

Scott Williams

Diamond-Star Public trust high price

One of the first questions being asked about the Diamond-Star Motors Corp. development is a good one: How much did we have to sacrifice to get the project here?

And a healthy debate has ensued now that state and local government officials have revealed that millions of dollars in incentives were granted to the Chrysler Corp. and Mitsubishi Motors Corp., who are building the Diamond-Star plant together.

But another important concession that Chrysler and Mitsubishi received from Illinois, one with far more frightening implications than any mere tax break, has been overlooked almost entirely.

That is probably because this particular concession was not granted by government, but rather by the media.

Last year, when Mitsubishi first began scouting potential plant sites in the Bloomington-Normal area, two local news media were asked not to report the story because it was feared that publicity would chase the company away.

The media were approached by a local government official who warned that Japanese businessmen prefer not to have their business dealings subjected to excessive public scrutiny.

In fact, Missouri's hopes of landing the 2,500-job Mitsubishi development were said to have been effectively dashed by widespread publicity in that state.

So the editors at the *Bloomington Pantagraph* and WJBC radio station took the hint and agreed to allow Mitsubishi officials to go about their business in private.

For several months, the *Pantagraph* and WJBC sat on the story. From their perspective, censorship was a welcome alternative to the unsavory prospect of

spoiling a major economic development for the community and state.

Only after the *Journal Star* learned of Mitsubishi's interest and prepared to do the story did the *Pantagraph* and WJBC receive the go-ahead to do the story, too. The news then broke, and very few people at the time realized that the information had long been suppressed.

That sequence of events was not revealed until last month, during a panel discussion appropriately titled "Government Manipulation of the Media."

Unfortunately, the point by then was quite moot. Chrysler and Mitsubishi already had selected Bloomington-Normal for the Diamond-Star project, which raises two interesting possibilities.

Either Mitsubishi officials were not nearly as concerned about publicity as the *Pantagraph* and WJBC were led to believe, or the few months of privacy that Mitsubishi officials enjoyed last year were enough to win them over.

If the former is true, then the *Pantagraph* and WJBC quite simply were made out to be fools. And they reneged on their obligation to keep the public informed for no other reason than playing into the hands of government.

On the other hand, if the latter is true — if Bloomington-Normal did land the Diamond-Star project partly because the local media kept the public sufficiently uninformed — then the implications are serious, indeed.

First, it implies something about the sort of Illinois citizen that Diamond-Star will be. A big business, to be sure, but with a Big Business attitude that it can control peoples' lives just because it offers a lot of jobs.

Second, the suppression of information

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implies something about just how far Illinois government officials are willing to go to bring new industry here. Evidently, when they vow to spare no expense, they mean they are not above trying to compromise the fundamental principles of journalism and selling out the public's right to know.

And finally, it implies that the *Pantagraph* and WJBC have allowed an unsettling precedent to be established.

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By agreeing to keep people ignorant of the Mitsubishi project, the *Pantagraph* and WJBC set themselves up to be questioned and second-guessed everytime they print or broadcast a story from now on.

People can rightfully ask a question that should never have to be asked about a news medium: Are they telling us everything they know?

That is what we sacrificed to get the Diamond-Star project here.

Scott Williams is a Journal Star reporter who covered the Chrysler/Mitsubishi story.