



THE WASTE REPORT

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UNCLE SAM: 4TH AND LONG ON FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY FEDERAL GOVERNMENT DEVELOPS DIGITAL FOOTBALL DOWN MARKER

When football season kicks off, you might notice something new stalking up and down the sidelines. No, not a boisterous head coach, or a menacing linebacker itching to get in the game. It'll be a digital down marker... one your tax dollars paid to help develop.

You heard that right. **Auburn University used nearly \$130k in federal funds¹ from the Economic Development Administration (EDA) to help develop the eDown, a battery powered down marker that displays numbers from 1 to 4 in LED lights.²**

It all started when a scoreboard manufacturer from Roanoke, AL, (about 45 miles from Auburn) contacted the university with the idea for a digital down marker. The problem, it seems, is the old mechanical down markers were less visible in lower light,³ required operators to reach above their head, and could jam (we never noticed that).⁴

Auburn agreed it was time for something new and, armed with EDA funding, used a semester-long industrial design course to help develop the down marker. Sixteen students (all presumably paying tuition) developed eight prototypes, one of which was selected by the private scoreboard company that now SELLS the marker as the eDown.⁵

If You Build It... Others Will Profit

"The group [at Auburn] worked so well as a team, and everyone contributed something to the final design. As a result, our company now has a product that is already setting a new standard in professional, collegiate and high school football."⁶ [emphasis added]

The scoreboard company "now has a product," the eDown, they can sell and profit from. However, at nearly 15 times the price of a traditional, mechanical down marker,⁷ one has to wonder if a market exists for this Cadillac of its industry. If not, it is only the taxpayer who bore development risk; in other words, the upside is to the company and the downside to the taxpayers.

Consider this: a scoreboard manufacturer already deals with digital displays used at sporting events. This particular manufacturer specializes in scoreboard and game clocks that are mobile⁸ – requiring a battery.

It appears this company was already well positioned to develop the eDown on their own. One might argue they needed some technical assistance similar to how a farmer might use a university extension program. But Auburn made the prototype. **That is not like an extension program testing your soil; it is like them planting your fields for you.**

Doing Fine Without Uncle Sam

Certainly college and athletic innovation are intertwined and have led to major economic development - Gatorade from the University of Florida and Nike from the University of Oregon come to mind.

But the first waffle-soled Nikes that graced the feet of Steve Prefontaine in the early '70s were not developed by an EDA-funded program. No, Bill Bowerman built his prototypes in his garage with his wife's waffle iron. Uncle Sam did not make the shoe for him (or fund someone else to), let alone buy the waffle iron.⁹ Somehow still, Nike seems to have done just fine.

¹<https://www.usaspending.gov/transparency/Pages/TransactionDetails.aspx?RecordID=691FFB47-497E-4988-8604-85461B078D78&AwardID=10854340&AwardType=G>

²<https://www.eda.gov/pdf/success-stories/innovation-entrepreneurship/Victory-Game-Clocks.pdf>

³Ibid.

⁴http://ocm.auburn.edu/newsroom/news_articles/2016/10/auburn-industrial-design-students-score-with-edownan-innovative-led-down-marker.htm

⁵<https://www.eda.gov/pdf/success-stories/innovation-entrepreneurship/Victory-Game-Clocks.pdf>

⁶http://ocm.auburn.edu/newsroom/news_articles/2016/10/auburn-industrial-design-students-score-with-edownan-innovative-led-down-marker.htm

⁷\$1,499.95 for the eDown vs \$114.48 for a traditional down marker

⁸<http://www.victorygameclocks.com/#about>

⁹http://blog.oregonlive.com/behindducksbeat/2011/02/nikes_holy_grail_bowerman_fami.html