposition groups mobilized on the other side to prepare to defend the airport.

It was apparent at first that the groups calling for the airport’s closure had the momentum, but by October, the pendulum of public opinion swung over to the side advocating the airport’s preservation. An October 26 poll conducted just a little over a week before the vote was to be held by the St. Petersburg Times showed that 70% of the public supported keeping the airport open (Johnson, October 26, 2003). Many attributed the shift in public opinion to the success of the preservation groups in leading the public into believing that the waterfront park groups represented wealthy developers whose sole aspirations were to close the airport so that they could build tall, fancy condominiums in its place. Others pointed to the inability of the
waterfront park groups to construct an easily digestible, bumper sticker proposal that did not confuse the voters of the motives of the groups calling for closure. In any respect, CNWP had run out of time.

**Stakeholders and Their Visions**

One of the most vocal groups that formed was the CNWP. Upset by what they perceived as the cursory dismissal of the plan by the City Council with little public input, the members collected more than 14,541 required signatures (or 10% of the number of registered voters) to place the issue before the public on the November ballot. CNWP advocated a plan that would have closed the airport entirely, opened a new 60-acre waterfront park, and allowed the remaining 50 acres to be developed.

The Albert Whitted Airport Preservation Society (AWAPS) was created in April 2003 to counter the efforts of the CNWP. AWAPS joined ranks with the Airport Advisory Committee, an organization established in the late 1980s to bolster airport supporter interest. The group envisioned modifications for the airport, including a new terminal with a restaurant and museum and possibly a runway extension stretching into Tampa Bay that would allow greater flight activities. The group estimated that the airport economic benefits brought in $21 million to the local economy.

As the discussion became more heated and the sides more entrenched in their respective positions, St. Petersburg’s mayor, Rick Baker, proposed a compromise. His plan would close the east-west runway, freeing up 28.5 acres for development, while the north-south runway would remain in place, allowing the airport to continue operating. Ultimately, this plan failed, not
because it did not make a legitimate attempt to meet many interests but because it was viewed as a lose/lose solution. The reasons for failure are discussed in more detail below.

The University of South Florida (USF)-St. Petersburg campus hoped that the airport’s (or at least the east-west runway’s) closure would allow them to build taller structures to make more efficient use of their current property holdings and to attain the rights to some of the property that would be freed up for development. The University was expecting its student population to double in a few years, and in order to accommodate this growth, the campus wanted to expand its facilities. Also, many students and faculty regularly complained about the noise of the airport and the safety hazards of having an airport next door whose runway design required planes to descend right over the campus. There were frequent talks about adding an aviation school to the campus, but nothing ever materialized. The campus has claimed that it supported the compromise plan proposed by Mayor Baker that would close the runway strip that prevented USF from building taller structures (Wilson, October 19, 2003).

Mixed into the debate were a variety of other persons and organizations. Among the most prominent of these other persons and organizations were:

- Neighboring property owners, including particularly Bayfront Medical Center and All Children’s Hospital, expressed the desire to build taller structures on their properties and eliminate the overflights of planes taking off and landing.
- The Federal Aviation Administration and the state Department of Transportation, which license the airport, must approve any non-aviation use of the property.
- The Army Corps of Engineers and the state Department of Environmental Protection would be responsible for licensing any runway extensions that require filling in part of the bay.
• Private developers, of course, hoped the airport would close and that they would be able to build on the premium real estate.

• The local news media, often portrayed on their own pages as neutral observers who were merely reporting the facts and letting readers reach their own conclusions, were editorializing the debate and taking sides.

  ➢ The St. Petersburg Times was even accused by the Weekly Planet and others who supported keeping the airport of failing to disclose a conflict of interest—the Times is owned by the Poynter Institute which owns property across the street from the airport and, therefore, also falls into the neighboring property owners class of interested parties (Snider, October 30, 2003).

### The Proposals

In 2002, St. Petersburg’s economic development director, Ron Barton, proposed closing the airport in favor a new waterfront park and mixed-use development. Once again, the historic airport found itself under attack, and its supporters began lobbying the City Council to vote-down the proposal. At the same time, though, other city residents saw the proposal for what it was—an opportunity to improve the accessibility of the publicly owned waterfront tract to more people and to increase the overall tax base of the city.

The airport’s supporters, though, for a myriad of reasons, argued that preservation of the status quo was more important than increased downtown development. For instance, the airport employs, either directly or through companies operating there, approximately 300 local citizens with a total payroll of approximately $7 million. Also, according to economic indicators, the airport is a valuable asset to the city, bringing into the Florida economy approximately $21
million each year and was forecasted to bring in over $50 million by 2006 (Albert Whitted Master Plan Update).

Further, the airport is a great recreational asset for the citizens of St. Petersburg, and as mentioned above, the site is rich with aviation history. The counterarguments from those who supported developing the land into a park and urban community were obvious—the creation of construction jobs during development, the creation of maintenance and service jobs after completion, the added property tax income to the city, and the improved quality of life and increased opportunities for recreation represented by a new waterfront park. Basically, strong arguments were made on both sides of the debate.

After some public debate, Mayor Baker entered the fray and presented his “compromise” plan intended to bridge the gap between the two widely divergent points of view. As mentioned briefly above, his plan called for the closing of the east-west runway, the sale of approximately 30 acres of the land for private development, and the extension of the remaining north-south runway further into the bay so that it would be at least as long as the current east-west runway. This “compromise” plan, though, failed to satisfy either of the two major actors in the debate. The citizens who wanted a new waterfront park would get nothing—the airport would still be there, and the land being sold would be developed rather than converted into green space open to the general public. The supporters of the airport would lose the main artery of the airport, decreasing its overall usefulness. Instead of satisfying either of the two most vocal public interest groups, the plan seems to have been designed to satisfy the more minor actors in the dispute—the neighboring property owners who would have been able to develop taller buildings on their land and the private developers who would have had the opportunity to develop the 30 acres the city would have sold.
Mayor Baker made a cardinal mistake when he decided to enter this debate, a mistake he frequently makes when proposing major changes to the city’s policies. In the nearly three years he has served as mayor, he has developed a reputation for building complete proposals behind closed doors and then presenting them to the public, expecting people to be impressed with his initiative (Johnson, May 4, 2003). But as the authors of *Managing Public Disputes* state, the best way to gain broad public support is to have the parties develop the solution to a dispute (Carpenter & Kennedy, 2001, p. 29). When Mayor Baker released his compromise proposal, there had been little public discussion of any such solution, and the public was not ready to accept his idea, even if they would have arrived at the same ultimate conclusion.

Further, the mayor’s plan presented the city with a solution following King Solomon’s example—take half of the airport and develop it as it would be under the Barton proposal. As discussed in *Getting to Yes*, though, the best solutions to disputes are those that expand the range of possibilities before meeting in the middle (Fisher & Ury, 1991, p. 56). By doing so, all parties can receive larger pieces of the pie than if they had merely stayed within the traditional range of possibilities of the dispute. Mayor Baker’s proposal failed to increase the size of the pie before cutting it into slices, and nearly everyone viewed it as a losing proposition.

But lack of broad public approval was not the only drawback to Mayor Baker’s plan; it also faced an uphill battle to gain approval from the various state and federal agencies, including the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), the state Department of Transportation (DOT), the Army Corps of Engineers, and the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), that would have had a hand in its ultimate implementation. Taking each agency in turn, the following describes the obstacles the mayor’s plan faced:
• FAA and DOT approval were speculative at best. First, small planes cannot takeoff or land in high cross winds, and the FAA requires that an airport have 95 percent wind coverage, meaning that planes can takeoff and land at least 95 percent of the time. Under its current format, Albert Whitted airport has 98 percent wind coverage, largely because the two runways are basically perpendicular. If the east-west runway were to be closed, the airport would have only 92 percent wind coverage. Secondly, the FAA provides financial support to airports through grants. As part of the acceptance of grant money, the FAA requires that it be given a veto power of sorts over any non-aviation use of airport lands. Albert Whitted airport is currently subject to these restrictions, and the FAA informed the city that the plans proposed by both Ron Barton and Mayor Baker would not likely be approved. The city considered repaying the grants, but the grant agreement does not allow for such. Therefore, the airport property is subject to the FAA veto until 2011, when the current grants expire. The state DOT had similar requirements that would also have had to have been met or waived.

• Before the north-south runway could be extended into the bay, the state DEP and the federal Army Corps of Engineers would need to approve a dredge and fill permit under the Clean Water Act and similar state legislation. Such permits are difficult to attain under normal circumstances, and the current situation would likely be viewed as even less compelling than the average permit request because the reasons for extending the runway, one, would have been of the city’s own making when it closed the longer east-west runway and, two, would have had potentially dire environmental, historical, and archeological effects on the Tampa Bay estuary. Therefore, even if the FAA and DOT approved the closure of the east-west runway, the extension of the north-south runway would not likely happen.
By November 2002, other interested parties were developing their own proposals of how the land should be used in the future. For instance, developers wanted the entire tract devoted to new construction; environmentalists wanted the entire tract devoted to green space. None of these tertiary plans, though, garnered much attention. Rather, the debate centered on choosing among the three primary options: One, the Barton plan for a new waterfront park and mixed-use development; two, the Baker plan for development and airport improvements; and, three, the maintenance of the status quo. On November 12, 2002, the City Council seemingly eliminated the first choice when it unanimously rejected the Barton proposal, but that vote would prove to be the moment when the interested groups merely solidified their positions and decided to take the issue to the general public by way of referendum.

The Development and Debate of Positions

For the next year, the Citizens for a New Waterfront and the Albert Whitted Airport Preservation Society began to entrench themselves in their positions. At the same time, huge fundraising efforts and public relations pushes were under way to sway opinions. Groups like those described previously as well as others who were less involved and less vocal, began to meet to develop strategies to push for their positions. Each side was working hard to ensure that they were not outdone and that they had as much or more air time as the opposing viewpoint. Interested organizations and citizens wrote editorials that were published in various newspapers and on Web sites. Residents spoke at City Council meetings and lobbied local politicians. Local news media outlets were polling the public to see which side had the upper hand.

At public forums held in early 2003, the citizens were able to voice their viewpoints on this hotly contested issue. But as with most public meetings, there was little participation among
the moderate members of the public; rather, these events drew out the extremists and gave them each a bully pulpit from which to propound their viewpoint and attack the opposition.

At one meeting in January of that year, 138 speakers voiced their opinion regarding Mayor Baker’s compromise proposal. The hearing was overrun with pilots and aviation enthusiasts who strongly opposed any such drastic changes to the airport, arguing the closure of the east-west runway would irreparably damage the airport. This argument may or may not have been meritorious, though. The mayor had commissioned an independent study by Tampa-based DMJM Aviation, an aviation consulting group, to assess the airport’s viability once the east-west runway were closed. The independent assessment found that the airport could feasibly and safely operate with only the one runway, but the pilots vehemently disagreed.

In October 2003, there was a public debate between former mayor of St. Petersburg Charles Schuh, an advocate for the waterfront park plan, and the vice president of the Airport Advisory Committee, Jack Tunstill. The two made remarks and took questions from the audience. While heated at times, the tenor was generally very civil, but this was more the exception than the rule when the parties gathered (Johnson, October 8, 2003).

The cordial debates between interested persons gradually spiraled into personal attacks and mean-spirited jibes at the interests underlying each side’s positions. The park proponents accused the airport supporters of trying to maintain a system where the public subsidized their hobby and argued that the airport was merely a playground for a few wealthy locals. The airport supporters argued that few of the pilots who used the airport were rich—citing the fact that the parking lot was typically filled with minivans and economy cars, not luxury automobiles, they presented themselves as a group of ordinary men and women with a passion for aviation. To this
end, signs like those in the images below began appearing around the city on front yards, along busy roads, and on vehicles expressing support for the airport.

The public debate ebbed and rose as attention shifted among the myriad of newsworthy events, but it would always flare up when other events took place at the airport. The Waterfront Park supporters staged demonstrations and accused the airport of merely trying to gain public support through deception any time the airport hosted public events such as air shows and open houses.

The news media was not only reporting the facts of these demonstrations and public forums and debates but was a willing participant in the discussions, taking an active role at swaying public opinion. New articles and editorials were appearing nearly every morning, but there was no consistent voice among the news media. Different media outlets adopted different positions and merely added to the contentious tenor of the debate. As mentioned above, the St. Petersburg Times supported the airport’s closure while the Weekly Planet staunchly opposed such an action and even lowered itself to the level of attacking the Times.
By the time of the election, the Preservation Society and the Waterfront Park supporters were accusing each other of being Political Action Committees (PACs) but of not properly disclosing information in compliance with the rules regulating PACs. While throwing accusations at the other side, each group claimed the rules were inapplicable to themselves because they were merely voter educational organizations.

Basically, once the city voted down the Barton proposal, the Citizens for a New Waterfront Park formed and decided it could do better if the public was given the deciding voice rather than the Council. Therefore, the group stopped any efforts to see the dispute from its opponent’s perspective. The airport supporters, faced with this staunch and uncompromising opposition, decided that the airport’s survival depended upon stopping the efforts of the park proponents. Rather than looking for common ground and trying to develop a single proposal that could gain universal support, lines were drawn in the sand, which prevented the parties from sitting down and working out a solution where everyone came out a winner.

**Voter Involvement**

During the summer months, the ballot questions were drafted, and the final language was approved. Both sides concentrated all of their efforts on persuading public opinion. Knowing that the general public may not like the idea of a large portion of the airport property filled with high-rise condominiums, the supporters of the waterfront park revised the proposal they would place on the ballot as an amendment to the city’s charter. Rather than allowing development on 50 acres of the current airport site, the amendment would require that any development of the land lasting longer than five years be approved by public referendum. Therefore, the park
proponents argued, the property could not be developed into high-rise condos unless the public explicitly approved such a plan.

Finally, on November 4, 2003, all of the efforts that had gone into the preceding year came to a head as the 35,000 voters, constituting 24% of the total city electorate, went to the polls to decide the future of the airport property. The first question on the ballot was:

Should Albert Whitted Airport remain open forever by amending the City Charter to require retention of the airport?

Over 72% of the voters answered this question “Yes.” The third question on the ballot was:

Shall the charter be amended to: (1) Create a new Waterfront Park, replacing airport use by 2011, on at least half of Albert Whitted property, including the entire waterfront perimeter; (2) require a plan for the entire property, to be approved by supermajority Council vote after full public participation, identifying park and, if any, non-park uses; (3) provide the sale or lease for more than five years of any Airport property be subject to referendum?

Amazingly enough, the vote on this charter amendment was even more lopsided with 78.06% of the voters answering “No.”

Current State of the Airport

The voters spoke loudly and clearly on Election Day, and the politicians and airport opponents seem to have listened. The City has formed a 19-member Blue Ribbon Task Force to determine what changes are needed to improve the airport facilities. Among the representatives are people from both sides of the debate; they are finally sitting at one table trying to decide how best to use the property within the bounds set by the public’s mandate. The task force has held several meetings to which the public has been invited and allowed to speak. However, to maintain the civility of the discussions, there are strict rules regarding the public involvement—up to 5 members of the public are given 3 minutes each to speak to the members of the task force.
at the beginning of each meeting; the subjects of the public speeches “should be kept to the issues surrounding the future development of the airport property.”

The current plan being developed includes an airport terminal, additional hangars, public observation decks and picnic areas, walking/biking trails, and other improvements to make the airport more accessible both to those wishing to fly to and from St. Petersburg and to those who wish to enjoy the bay front scenery. Ultimately, the plan seems to be incorporating the important aspects of both the public mandate to keep the airport and the strong desires of certain segments of the public to make it more accessible. It seems the parties have finally found a way to co-exist on the single parcel, adding a park to the greenway around the airport rather than replacing the airport.

For the most part, as long as the current trend continues and the airport is improved, as it currently seems it will be, all of the interested groups will look at the final product as a success. However, the neighboring property owners, who are getting none of what they wanted, and the city’s tax rolls, which will not receive the boon of new development, are the ultimate losers. But still, the voters spoke, their collective voice was heard, and few can argue with the result when democracy is its basis.

Conclusion

In this situation, the public referendum was not the best way to build a solution. The referendum process fostered a contentious atmosphere that failed to ultimately settle the dispute. Rather, its success was limited to eliminating certain options and focusing attention on a narrower range of possibilities. It is now up to the Task Force and the interested parties to develop a lasting solution. Otherwise, this issue will merely arise again in another few years.
That being said, it is important to determine why this process failed to solve the problem. In *Managing Public Disputes*, the authors lay out a series of ten principles for developing a program of effective conflict management (Carpenter & Kennedy, 2001, pp. 52-65). Examining the current situation under these principles shows how far the decision-makers strayed from what is widely considered the best method to resolve public disputes. Looking at each principle, this is how the current process would be evaluated:

- **Principle 1: Conflicts are a mix of procedures, relationships, and substance.** Although both of the major parties used human values and relationships as well as technical arguments to support their respective sides, their arguments never evolved past positions and never bridged the gap between them. Further, there were no procedures in place for finding common interests and developing solutions. Instead, the parties used the public forums, debates, and editorial pages as instruments for voicing their positions.

- **Principle 2: To find a good solution, you have to understand the problem.** Both parties used stereotypes and presumptions to their advantage when making their arguments to the public. For example, the Preservation Society tried to link the proposal to close the airport with the further development of high-rise condos in downtown, associating the park proposal with the negative image that such development evokes. On the other hand, waterfront park supporters labeled airport supporters as a group of wealthy elites whose hobby was being subsidized by tax dollars.

- **Principle 3: Take time to plan a strategy and follow it through.** Again, there was no procedure in place to foster common ground and ultimately solve this dispute. The city seemed content on some levels to let the two sides resolve their differences through antagonistic measures.
• **Principle 4: Progress demands positive working relationships.** Clearly, as described throughout this case study, there were no positive working relationships established amongst the various factions.

• **Principle 5: Negotiation begins with a constructive definition of the problem.** Perhaps the lack of substantive negotiations aimed at a common solution can be traced to the failure of the groups to define the problem in any way other than a question requiring a yes-or-no answer. Says City Council member Jay Lasita, “A yes-no choice is not a true choice” (Johnson, C. June 18, 2003). Rather than asking whether the airport should be closed, the question could have been constructed in a more open-ended fashion such as “What direction should the city take with respect to the airport and its property?”

• **Principle 6: Parties should help design the process and solution.** As mentioned above, this was one of the basic violations represented by Mayor Baker’s proposal. The idea was developed behind closed doors and presented to the public as a finished product rather than including the public’s input from the start of the process. Therefore, while he attempted to resolve the conflict through compromise, it was his plan not the parties’ creation.

• **Principle 7: Lasting solutions are based on interests, not positions.** The end result of the position-based debates failed to conclusively resolve the conflict. There are still many questions that need to be answered.

• **Principle 8: The process must be flexible.** While the lack of any established process could be viewed as inherently flexible, it failed to provide a positive framework for the interest groups to discuss their differences and combine their common interests.

• **Principle 9: Think through what might go wrong.** Again, with no established process or mediator to think through such a process, there was no constructive and neutral thought about
the downsides of the direction the dispute was heading, and those downsides were realized before they could be preemptively stopped.

- Principle 10: Do no harm. While the parties are unlikely to forget the personal attacks and heated debates, they seem to be working well together on the Blue Ribbon Task Force to develop a plan that will benefit as many people as possible and reflect the desires expressed by the public through the referenda. Members from both sides seem to be willing to make some concessions in hopes of gaining a better product.

In closing, the number of stakeholders, plus the level of media attention the issue was drawing, made any decision that might have been made behind closed doors insufficient, inconclusive, and illegitimate. If a decision had been made determining the airport’s future that did not include input from the residents, the losing side would always question the legitimacy and fairness of the decision, and the result could have been an endless cycle of litigation. At least this possibility seems to have been avoided.
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