

THE CARRBORO CITIZEN

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FROM THE EDITOR

Uh, jobs?

The new crews in charge of the North Carolina General Assembly and the U.S. House of Representatives were swept into office during a time of massive unemployment and amid a growing concern that “the government” was trying to control too much of our lives.

So, naturally, among the first things the new leaderships does – after sending a symbolic raspberry to the Obama Administration over health care – is get down to the business of regulating the reproductive rights of a little more than half the population.

It is a chore to try to understand the pretzel logic coming out of Washington and Raleigh these days, especially if you try to overlay what we saw during the last campaign with the priorities of the people now in charge.

In this state, as it was elsewhere, the economy and the dearth of jobs was at the heart of voters’ discontent.

Whether you then believed it was a good idea to throw the incumbents out or not, it’s hard to believe after a week of watching them in action that the new batch in office has any special aptitude for the hard work of righting the economy.

What we’re seeing instead is a stream of bills aimed at reigniting fires over social issues like abortion and gay marriage as well as attempts to undo the work of previous legislatures, like the Racial Justice Act and anti-bullying legislation.

And this week, just in time for the 150th anniversary of the Civil War, the state House flirted with the nascent nullification movement via a resolution asserting state sovereignty. How quaint.

None of this business is going to add a single job. And none of it should be a surprise.

Over the years, plenty of bills aimed at exploiting hot-button social issues and outright jingoism have been introduced, but the Democratic leadership never allowed them to get close to the floor. Now that the new GOP leadership is comprised of or beholden to the very people who introduced those bills, we are fixing to have the kind of divisive, angry debates we’ve managed to dodge all these years.

There are legislators who no doubt think they have been sent to Raleigh to refight the culture wars of the 1990s. But by and large, voters from both parties indicated they want basically the same things. They want jobs, better public schools, greater access to higher education and a safe and healthy environment.

It’s time to stop the political posturing and get these issues back to the top of the priority list. Legislators should save the save the tut-tutting over the 10th Amendment and the supremacy of the federal government for after hours at the Oyster Bar and spend their time on the clock trying to get this state moving again.

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Visioning a library of the future

VICKY DICKSON

A public library is one place that belongs to everyone, a place where the whole town meets and can linger as long as it likes. Just for that reason, I hope libraries will always be around.

Like many people, I also hope the Chapel Hill Public Library stays where it is – in a public building, with architecture that’s not driven by sales and marketing. The wooded park setting of the library is vastly superior to the acres of asphalt around University Mall. And why take on the risk that would be involved in sharing space in a privately owned building, which might at some point be sold or repurposed by its out-of-town owners?

But the fiscal constraints on the town of Chapel Hill and its residents are real, and probably ongoing. Since it’s incumbent on the Chapel Hill Town Council to spend tax dollars carefully, one way of doing so might involve taking another look at the Library Master Plan (adopted in concept in 2003) through a 2011 lens.

A major facet of that plan, an aspect that presumably drives most of the proposed expansion, is the goal to increase the materials (books and other items) per capita held by the library from 2.8 to four. Since the library held 145, 200 items in 2003, that would mean increasing the number of items held (factoring in a projected population increase) to 320,000.

But given the recent explosive growth in e-books and their readers, isn’t it conceivable that much of the increase in inventory could be digital? E-books and e-magazines don’t require any physical storage space or staff to check out and re-shelve them. And since checkout would be done

online, there would be no need to increase the size of the parking lot or the building.

While I’m a person who really likes cracking open a brand-new hardback and loves the way a shelf of books warms up a room, I do think the convenience and the environmental savings of e-books make them compelling. And apparently I’m not alone, with Barnes & Noble reporting sales of a million e-books on Christmas Day 2010 and Amazon announcing that e-books sales began outstripping sales of print bestsellers last October.

So I hope the town council is taking a hard look at the building plan that was approved in 2007, before the launch of Kindles, Nooks and iPads. If we don’t, at this point, factor in the likelihood that library patrons will increasingly opt for digital materials checked out via the website, we might well find ourselves burdened with the fiscal and environmental costs of a building and parking lot that are significantly bigger than they need to be.

The town council should not let its goal of finishing library renovations by 2012 get in the way of a clear-eyed re-evaluation of the plan and a thorough consideration of how libraries are likely to function in the digital future. If future libraries might best serve, for instance, as places for the public to learn about books and reading, the renovations to be embarked on should reflect that priority. Hardcover books will probably not disappear, but they may eventually be retained mostly for historical reasons, so plans should address that possibility. And address the ever-present need for a public place for the whole town to meet, and linger.

Vicky Dickson writes about literary matters for The Carrboro Citizen.

Given the recent explosive growth in e-books and their readers, isn’t it conceivable that much of the increase in inventory could be digital?

Closing the door to community colleges: an overreaction to tragedy

VICKI SMITH

Recently, the board of directors of North Carolina’s Community College System adopted a new policy that will allow individual colleges in the system to restrict admissions based on perception of a “threat” posed by any applicant. Despite objections raised by disability and civil rights advocacy groups, the board voted to amend the system’s long-standing open-door admissions policy to allow schools to refuse to admit prospective students who may present “an articulable, imminent and significant threat.”

Coming as it did in the wake of the tragic shooting rampage in Tucson, Ariz., that left six people dead and 13 wounded, including U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, many people assumed that Tucson was the motivating factor for this new policy. While this was not the case (the policy change was in fact proposed last fall), it was at least in part a reaction to a shooting tragedy. When the policy was first proposed, at least one community college president linked it to the tragedy at Virginia Tech.

Every time we experience a tragedy in which the accused perpetrator is alleged to have untreated mental illness, society tries to figure out how to prevent future similar occurrence and how to “shield” the rest of us from the tiny, unpredictable portion of people with mental illness who may be violent. But mental illness generally, and any particular diagnosis or behavior specifically, is not a predictor of violent behavior.

And as the tragedy in Tucson demonstrated, simply excluding or removing a person (the accused shooter, Jared Lee Loughner, had already been suspended by Pima Community College in Arizona for reportedly exhibiting erratic behavior in class) is no magic solution.

Up until now, North Carolina’s “open-door” approach allowed for the admission of anyone 18 or over or who had attained a high school diploma or its equivalent (GED). There were no other criteria for admission. By its very nature, the old policy did not require any type of admission screening, including physical or psychological testing or a criminal-records check.

Now every local community college has the option of developing a process to make a determination of which ap-

plicants present an “articulable, imminent and significant threat” with little or no guidance. Unfortunately, this vague language will lead to differing interpretations and methods of implementation across the community college system.

Worse still, some people with disabilities will be denied admission on the basis of their disability because of unfounded fears and stereotypes. People with mental illness and certain intellectual or developmental disabilities can be perceived as violent because of their manner, even though these disorders are in no way a predictor of violence.

A person with a movement disorder may be perceived as “dangerous” because of the way they move about. An individual with Tourette Syndrome may be perceived as “threatening” during a verbal outburst, even though it is involuntary and there is no physical threat at all. This type of preadmission screening is discriminatory. The regulations implementing Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 explicitly prohibit preadmission inquiries regarding whether a student has a disability.

The new policy is so fraught with potential rights violations that, on its face, it is likely illegal and almost sure to result in court challenges. But there are other potentially serious and more far-reaching consequences. Will, for instance, this policy so stigmatize individuals with a diagnosis of mental illness that they decide not to seek mental health services for fear of discrimination? Will parents avoid seeking critical mental health treatment for fear of ruining their child’s ability to go to college because of a diagnosis of a mental illness?

I am sure that the community college board members did not intend to stigmatize people with mental illness, but, unfortunately, that is the very result of their decision.

Every public institution should have a safety plan to protect students, faculty and staff from the threat of violence, but clumsy, overly broad rules that give license to discriminate against people who pose no threat at all is not the answer. Community college leaders need to start over.

Vicki Smith is the executive director of Disability Rights North Carolina.

LETTERS

Where the sun don’t shine

Three years ago, Greenbridge was just a twinkle in Tim Toben’s eye. At the time, some people commented to me that the neighborhood didn’t realize what a shadow it was going to cast. By 2009, towering cranes, reminiscent of a *Star Wars* episode, decorated the Chapel Hill skyline. Years of controversy, tweaking of plans, community meetings and massaging of egos has led up to the final product. Now in 2011, despite a slow economy, more than half of the 96 condos have sold, including the dozen or so affordable units.

Regardless of whether you are a fan or foe, there it stands. And on Jan. 12, the day after our recent ice

Regardless of whether you are a fan or foe, there it stands.

storm, I had the occasion to witness one consequence of building 10 stories of green construction. On the sidewalk, a man I know only as Fabio was struggling to push his wheelchair along the ice-covered sidewalk. Fabio is a double-amputee frequently seen sitting in his chair along Rosemary Street. Sometimes, with the use of his prosthetic legs, he walks behind his wheelchair, pushing it like a grocery cart.

I pulled over to help and, once I had a grip on the chair, began slip-sliding myself. Another person jumped in, and together we three managed to get moving and stay upright.

As we made steady progress, I innocently posed the question as to why this patch of ice seemed to have remained solid when most sidewalks appeared clear. Fabio turned his head and pointed to the building on our left and said one word, “shade.”

I applaud the mainstay of the building – that is, progress made toward green construction – along with efforts to conserve our natural resources. But when the next storm delivers snow and ice our way, the maintenance crew of Greenbridge should consider clearing the nearby sidewalks for neighbors who live there, where the sun don’t shine.

S.A.M. BROOKS

LETTERS POLICY

Letters should be no more than 425 words in length and must be accompanied by the author’s name, address and contact information. We will publish one letter per author per month. Lengthy letters written in longhand will mysteriously become lost. Emailed letters are preferred. That said, send your letters to:

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Tales of the City?

The Citizen would like to hear your Carrboro anecdotes for possible inclusion in the centennial guide to be published in April in honor of the town’s 100th birthday.

Send any colorful recollections or yarns that stand the test of time to news@carrborocitizen.com. Your neighbors will thank you, and so do we.