

## **A Questionable Contract**

The Nassau County Medical Center is no boondoggle. It's an enlightened, compassionate public response to the need for a sophisticated medical facility in a county of more than 1,500,000 persons. But any quite complex \$100,000,000 public project is quite simply a temptation for weak men and greedy men both in and out of public office.

A *Newsday* reporting team, headed by Bob Greene—after an eight-week-long investigation—has discovered that the county is only a signature away from spending almost \$1,000,000 in excessive costs for the installation of an electrical system at the medical center. The electrical units in question are called safe patient centers. They are used to shield patients from the shock hazard inherent in electrical devices designed to save lives. Accident or malfunction can make these devices lethal. Although there is still some controversy over the efficacy of these safe patient centers, we have no quarrel with the decision to install them at the medical center. The motive was clearly to save lives.

Our quarrel is with the unconscionable cost. The taxpayers of Nassau are being asked to pay more than three times the normal cost of such an installation. In line to profit from this tax-supported bonanza is the Broadway Maintenance Corp., a firm that has been the target of official investigations in several cities. It is also one of the clients of the law firm of former Nassau Democratic Chairman John F. English. The complex chain of events that produced the current situation have been detailed and documented in the news pages. The chronicle is tainted with political favoritism, bureaucratic ineptitude and, perhaps, pure venality. Many questions remain to be answered: Why didn't former Commissioner of Public Works Herbert J. Simins—who was once entertained aboard a Broadway Maintenance yacht—monitor the hospital contractors more closely? Why did County Executive Nickerson say the electrical work was mandated by the state when it wasn't? Obtaining the answers to such questions is a task for the district attorney.

Nickerson, it should be noted, categorically denies that there is any overcharge involved. He also describes *Newsday's* reporting as "irresponsible and totally and willfully false." On both counts, our response is to let the evidence speak for itself—as it has in past investigations conducted by this team.

These investigations won *Newsday* the Pulitzer Prize for distinguished public service last spring. We were proud of that. But we're even prouder of the continuing effort of the team, led by Bob Greene, to act as the public's watchdog over the activities of office-holders on Long Island, of either party. (The Pulitzer report chronicled Republican activities.) And watchdogs don't stop to look at party labels before they bite.

We think that Gene Nickerson, whose social vision has been consistently praised on this page, should heed the words of John F. Kennedy, who once said about the press:

"It is never pleasant to read things that are not agreeable, but I would say that it is invaluable . . . Even though we never like it, and even though we wish they didn't write it, and even though we disapprove, there isn't any doubt at all that we could not do the job in a free society without (them)."

One thing is certain: Neither Nickerson nor his successor, County Executive-elect Ralph Caso, should sign the contract

giving Broadway Maintenance final clearance to proceed with the installation of the safe patient centers.

Indeed the delay should be beneficial. ~~Haste~~ brought the county to the brink of an inexcusable waste of tax money. Right now, some judicious second thoughts are clearly necessary.