

P.B. Post
5/12/63

Schools' master builder

Bill Malone's impending departure from the Palm Beach County School District is a loss and a test. If the district passes the test, the loss becomes a benefit.

It's a loss because Mr. Malone, the chief operating officer, transformed school construction from a wasteful, expensive joke into a model of on-time efficiency. Before the district hired Mr. Malone three years ago, the public perception of school construction was insiders on Las Vegas junkets and schools promised but never built. Under Mr. Malone's leadership, that image faded as children and teachers moved into well-designed schools.

What will happen when Mr. Malone leaves? That's the test. If construction reverts to sinkhole status, the district will have no chance of getting voter approval for a sales tax or bonds to pay for school construction. A referendum is likely next year, in March or November. Because Mr. Malone is leaving this summer, voters will have several months to judge his replacement.

A complicated deal to build a new Atlantic High School in Delray Beach put a rare blot on Mr. Malone's record. The district failed to get a required appraisal, an oversight that fed rumors that the public had overpaid. The flap was more

*Palm Beach County must
pick a worthy successor.*

about politics than money; a vocal contingent didn't want the school moved. Beyond that group, the district's fiscal reputation didn't suffer.

Aside from being a hard act to follow, Mr. Malone could pose another problem. He's going to work for a private architectural company, Song & Associates, that does a lot of business with the district and wants to do more. Although Mr. Malone has said he hopes to be an advocate for the school referendum, he'll need to be careful. A whiff of conflict of interest could turn off too many voters. He might be more help staying on the sidelines.

Apparently, one of Mr. Malone's skills was hiring people as talented as himself. There's a good chance that one of his deputies will be promoted and will do at least as good a job. So though it might seem odd to say, it will be best if, by the time the referendum rolls around in 2004, school officials wonder why they ever thought Mr. Malone was irreplaceable. In fact, that outcome would be the final proof of how thoroughly Mr. Malone reformed a department that badly needed it.

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