

A Gandy-coated lollipop  
Mac McKerral Editor

As I began writing today, I looked around the newsroom and found almost all the staff sucking on Tootsie Roll Pops.

The sweets came courtesy of Carl Cronan, commercial real estate writer. Carl knows the way to the heart of a staff member here starts — and ends — with sugar and chocolate.

I grabbed one, cherry flavor, and moved back to my desk to ponder a letter written by Mayor Rick Baker of St. Petersburg to state Sen. Jim Sebesta, R-St. Petersburg.

The irony of the arrival of the Tootsie Roll Pops while I perused Baker's letter was not lost on me.

Baker, in polite and couched language in the letter dated Oct. 9, let the senator know that Baker had been "sucker" punched by him.

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On Oct. 7, Sebesta, as politicians like to do — especially a month before an election — told folks just what they wanted to hear with regard to the debate over what to do with the mess called Gandy Boulevard.

Sebesta's Tootsie Roll Pops appeared as short-term, cosmetic fixes in the flavors of synchronized traffic lights (cherry red and lemon yellow), trees and landscaping (lime green), built up medians and covered up curb cuts (chocolate brown).

Sebesta's plan would expedite traffic by 20 percent, he said. That means getting from West Shore Boulevard to say, Dale Mabry Highway, at most times of the day would only take 20 minutes.

But under Sebesta's plan, everyone goes home from the public information

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meeting happy, he says with a smile, while dusting off his hands and moving onto the next constituent "promise" land.

And all that fixing for a paltry \$10 million to \$20 million, he added.

Department of Transportation proposals — involving either a bypass or an overpass — have infuriated some residents and come with a much bigger price tag — \$250 million or more. They involve years of construction, moving homes and even some businesses.

But they also seem to more appropriately address the reality of the Gandy Boulevard corridor, which on most days offers gridlock such as that found at the start of the Daytona 500.

Maybe Sebesta needed a reminder that it's not sleepy South Tampa or sleepy St. Pete anymore.

Rather, Baker's letter, more important, reminded Sebesta that previously Sebesta pledged support for the corridor bypass proposal.

"Surprised and disappointed" was the code used by Baker to describe his feelings about the mutiny by Sebesta.

He could have bought a vowel and written "blindsided and hoodwinked."

Baker also reminded Sebesta that the route is critical for hurricane evacuation, and that if choices need to be made about how to spend limited amounts of state and federal transportation money, getting people out of Pinellas County smoothly before a hurricane hits probably should be a priority.

"Please reconsider your position," Baker wrote.

Well, that's not out of the question for politicians, who can spin on a position quicker than a weather vane during a Cat 5 tempest.

Indeed, it would seem Sebesta already knows how to do that.

What impressed me about Baker's letter is its polite, calm and cordial

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demeanor.

But I suppose getting along with state senators, regardless of whether they jumped ship on you, is part of the job for a mayor.

Heck, Baker might decide to run for re-election, too.

And you don't want to burn any bridges.

Even the Gandy.

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