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Sent: 11/4/2015 9:16:54 PM
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Subject: Get around

Buses

In early 1990, I announced my candidacy for mayor here in Columbia. My main issue was the bus system, then run by SCE&G under an agreement committed at the beginning of the century. That agreement was reaffirmed by the United States Supreme Court in the early '30s, so SCE&G was stuck with it. As an issue, though, the SCE&G bus system wasn't much of a hot button. I scored a whopping 5% of the vote, and the gay vegetarian candidate, the guy who advocated orange groves in Finlay Park, hauled home 7%.

From the beginning, the way our shareholder-owned electric power utilities in the United States turned a profit - an assured government protected profit, I should say - the bus system was not much of a burden on SCE&G. The problem was the business about getting taken over by an out-of-state firm or taking over an out-of-state electric power company. That is, they couldn't do it until the bus system was out of their hands. Therein lay the intrigue and the dishonesty over at SCE&G, a k a SCANA, the umbrella over SCE&G.

Mayor Finlay would hear none of it, that argument why SCE&G should be able to push the bus system on the city. He appreciated the subsidies coming into Columbia's bus system from all the SCE&G customers across the state. When they paid SCE&G for turning on their lights, they also contributed a little to Columbia's bus transit, which kept Columbia's tax payers free of any financial obligation to the bus system. The city got off light. Free, actually.

Once SCE&G moved to transfer the bus system to the city, SCE&G came up with a plan to gut the bus service, to drive off the bus service customers.

Every year in the 1980s, the Urban Mass Transit Administration would contribute about one million dollars to the Columbia bus system's operations and another million to the system's capital improvements budget.

SCE&G happily took the million dollars to offset its bus system overhead, but SCE&G declined the million in capital improvements – which could buy new buses, for example.

SCE&G bought used buses, clunkers, with its own money and rarely replaced or repaired the engines or the transmissions. The bus bodies were run through prison industries on Broad River Road for seat refurbishment and fresh paint. Still, the buses broke down all the time, discouraging riders and reducing ridership. The reduction in bus maintenance and replacement began soon after Thatcher took over the U. K. in 1979 and Ronald Reagan first sat in the Oval Office in 1981. Both leaders had their countries believing to expect a wave of deregulation, and the electric power systems were among the early targets. With the coming deregulation, SCE&G wanted to be free to be taken over or to take over, either way with an out-of-state firm. Such freedom of potential ownership held high the value of a share of company stock.

According to the SCANA annual report for 1992, the combined ridership on the SCE&G bus systems in both Charleston and Columbia was a bit over 10 million a year in 1982. Ten years later, 1992, the ridership total had fallen to about 5 million annually. Nowhere else in the world did this happen. Nowhere else did a bus transit system lose half its ridership like that. The decade was an expansion in economics and population growth. Many bus systems in the United States almost doubled in ridership during the same time SCE&G's fell by 50%.

If not admiration, congratulations were due SCE&G for pulling it off. If they wanted to gut the bus system, if they wanted to force ridership to abandon the buses, they were on the job with the concept of not replacing or repairing the transmissions and the engines. With abject absence in reliability, the ridership ran. Next with such dramatic reductions in ridership, SCE&G could push the bus systems on Charleston and Columbia more easily than it could with robust ridership. Low ridership, according to SCE&G, meant low overhead. Every rider, SCE&G complained, cost the bus system more.

But if a city wanted to grow its bus system ridership, there were any number of ways to do it. In Austin, Texas, in October 1989, the city had just won the vote for a penny sales tax dedicated to transit. While the bus system underwent total