

THE CARRBORO CITIZEN

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EDITORIAL

The library and the mall

When it comes to deciding whether to relocate the Chapel Hill Public Library in University Mall, the easy thing for the Chapel Hill Town Council to do would be to declare the deal too complicated, walk away and tell the mall’s owners, Madison Marquette, “Thank you very much and good luck with your shopping center.”

The plans for expanding the existing library are already drawn up and approved, and plans for the library’s move to temporary space in the mall at the opposite end of Dillard’s are under consideration. But as evidenced at the council meeting Tuesday night, there are plenty of questions and a lot of moving parts.

If they walked away from the mall’s proposal, council members could cite the will of the voters who approved the bonds for the library expansion. Judging from the public’s response to the Dillard’s proposal, keeping the library at its current site still seems to be favored by the library’s patrons and supporters.

The sense of ownership library patrons feel about their very well-used facility and the beautiful park around it is understandable. And then there are the countless hours that went into coming up with an expansion plan for the new building. Although some of the resulting ideas could go into the design at the mall, scrapping the design itself would be a waste.

But consideration of the mall proposal is not taking place in a vacuum. The financial pressures on the town and its taxpayers are much different than in 2003.

Since tight budgets have delayed the project for the past two years, the council now undoubtedly feels a sense of urgency to come to a conclusion. But that urgency should not outweigh a careful look at the deal and the numerous questions surrounding it. Valid points were raised Tuesday night, questioning how ownership of the building would work, the future of the mall and the public’s right of access.

Right now, it is difficult to suss out how those things would work, just as it is to determine how much the town would actually save by moving the library permanently to the mall. So far, town officials are restricted to gathering facts and are not authorized to negotiate with the mall owners. New facts (“wrinkles,” as the town manager put it) are surfacing that will surely influence the decision.

The council must have all the facts to accurately weigh the risk and return in this public investment. Right now, we’ve got a pig in a poke. Without more time and actual negotiations, there is no way to know if this deal represents multi-million dollar savings for the town or a venture too risky to undertake.

It’s likely that even after more research and discussion, the town manager’s report on Feb. 14 will still have gaps and a lot of “ifs” and “maybes.”

The council wants to move on, but as council member Gene Pease reminded his colleagues Tuesday, we are in a very different era, one in which local governments are likely to feel even more strain ahead.

Yes, council members should keep faith with the voters – both the ones who approved the expansion of the library and the ones who’ve charged them with being good stewards of the public purse.

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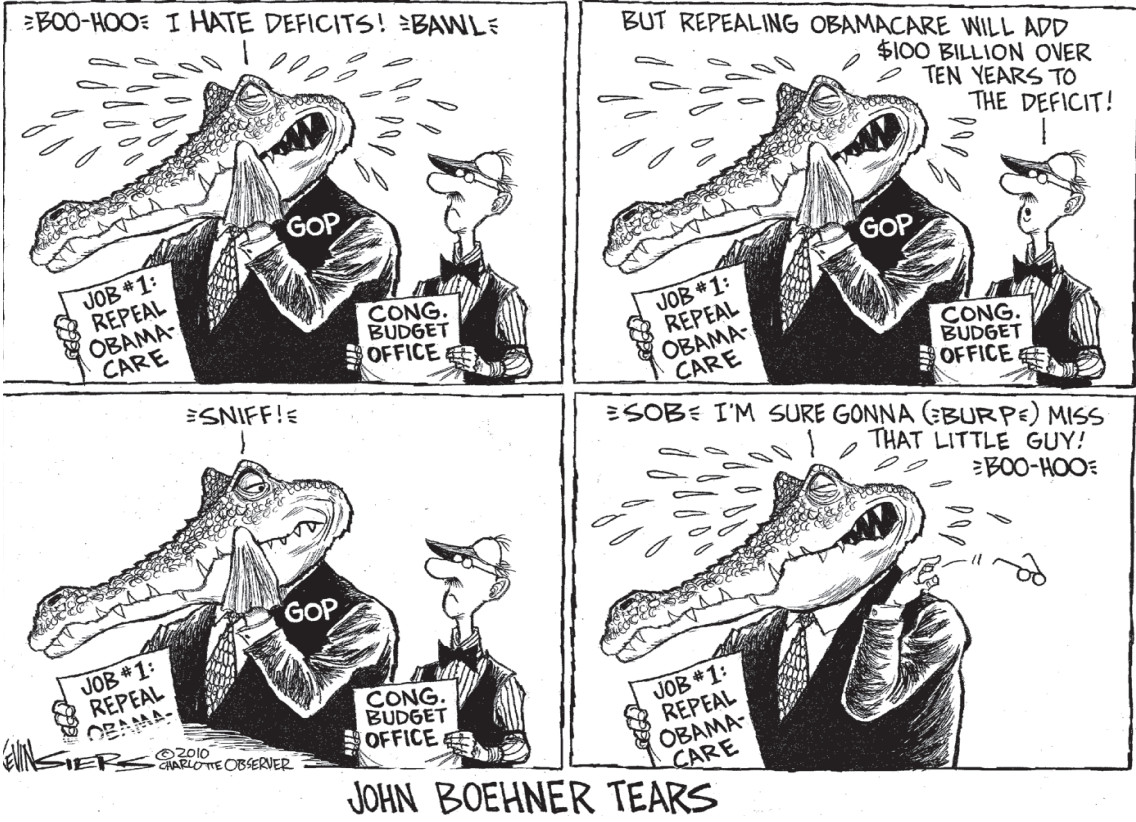
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For local economic development, focus on the people

CARLO ROBUSTELLI

For the past several years, the public discourse around growing our economy in Orange County has been focused on having the appropriate “tools.” Such tools include regulatory and financial incentives, a proposed sales-tax referendum, a stronger marketing and branding effort, new economic-development professionals, etc. We have heard economic-development leaders ask, “What types of businesses do we, the Orange County community, want? Green and sustainable industry, nonprofit headquarter locations, locally owned small businesses?”

Over the past year, I have spent a significant amount of time talking with folks about economic development and workforce development. In fact, I have attended economic-development meetings in municipalities throughout the county, hosted meetings with economic-development professionals on various topics, carefully tracked local economic-development efforts and strategies and met with numerous students looking for a livable wage-paying job. What I have observed is that we have more in common than we are willing to admit. I have also found that we are often quick to talk about what we stand against and slow to speak up about what we stand for. This, understandably, can make it difficult to collaborate and cooperate.

I believe it is time for our community to come together and develop a collective common good for our economic-development interests that is people centered. Here are a few questions that I think are important to answer: Who are we trying to support – local entrepreneurs, students graduating from UNC/Durham Tech, current residents, future residents, recent high school graduates – by grow-

ing our local economy and promoting economic development? How, if applicable, are our current economic-development strategies working toward supporting the groups identified in our above answer? Why is it important that we focus our efforts on this/these groups? Moving forward, what will the groups we have identified need to grow, expand and thrive? How can local economic-development interest groups (e.g., the chambers of commerce, EmPOWERment, Carrboro Merchants Association, Hillsborough Merchants Association), local community-development/activist groups (e.g., the Sierra Club, Justice United, NAACP) and our educational institutions help support these efforts?

Our college’s vision in Orange County is to build new programs and maintain existing services in a thematic and strategic way that upholds our commitment to be the community college of Orange County. We stand ready to support the strategic economic-development interests throughout our service area. In fact, we believe that building the new Orange County Campus is one of many successes that we should all point to when reflecting on economic/workforce development over the past 10 years. Our new community college campus could not have been better timed as we, faced with the worst economic recession in over 100 years, provide free “how-to” small-business seminars to local entrepreneurs (existing and new), provide affordable university transfer instruction, start new and innovative sustainable technology programs, provide short-term high-demand job skills training and more to local residents and businesses.

Carlo Robustelli is director of Orange County Operations for Durham Technical Community College.

LETTERS

Words hold power

Stick and stones may break my bones ... How we all wish that cliché would hold its merit today.

What has amazed and troubled me most is the swiftness in which we deftly attack with equally strong emotion. Having voted for Carrboro’s mayor, Mark Chilton, I was floored by my public servant’s comment on Facebook regarding the shooting of Rep. Gabrielle Giffords: “Shooter, you probably think you did this for your country, but like Timothy McVeigh you are America’s worst enemy. You don’t deserve the kind of civilized trial and punishment that you will end up with. F\*\*\* you.”

This was posted within hours after the shooting. It was that very first, succinct few sentences that left a searing impression. All the many words he wrote after that were not the ones that actually woke me in the middle of the night in immediate thought of our responsibility as human beings.

In the context of this national event, we are all witness to the power of words, regardless of partisanship. The difference between the individual and the collective, no matter the size, is drastically diminished by the inherent infinite nature of the Internet. This leaves us exponentially burdened regarding free speech and, in this case, coupled with the scope of the impact of an elected official. This is an example of how one voice can become so quickly a widespread collective.

I am not denying my mayor’s human right to emotional response. It is often difficult to separate the private person from the political one. It is the personal convictions that make up who we are, what we believe in and desire to promote.

What we hope for is not always what we get. One could have hoped for a mayor that took a positive, unifying leadership role in the community. All is not lost, there is still time.

I am not writing here to take a side or to point a finger of blame. My point is to shed light on the responsibility of the individual as part of the collective whole. Every situation presents us with an opportunity. The very same passion can empower us to do things differently if we afforded ourselves patience and observation, one of the hardest of things with which to task ourselves and most worthwhile in its success.

Locally, let this be a reminder to us that words do hold power in the face of a larger, national tragedy. Let us not wield them so quickly as to be so naïve about the Internet, Facebook in particular.

CARTER HUBBARD  
Carrboro

Opposition to shelter site

Mr. Cianciolo, I’m not afraid. It’s just that I can count.

In a Jan. 6 Carrboro Citizen article entitled “Planning Board approves new shelter proposal,” a Planning Board member was quoted as saying, “I think a lot of the opposition is based on fear of the unknown. I think the basis of the fear is unfounded, but I think the fear is real,” said board member George Cianciolo. Supporters for the new men’s homeless shelter site at Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and Homestead Road have repeatedly used the word “fear” to describe residents who live near the newly proposed site, but I don’t think fear is right. Opposition for this site is based on facts and numbers.

- All three overnight at-risk facilities in Chapel Hill will be located within one-fifth of a square mile around Homestead Park. There will be zero overnight at-risk facilities anywhere else in Chapel Hill. Talking about “community responsibility,” is the Chapel Hill community only limited to this part of the town? The neighbors around Homestead Park have done more than their fair share. If this is not called over-concentration, I don’t know what is.
- There are already 123 emergency, transitional, halfway and detox overnight beds in the area around Homestead Park. The proposed shelter will add 52 emergency/transitional and 17 to 70 white-flag night beds totaling up to 242 beds in the area.
- The lease for the new site is 50 years with a 10-year option. Currently zero dollars are slated by Orange County for a new facility that will provide emergency shelter to homeless men. The opportunity over 50-plus years to expand to provide emergency shelter is a realistic option.
- The proposed shelter site is 115 feet from a residential property and is within the 1,000-foot radius of three child-care facilities.
- The Town of Chapel Hill will invest millions of dollars in a downtown-redevelopment initiative including \$13 million already slated for 140 W. Franklin St. The \$55-million project featuring luxury condos and retail is a few blocks from the current men’s homeless shelter.
- In 2008, a UNC real estate foundation spent \$46 million for University Square, a 12-acre lot very close to the current men’s shelter.

As a resident of Parkside, a neighborhood near the proposed site, I have taken the time to learn about the men’s homeless shelter proposal and I have come to the conclusion there are countless reasons why the Town of Chapel Hill needs to find a better site for the new men’s homeless shelter.

TIGER GUAN  
Chapel Hill

A little tax fairness would go a long way

CHRIS FITZSIMON

Most of the public debate about how to address the state’s \$3.7-billion budget shortfall has focused on two competing claims. The new Republican leadership says that they can balance the budget with cuts alone without doing irreparable harm to education and human services.

A broad coalition of educators, health care providers and advocates understandably believes that’s impossible and that cuts of that magnitude will devastate public education and cut off services to the most vulnerable people in the state.

They want new revenue from new taxes or at least a continuation of the tax increases passed in 2009 that are set to expire June 30. Keeping the tax rates the same makes sense, but it will only provide \$1.4 billion in revenue, less than half of the shortfall.

There’s a third point of view to consider: that tax fairness can help this year, and that doesn’t refer to the overdue tax reform that legislative leaders seem unwilling to consider this session.

Lawmakers and advocates alike should take a look at the \$5.8 billion in “tax expenditures” that North Carolina makes every year.

Legislators so determined to scrutinize every dollar the state spends ought to spend as much time examining every dollar the state gives away to specific industries and multinational companies.

The Department of Revenue issues a report every biennium about the tax breaks, loopholes and preferential treatment in the tax code. The report defines tax expenditure straightforwardly.

“A tax expenditure is defined as an exemption, exclusion, deduction, allowance, credit, refund, preferential tax rate or other device that reduces the amount of tax revenue which otherwise would be collected.”

The report identifies sales-tax exemptions for everything from seeds and medication used in farming to the electricity used by manufacturers, the same electricity that everybody else pays taxes on.

There’s a tax break for tobacco distributors if they file their reports and cigarette tax collections with the state on time. Alcohol distributors receive a similar break for timely collections and reporting. There’s no break for citizens who file their taxes before the deadline.

There are loopholes for the logging industry and poultry farms and a break for tobacco companies that export cigarettes. The list goes on and on.

Some of the exemptions cost the state a few million dollars. Others cost tens or even hundreds of millions. That’s a lot of teachers and a lot of services to people with disabilities.

One of the most egregious giveaways that didn’t even make the report is the practice of allowing multistate corporations to shift the profits they make in North Carolina to other states to avoid paying the state taxes they owe. That not only robs the state treasury of revenue, it is patently unfair to North Carolina companies who compete with the multistate corporations but pay higher taxes because they have no place to hide their profits.

It’s time to expand all the talk about the pain and sacrifice that the state budget crisis will require to include more than state employees and people who rely on state services. The special interests that have been reaping the benefits from all the tax breaks and loopholes should be called on to help with the budget crisis too by paying their fair share of taxes for a change.

Chris Fitzsimon is executive director of N.C. Policy Watch.

LETTERS POLICY

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