

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Public input needed

There has been a shift in Carrboro’s public-input process over the past several years from gathering information from the Carrboro citizens in some type of public-input process prior to developing full-blown plans to presenting fully developed plans to the public in a very brief public-hearing process.

This new paternalistic approach’s shortcomings are obvious in many recent projects that have or have not come before the public. These include the new fire station, which was not designed to good green standards and took a lot of individual citizen vigilance to bring to some semblance of a healthy building. The latest transportation plan was presented almost fully formed, and when input was received from the public, it was met with scowls and anger on the part of some members of the council. The latest is the greenway debate. It is my opinion that had the town held a design charrette or at least asked the public what it thought appropriate for this public space, we may have avoided a polarized process. As an architect, I can’t imagine designing a house for someone without asking how they might like it to be.

The latest affront which is still unfolding is the Carrboro 2020 vision developed by Carrboro citizens 10 years ago. It is my understanding that the board has taken upon itself to make the 2020 plan the topic of their retreat, again, without any public input. The recent history of lack of gathering early input from citizens makes me very wary of this process, for while a board re-

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treat is not behind closed doors, it is hardly a public venue for discussion.

This father-knows-best approach is at best inefficient and at worst runs the risk of pandering to select classes of the public, as seen in the road-connectivity debate, where a very few were served at the expense of the public at large. Again some members of the board were outwardly less than happy with dissenting opinions that favored the larger public.

In today’s world of information sharing and readily available science, the potential cost of defending uninformed decisions is a waste of precious resources.

GILES BLUNDEN
Carrboro

Thanks for the change

In January, Real Change from Spare Change, an initiative of the Chapel Hill Downtown Partnership that supports community efforts to address homelessness, sponsored the Come Out of the Cold! Donation Drive. The response was tremendous! Neighborhoods, offices, churches, families, civic groups, UNC departments, and numerous individuals throughout Orange County answered the call and donated much more than we ever expected! In total we collected 143 blankets and sleeping bags, 133 jackets, 79 toiletry kits and almost 250 hats/scarves/gloves.

Housing for New Hope Street outreach workers distributed items immediately to unsheltered homeless individuals. Items were given out during the Point in Time Count throughout Orange County by law enforcement officers and service providers. And many people living in transitional housing and supportive housing received donated items through Neighbor House of Hillsborough, Maggie Alvis Halfway House, Sunrise Casaworks Residential Program, and Cross Disability Services.

The wonderful outpouring of donations for this drive reflects the shining generosity of our entire community. Thank you so much to everyone that contributed to this drive and took time to help those in need!

MEG MCGURK
Assistant director, Chapel Hill Downtown Partnership

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More evidence of North Carolina’s failures in mental health care reform

CHRIS FITZSIMON

State lawmakers received a report on the state of the mental health system Wednesday, and the news is mixed at best: some improvements in the troubled system along with startling reminders of the huge problems that remain.

Maybe most disturbing of all, the report was completed before the devastating budget made by the legislature last summer to services for the mentally ill, developmentally disabled and people with addictions.

The report was mandated by the 2008 General Assembly and is an analysis of the gaps in services in a system plagued by problems in structure and funding since the 2001 reform efforts. It was prepared by the Department of Health and Human Services based on information from mental health consumers, advocacy groups, outside task forces and the local management entities (LMEs) that oversee the delivery of services.

It restates the primary goal of the mental health system after the 2001 reforms: to provide people with mental illness, addictive disorders and developmental disabilities the opportunity to live in their communities instead of state institutions, which are reserved for the people with the most severe needs.

That’s the plan. The problem is that for that to work, adequate services must be available in communities across the state. One common theme of the report and statistics furnished to the department every quarter is that services vary dramatically across North Carolina.

The last quarterly statistical report prepared by the department showed vast differences in the performance of the 24 LMEs. The state has a goal of proving timely access to care for

at least 88 percent of patients with urgent needs. One LME saw 100 percent of the patients; another saw only 39 percent.

The state has a goal of seeing 70 percent of patients discharged from mental hospitals within the first crucial seven days after release. It seems as if the goal ought to 100 percent, but no LME did that. One saw 71 percent of patients released in its area. Another saw only 24 percent, leaving 76 percent without follow-up care.

Among the common problems identified in the report by various groups are waiting lists, especially for people with developmental disabilities, lack of transportation and lack of affordable housing, despite a significant investment in 2008 in housing for people with disabilities.

People with addictions continue to end up in prisons instead of treatment. The Institute of Medicine recommended expanding the successful Drug Treatment Courts to help, but new courts have not been established.

The report is basically an organized presentation of the problems faced by the mental health system in the first half of 2009, and the list of gaps in services is a long one.

DHHS officials have made some progress in finding more efficient ways to provide services, and some internal reorganization has helped. But none of that gets to the fundamental problem that was apparent in 2009 and is even more striking now.

The state simply does not adequately invest in caring for people with mental illness, developmental disabilities or addictive disorders. Not even close.

Much of the public discussion about mental health in recent years has understandably focused

on the shocking problems in state institutions, where patients have died from abuse or neglect, and on the fraud and mismanagement in the community support program, which undeniably existed, though it may have been significantly overstated. But the funding problems have never really been addressed.

The report presented Wednesday makes it clear that the mental health system was scrambling last year to rearrange and redesign services to try to compensate for a lack of resources. And things have gotten worse.

Recent months have brought disturbing accounts of the effect of last summer’s budget cuts to programs across the state. Department officials themselves have reported that the cuts are being felt in jails, ERs and state mental hospitals. Programs for the developmentally disabled are being slashed or abolished.

That has led to more scrambling in an even more impossible attempt to provide more services with even less money. DHHS officials have tried to put the best spin on the problems, even claiming that the crises have provided the opportunity to streamline the mental health system.

None of that matters much to people with mental illness, a developmental disability or addiction disorder. They need and deserve our help. The report presented Wednesday shows many of them were not getting it last year and we know many more people are suffering alone now.

Enough already with reports. Let’s find the will to do something about it.

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

The case for a Carrboro Costco

ELLIE KINNAIRD

There has been discussion recently about whether a Costco located in Carrboro would have a detrimental effect on our community. I believe, to the contrary, that a Costco would answer a serious Carrboro (and Orange County) problem while upholding our core values. How can that be when all big-box stores are seen as evil and destructive to a community?

Here is the argument for a Costco in Carrboro.

Homeowner taxes in Carrboro are so high, they are driving our low-income people out, especially our black community. Without expanding the commercial tax base, our taxes will continue to go higher, driving more lower- and moderate-income people from Carrboro. The proportion of property tax paid by residents as compared to businesses is out of balance, with single family carrying 71.43 percent of the burden, multi-family 14.68 percent, and only 9.23 percent from business sources. If we do not address this with a larger commercial tax base, we will become a more and more elite community. That violates a core value of Carrboro and Orange County for a diverse population.

There is a fear that a Costco will drive out our small businesses. But much of our business base is comprised of very small specialty stores. While we are fortunate to have a

range of unique small businesses, they are unable to generate a significant proportion of our sales tax. But most importantly, Costco is not in competition with its high-quality, specialty items.

We talk a great deal about paying a living wage, not just a minimum wage. Most small businesses, even though they are dedicated to their employees, cannot pay a high wage. Costco, on the other hand, pays \$18 an hour and more, for a living wage.

Further, most small businesses, though they wish they could, cannot offer health insurance to their employees. Costco provides health insurance for all part-time and full-time employees. Our community believes that no one should be uninsured. Costco fits into our value system for health care for all workers.

Costco is committed to social justice and the environment, which we in Carrboro value.

While we have a low unemployment rate, there are many, especially at the lower wage scale, who are unemployed. A Costco would provide many jobs to that population. Again, a core value of our community.

Thousands of people in Orange County drive to the Costco in Durham, thereby polluting the air and causing environmental damage. Some years ago, New Hope Commons was proposed to go on the Chapel Hill side of Interstate 40. It was

rejected, and the sales and property taxes went to Durham. The pollution and tax burden on homeowners and renters stayed here.

Finally, we are urged to buy local, but the fact is that thousands drive to Costco every day for those items not available here. I do all the shopping that I can in Carrboro – Weaver Street Market, Harris Teeter, Fitch Lumber, the PTA Thrift Shop and all the fine small stores, coffee shops and restaurants. The loan to Weaver Street Market that enabled it to start up and flourish was approved at my first meeting as mayor. As mayor, I worked hard to build up the business community to its present vitality and revived the merchants association; I was instrumental in saving The ArtsCenter; along with other great supporters, started our library; and I obtained the funds for the Farmers’ Market facility. I love Carrboro and want it to continue as a robust and attractive place, but I don’t want it to become an elitist enclave without a diverse population.

Enhancing our tax base with a Costco would be a start to relieve the homeowner’s tax burden and to promote our values as a whole community welcoming all walks of life.

Ellie Kinnaird represents Orange and Person counties in the North Carolina Senate and is the former mayor of Carrboro.

Greenway should be for all to use

DEBBIE L. NICHOLS

I find your Flora columns fascinating and informative, specifically the 2/4/10 issue connecting *Avatar* to nature. It is most imperative that all citizens be allowed to partake in nature observations.

Unfortunately, in this same issue there was a disturbing letter (“Carrboro misguided,” 2/4/10), symbolizing a trend. The writer objects to sidewalks or bike lanes. Without sidewalks, people in wheelchairs find it almost impossible to travel. Everyone should be allowed access to public land, especially nature trails.

I think about the recent 50-year anniversary of the Woolworth sit-in and how this country has changed in racial relations. Yet the country’s attitude towards the disabled is out of step in terms of equality. As a disabled person with multiple sclerosis, I face discrimination daily. I have been

While I am a leftist, I could never possibly agree with the elitist arguments that they are using to bamboozle the Carrboro Board of Alder people.

told that I “wasn’t worthy of owning a dog,” that I shouldn’t live independently, etc. I only need a cane, but friends in wheelchairs cannot leave their houses due to so many hindrances. And now the property owners around Bolin Creek are saying that a disability access is not good for the environment. Where were they when the residents of southwest Orange County were fighting against the airport flying over our property and the waste transfer station? This is the bread basket of the county. Are they nuts? Now they are organizing against any kind of access for the disabled, using an environmental excuse when it doesn’t hold water.

According to online records, Orange County paid for half the Adams Tract property in Bolin Creek. And Orange County paid for a lot of Bolin Creek Greenway. Denying access to the Bolin Creek trail would be a travesty to the disabled. The same people were happy when the county helped buy the land. Yet now they only want the most agile people in the neighborhood allowed in. I think the environmental arguments are just euphemisms for keeping the general public out, including the disabled, of public lands. This is just like the old Republican Southern strategy for obtaining votes in the South in the late ’60s. Except this time it’s the political left using a convoluted environmental argument, and they are not being honest about their intentions. While I am a leftist, I could never possibly agree with the elitist arguments that they are using to bamboozle the Carrboro Board of Alder people. Tell it like it is; you just don’t want anyone to access what you think is your land. This is public land. I will continue to stand up for disability equality as loudly and as often as needed.

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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