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More from Logan Jenkins

Airport roundtable puts me squarely in new territory

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If smiles could kill, Bob Filner could be a mass murderer.

Last week's airport roundtable – conducted by Congressman John Mica, R-Fla., chairman of the House Subcommittee on Aviation – created negligible news, but it did fill up my windsock.

Before the meeting, Filner said he'd been limited to a mere few minutes when he'd addressed the San Diego County Regional Airport Authority, which has the unenviable job of placing a future airport on the November ballot.

This roundtable, he confided with a rapacious grin, was pay back for the times the authority had cut him off.

True to his word, Filner sat at the head of the elevated table and took his sweet time to tout in loving detail what he – and 80 percent of his Valley constituents – believes is the best, arguably the only, option for an airport in 2020: Imperial Valley.

“It's a matter of time, not distance,” Filner repeated, smiling furiously at Joe Craver and Paul Nieto, authority board members whom Filner evidently sees as hostile to his dream location a hundred miles from downtown San Diego.

As do many observers, the congressman suspects the authority's board majority is leaning toward the county's military bases in general and the 23,000-acre MCAS Miramar in particular. Filner believes the Valley is a token civilian location that hasn't received a fair hearing as the shot clock is expiring.

You can't say Filner, who's facing a tough Democratic primary against Assemblyman Juan Vargas, hasn't put taxpayer money where his mouth is. It was the congressman, you'll recall, who earmarked \$800,000 for a rushed SANDAG study on a maglev line from San Diego to the Valley.

Right on cue, Gary Gallegos, SANDAG's executive director, reported some good news to the roundtable: A maglev line to the Valley is feasible from an engineering standpoint.

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The mountainous terrain, however, would require a staggering amount of money, in the \$20 billion range.

It sounds like a bargain to Filner. Beyond sweeping passengers to airliners, Filner envisions the futuristic maglev doing double duty, linking San Diego's port to Phoenix and points east. Bonanza.

Make that triple duty. Filner sees the Valley, once it's a 20-to 30-minute commute from San Diego, as virgin sand for San Diego's affordable housing.

Imperial Valley. The new Temecula.

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I confess, I've held an in-the-box view of the airport search.

Miramar has made sense as a commercial airport for half a century. In 1994, when developer Doug Manchester was trying to pull San Diego County through a window of opportunity created by the Navy's Top Gun departure and the Marines signaling ambivalence about Miramar, I was a cheerleader. The development of Lindbergh's 500 bay-side acres appeared to be a golden goose.

Well, we know what happened. Randall Harold Cunningham and San Diego Mayor Susan Golding teamed up to kill a Miramar airport despite a countywide advisory vote narrowly in favor.

A dozen years later, the solution, familiar as an old pair of desert boots, remains Miramar, though I hold no hope for the Navy ever agreeing to joint use. Somehow or other, the Marines, who say they're adamantly opposed to sharing or leaving for other training grounds, would have to be enticed away in the next 15 years, a problematic proposition, especially with a war on.

The political obstacles to Miramar appear all but insurmountable – the Navy has set its jaw; the congressional delegation is flying in formation; the nearby residents will fight to the last child and golden retriever.

During the roundtable, I began to wonder: Is it possible that Miramar, which in 1948 was deemed too far out of town for an airport, is now too central? Has the world turned on its head?

After the roundtable, Marine Gen. Michael R. Lehnert, the commanding general for seven Western bases, huddled with Filner in the Convention Center hallway. "It's visionary," Lehnert said of Filner's dream.

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If smiles could resurrect corpses, Filner's merry jack-o'-lantern could have jump-started a graveyard. "Did you get that?" he asked me.

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In the real world, the Valley's likely a mirage. Miramar, too.

The godlike forces of inertia are always favorites to prevail. Lindbergh will be marginally expanded. Our aviation needs will change. Private planes here. Cargo there. We'll make do. Developer Sandy Shapery's proposed maglev linking of SoCal's airports offers realistic hope for the efficient distribution of future passengers.

But hard as I try, I can't get Filner's grinning vision out of my head. To be sure, the Valley, once so far away, is coming closer to San Diego.

We're importing huge slugs of the Valley's Colorado River water, the result of a bitter battle that many feared would turn the Valley into a Dust Bowl.

Assuming it negotiates the regulatory hoops, SDG&E someday will import solar and geothermal power from the Valley via the Sunrise Powerlink.

With an airport on the desert floor, industry with ties to San Diego would grow up around it, as would huge tracts of air-conditioned homes San Diego's working families could afford.

And for me, an odd loop would be completed.

In 1901, my grandmother, a barefoot girl from Julian, descended the Banner Grade with a mule team. Her parents homesteaded on the banks of a lake that was wiped out in the great 1906 flood, a disaster that created the Salton Sea.

How strange that I, in my late 70s perhaps, might someday ride a 300-mph maglev train to an airport in the vicinity of where my ancestors camped in tents and dreamed of what could be made of the desolate land.

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