

FOR THE RECORD

Déjà vu all over again

We’ve seen this movie before – just last year, in fact – the one where the towns of southern Orange and the board of county commissioners square off over library funding.

Chapel Hill, whose library is open to all residents of Orange County, has long sought an increase in county support, which has fallen over the past 15 years from 20 percent of the library’s budget to 11 percent. Over the same time, the library has grown to become the state’s busiest.

The subject of county support was part of an extensive back-and-forth at the most recent Assembly of Governments meeting. And though there is a lot of consensus on what could be done, the reality is that this year – again – there won’t be funds to do much.

While the town’s fiscal challenges are many, the pressures on the county this year are even greater.

The state budget looks grim. There is massive deficit in Medicaid funding — \$250 million and growing – and that will have consequences at the local level. This is also going to be another year of strain on the county’s social services. Orange County may have one of the state’s highest per capita incomes, but the percentage of people in poverty is about equal to the state average. Here, as it is elsewhere, the need for assistance is growing. Consequently, a big increase in library funding from the county is probably not going to happen.

That leaves Chapel Hill in a pickle. Town Manager Roger Stancil has said interest rates and capital markets are favorable for the library expansion — a project approved by voters in 2003. As a result, the building can be built without a tax increase. Staffing and maintaining a library more than twice the size of the existing one is another story, adding about \$775,000 in annual costs.

Monday night, as the Chapel Hill Town Council discussed the proposed library expansion, Mayor Mark Kleinschmidt acknowledged that the county is not likely to fill that gap. He suggested the town look for a kind of down payment this year and a promise of a steady increase.

Council members also discussed a few familiar options, including approaching other governments and the possibility of charging an annual fee for library services.

Like last year and years before, we suspect that the council will look hard at the fee, but not make the leap. Still, it is unfair to force the full cost of a library expansion driven in part by patrons from elsewhere on the Chapel Hill taxpayer.

It makes sense to attempt to cobble together funds from a variety of sources, including grants, local governments and schools as well as look for ways to reduce the new operating costs driven by the expansion.

Meanwhile, planning a long-term, coordinated strategy on libraries ought to take place outside the yearly budget wrangling. Libraries fill too important a role in the community to only be discussed when it’s time for the ax to fall.

Caution: icy weekend ahead

This weekend, there’s a strong likelihood that snow and ice will fall from the sky. This usually leads to a town-wide demonstration of poor driving skills and a run on bread and milk.

Please take your time, don’t slam on the brakes and if you go into a skid remember to turn in the direction of the skid. (It’s kind of counterintuitive but it works like a champ.)

In the event of utterly rotten weather, *The Citizen* will post periodic updates on our MILL blog (carrborocitizen.com/mill).

For closings and other information, we recommend tuning into WCHL 1360.



Getting our bearings toward making things better

SAMMY SLADE

After the failure of the U.N. Climate Change Summit in Copenhagen, actions to resolve climate change in the U.S. are in reverse. Factors contributing to this lack of positive action include congress’ reluctance, before the mid-term elections, to engage in another battle, which is likely to be as drawn-out as the health care reform process has been. Now with

Considering the emergency that climate change puts us in, and the lack of significant action from higher scales of governance, the Carrboro Board of Aldermen voted unanimously in early December 2009 to adopt “A Resolution to Take Responsibility in a Socially Just Manner for Carrboro’s Portion of CO2 in the Atmosphere; Toward Getting the Atmosphere Back to a Safe Level Below 350 Parts per Million.”

rial Hall. (The event is at 7 p.m., though if you would like a seat, the doors open at 6:30.)

Please go to this event! It is imperative that we understand the degree of action called for if we are to mitigate the worst of what scientists are describing.

Fortunately for us in the Triangle, we still have the apparent luxury and potential of enacting changes that are derived from abstract understanding and not tangible calamity. Without the community’s understanding, there will not be the necessary movement required to assure that we implement action of the quality and degree required before irreversible catastrophe worsens and is felt locally.

Stay tuned to the Transition Carrboro-Chapel Hill

“unleashing” that will happen on May 15. This will be the “big bang” community effort to bring together all the individuals and organizations within the community to coordinate our efforts in imagining and enacting a positive future. In the meantime ... go see Hansen on Feb. 1!

If we could all understand the significance of our times, taking real action would be harder to deny ... and things could only get better.

Sammy Slade is a member of the Carrboro Board of Aldermen.

“It is imperative that we understand the degree of action called for if we are to mitigate the worst of what scientists are describing.”

In line with what is being called for by the scientific consensus for the industrialized world, this resolution commits Carrboro to a 20 percent reduction of 1990 levels of CO₂ in the atmosphere by 2020.

On Feb. 1, the Carrboro, Chapel Hill and UNC communities will have an invaluable opportunity to see one of the world’s most eminent climate-change scientists. James Hansen will be giving a presentation titled “Global Climate Change: What Must We Do Now?” This UNC-hosted and sponsored event, free and open to the public, will be at Memo-

Democracy or auction?

CHRIS FITZSIMON

Developer and prominent political fundraiser Lanny Wilson resigned from the State Board of Transportation Thursday, saying in a letter to Gov. Beverly Perdue that he wanted to “avoid any further unnecessary distractions” that would hurt Perdue’s efforts to reform the board.

Wilson was involved with a land deal on the coast that is part of a federal investigation into the activities of former-Gov. Mike Easley. Wilson also testified before the State Board of Elections in October about large contributions he made to the N.C. Democratic Party.

Wilson is a player in North Carolina politics. He and his wife have given at least \$275,000 to candidates since 2000 and raised hundreds of thousands more. That’s why he is a player and how he ended up close to governors and a member of the Department of Transportation board.

Politicians need big money to run for office, and Wilson gives and raises it. Big money dominates campaigns and sews the seeds for much of the corruption that has contaminated our state government in recent years.

Polls show that people in North Carolina and across the country know that big special-interest mon-

ey plays too prominent a role in our elections and has too much influence on the decisions of politicians when they are in office.

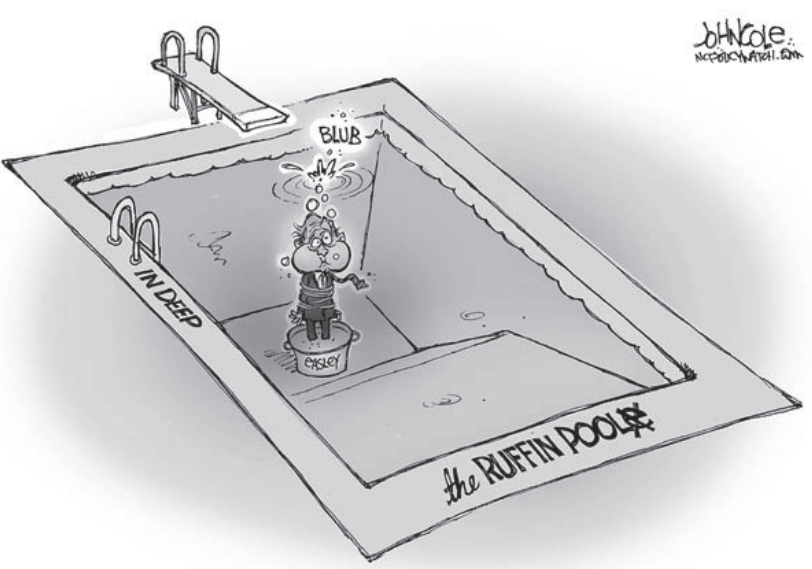
That’s what makes Thursday’s U.S. Supreme Court decision to allow corporations to spend unlimited money to elect or defeat candidates so disturbing. The flood-gates of huge special-interest money have been thrown open and threaten to wash away the chances of candidates who disagree with the corporate line.

An official with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce told The Washington Post that the end of the ban on corporate money in elections “is a positive for the political process and free enterprise.”

The political process is not supposed to be like a market, where large companies swallow small ones, where firms with a bigger market share have more influence on an industry, where everything is determined by a stock price and a dividend.

Everybody is supposed to have the same voice in a democracy if they choose to use it. This ruling makes a mockery of that notion.

Ironically, the decision comes as the Obama administration is trying to tighten the regulations on the major players in the financial industry whose greed and mismanagement played a key role in the eco-



nomic meltdown that is devastating millions of families.

The companies are resisting at every turn, of course, spending hundreds of millions of dollars lobbying members of Congress to keep the regulations weak while handing out billions in bonuses made possible by a taxpayers’ bailout.

Imagine what happens this fall, when the same companies can spend millions to elect candidates to stave off regulations that would reign in their greed and help prevent another financial collapse.

Fred Wertheimer of Democracy 21 told The Post that the ruling wipes out “a century of American history devoted to preventing cor-

porate corruption of our democracy.”

Closer to home, Bob Hall of Democracy North Carolina calls the decision another step toward turning public elections into private auctions. He’s right, and the starting bid and the sale price just went way up, and they were both already out of reach of most North Carolinians.

Democracy is supposed to belong to all of us, not just the highest bidder, not just Lanny Wilson or Bank of America or Goldman Sachs.

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

LETTERS

Why not both?

I would think everyone who wants a solid and sustainable future for Carrboro would support an expansion and diversification of the local economy. This discussion, in its latest incarnation, has state Sen. Ellie Kinnaird advocating for a Carrboro Costco and some local entrepreneurs and citizens decrying the desire for such a thing here.

I’m having a hard time understanding why we can’t have both.

Many have noted that the county is bleeding money in lost revenue when Orange County (including Carrboro) shoppers leave to shop the big-box stores in neighboring counties (you know who you are). Why should our county lose this revenue? Why should Carrboro lose this revenue?

Yes, there will be some competition with local merchants, just as a new local merchant competes with the existing merchants. And it is true that national and regional retailers remove a greater percentage of their revenue from the local economy than do local retailers, but surely it is better to get a percentage of that dollar rather than none, and to get jobs for local residents and reduce highway miles driven by shoppers.

None of these points, on either side, is new. I too would love to see local entrepreneurs supply all of our needs in a six-block walk from my house, but I can’t see the value to the whole of Carrboro of standing on convictions that push an ever-increasing and disproportionate tax burden on residents, especially those who can least stand it and who can use the jobs the most. The continued absence of these retail locations means many, many, many people will continue to leave Carrboro, to leave Orange County, to shop. How many of those dollars come back to our local economy?

JACK HAGGERTY
Carrboro

Send us your letters!

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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