

Would you pave over a church in pursuit of profit?



If someone were conducting a poll and asked your opinion about this, I bet you'd say no.

After all, the idea of destroying someone else's church just so you can make more money is distasteful, if not plain wrong.

So let's try a different question: Would you lengthen an airport runway to make it safer? That sounds reasonable. If you were polled, I bet you'd say yes. In fact I know you'd say yes, because I've got a report that says so.

I'm talking about the Hilton Head Island Airport, of course.

The report I have is from a firm called American Public Dialog. Someone commissioned them to determine how much community support there is for expansion of the airport. The wording of the questions was such that it clearly advocated for an expansion.

I am wary these pseudo-opinion polls. They do a good job of conveying the point of view of whoever is paying for the "research." But they are not genuine attempts to solicit public opinion.

That's not their job.

Want to read something weird? This is on American Public Dialog's web site:

"OUR MISSION

-Provide the highest quality survey research, the most accurate information, and the best advice possible to our clients.

-Identify and qualify opinions, attitudes, trends, facts, and feelings that our clients would not otherwise discover."

All right, that's the first couple of statements. Sounds like standard promotional blah-blah – boring but benign.

The next statements are the ones that really creep me out:

"-Advance the interests of our clients in a contested environment. On behalf of our clients, our single goal is the truth.

-Our job is to be right when others are wrong."

In other words, they can write their questions so that the information they get is beneficial to their clients. These are public relations professionals who can make sure they get the answers right, even if, from a public interest perspective, the questions are about the wrong things.

The researchers themselves may be truly decent people. Their data is well organized and their report is thought-provoking. I'd consider hiring them for a project if I needed their services. But in this instance their mission is to provide the best possible service to their client, not to provide comprehensive and unbiased information to the general public.

The title of this report is "Hilton Head Airport Benchmark Survey, and it includes a copy of the script the pollers used.

One of the first questions highlights the difference between the big wonderful airport in Savannah and the little inadequate one in Hilton Head: "The Island Airport expects up to

200,000 passengers this year and the Savannah Airport has close to a million [note underscore for vocal emphasis] more passengers from the Island or are Hilton Head-bound. Would you like to see the Island Airport be able to attract more passenger business?"

And not a word said about destroying a church. Results: 55% say yes, 36% say no, the rest are unsure.

One of the most vexing issues has to do with lengthening the airport runway. Here is a question on that topic: "US Air and Delta provide commercial services at the Island Airport but cannot fill their aircraft to capacity due to the short runway length and tall trees. Do you approve of increasing the runway length to increase safety and allow the planes to fly at capacity?"

And not a word said about destroying a church. Results: 69% approve, the rest disapprove.

Here's another iffy one: "Agree or disagree: The Airport should operate at its present restricted state, reducing its economic clout by not maintaining services and/or mandatory safety criteria." This question was posed shortly after a statement was read about how the airport brings in \$224,000 in business impact to the island each day. Not surprisingly, 80% of people disagreed. After all, who wants to say they want an airport with restricted service and reduced economic clout?

Yet again, not a word said about destroying a church.

I am not anti-airport, and actually I am a big fan of flying. My father was a private pilot, so I have happy memories of riding in the back seat of his airplane, playing with my toys and every so often looking out the window at clouds that were close enough to touch.

As magical as the experience of flying is, it is also important in a more down-to-earth sort of way: it is genuinely important to the island's business interests.

Those are important interests, but they are not the only interests. In the end, we must understand that decisions we make as a community reflect our collective values. So will it be God, or will it be Money?