

FOR THE RECORD

As a community

There was a frustrating inevitability to the failure of the state's effort to farm out the care of its citizens with developmental disabilities and those in need of mental health care to the free market. The signs of an impending collapse were there and became even clearer over the past year as the leadership of the state system moved on and more and more providers said they could not continue under new payment rates set by the state.

So, an under-funded system reliant on offering profitability to its providers began a series of cut-backs and, finally last week Caring Family Network — the primary provider in Orange, Person and Chatham counties — announced that within the next month it would be discontinuing most of the services it's been offering.

More than a thousand Orange County clients and their families are now faced with an uncertain future and a rapidly dwindling access to care.

Our county is just one of many throughout the state facing similar situations where the burden shifts quickly to local social service agencies, law enforcement, health care agencies and hospitals. This is a symptom of a larger problem with the market model. The system is not just broken; it's stuck with a solution that isn't working. One fear is that the easy thing to do is to pump a little more money into such a system and hope the next time around you get different results.

Even that will take awhile, and in the meantime thousands of individuals in need of care will go without.

We hope that our community will rise to the challenge and fill the gap in care. And though any local solution will be temporary, neither should this county nor the state be in any hurry to find the next for-profit enterprise willing to take on the mission.

We need a deeper, more comprehensive solution — one that protects our fellow citizens from the combination of market forces and political neglect. The people of this state have shown time and time again that they can pull together to create a brighter future.

We need a mental health system that reflects the same sense of mission and core values that built our university and community college systems. These are our brother, sisters, husbands, wives, parents, children and friends. They should be in our care.

Yes, a market-based model for mental health care offers some efficiencies, but community concern and dedication should never be jobbed out.

Free Oak Avenue  
(from speeders)

There are a lot of times in local government when a group of citizens gets up before a board of elected officials and says, "If you had to approve this today, you wouldn't."

So, Oak Avenue residents were right to remind the board of aldermen Tuesday that they wouldn't allow a developer to build a 21-foot wide road (17 feet, not counting the curbs and gutters) with no sidewalks if the traffic count was upwards of 1,000 trips a day.

But that's what's going on, and even though a speed table is working to reduce some speeding, there are still plenty of folks racing down Oak every day. Plain and simple, it's a cut through to a growing downtown, and until that changes the speeding won't stop. So the residents and the town are back to square one, which includes revisiting the idea of making part of Oak one-way. The impact of that will have to be carefully studied.

Meanwhile, one traffic-calming measure — greater police presence — has yet to be put in place. And while we're not sure where exactly Carrboro Police can set up a speed trap on the road, we're pretty sure that given the speeds seen and measured, they'll be writing plenty of tickets.

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Inspiring program helps suspended students

ISABEL GEFFNER

The recent attention given to the Report to the Joint Education Legislative Oversight Committee on the Annual Report on Drop-out Events and Rates in North Carolina has brought into clear focus many of the challenges that lie ahead of us for addressing the needs of our state's most at-risk youth. Too many of our young people are turning away from school too early, and their futures may be compromised unless we do something now.

I applaud the efforts of the state to provide literacy coaches, learn-and-earn early college high schools, dropout-prevention grants, high school transformation, North Carolina Virtual Public Schools and other initiatives outlined in the annual report.

But all the best programming in the world won't effect real, enduring change unless we simultaneously transform the way we think about and relate to the thousands of young people whose futures are at risk. It takes brave visionaries and communities to make this transformation. Traditional models of intervention have emphasized remediating incapacity among these youth, but outcomes have been inconsistent and unsustainable. Rather, focus on positive youth development that emphasizes youth potential has demonstrated enduring success. Programs that combine personal assets and skill building; academic support; family outreach; and environmental, organizational change have demonstrated a direct impact on student success.

I am inspired every day by a local program that provides a supportive environment to short-term suspended students. These are the youth most likely to drop out of school; they are often the most challenging students to deal with — academically and interpersonally — and research predicts their rate of drop-out to be three times higher than others.

Boomerang is a community-based program, housed at the Chapel Hill-Carrboro YMCA. Under the inspired leadership of its executive director, Jerry Whortan, the YMCA stepped forward and recognized that adolescents in our community who are suspended needed a place to go that would bridge their time with meaningful services and supports. Stakeholders from the school system, mental health, juvenile justice, local agencies and

even parents came together to support the idea, and two experienced, professional visionaries, Julie Wells and Tami Pfeifer, proposed the program that is now in its second year of operation.

What distinguishes Boomerang from other programs is the authentic, holistic approach to each child taken by every adult who interacts with the students. Students entering Boomerang are frequently caught off guard because staff interacts with them from a place of respect rather than power differentials. The atmosphere created at Boomerang is key to its success. It directly affects student attendance, student participation in discussions and skill groups and family participa-

*"I hope we truly embrace the possibilities for every child."*

tion. Different from a punitive, judgmental or otherwise challenging environment, Boomerang maintains an unflinching commitment to a respectful, participatory and nurturing environment. While rigorously structured, the program allows for flexibility and fluidity to respond to students' often unpredictable and unique characteristics so that the path for success can be individualized. Visitors are often surprised by the relaxed, often-joyful and ever-productive environment at Boomerang, uncharacteristic of many other programs. This reflects the unwavering respect for and commitment to the youth held by Boomerang staff.

The innovative program is based on resiliency research, a best-practice model for addressing the needs of disconnected adolescents most at risk of dropping out of school.

Boomerang helps youth and the community that surrounds them identify resources and supports that lead to long-term, successful outcomes. Through a rich and robust community collaborative, Boomerang provides each student it serves with a strengths-focused environment including intensive attention to academics, psycho-social development and even substance-abuse counseling. Research demonstrates that this approach increases a youth's ability to learn, receive informa-

tion, build relationships and to be resilient (to bounce back from adversity). While acknowledging the often pervasive risk factors confronting many of the youth it serves (e.g., single-parent homes, poverty, a family history of substance abuse and physical or emotional abuse), Boomerang focuses on providing students with an environment to succeed, on effecting systemic change in our community that benefits disconnected youth and on disseminating the research and practice on which the program is based to adults in our community interacting with youth most at risk of dropping out of school.

At Boomerang, youth are met by adults who expect them to be successful. Youth are connected to advocates and mentors. They take ownership of their out-of-school time: They determine their own short-term goals and recognize the strengths they have, guided by trained adult professionals who focus on students' strengths and potential; they are held responsible for keeping pace with their school work; and they are required to serve their community through service projects that benefit the YMCA facilities and membership. Their families are part of their work at Boomerang, and they join together during wrap-up meetings before returning to school to cultivate communication and connection. After they return to school, they are encouraged to remain connected to Boomerang staff: Some are encouraged to serve on the Boomerang Youth Advisory Board to help guide community change, and they attend monthly Boomerang reunions where they come together at the YMCA for an evening of pizza, basketball and informally structured conversation and reflection.

I hope that as we consider deeply the path ahead for our state's at-risk youth, we go beyond programs that simply focus on academic remediation and other deficits. I hope we truly embrace the possibilities for every child; I hope we respect the journeys of the most challenged youth in our schools; I hope we come together as resourceful communities and work hand-in-hand to transform the destiny for the kids who need us most.

Boomerang stands as an inspiration for us all.

*Isabel Geffner is a community member who sits on the steering committee of Boomerang.*

Wal-Mart's corporate tax shenanigans

BY ELAINE MEJIA

Recently, a North Carolina judge ruled against Wal-Mart in the giant retailer's lawsuit against the state of North Carolina. In 2005, the state sent Wal-Mart a bill claiming that the retailer owed \$33.5 million in back taxes. Wal-Mart paid up (probably to avoid heavy interest penalties later on) but then sued in state court in 2006 to have the money returned.

At issue is a clever tax scheme that the company used to avoid paying an estimated \$230 million in states' taxes across the country, according to the Wall Street Journal. North Carolina's share of that was \$33.5 million between 1998 and 2002. So what did Wal-Mart due to earn the state's scrutiny? Essentially, the company put ownership of its properties into a "real estate investment trust." That trust was owned by Wal-Mart Property Co., a separate holding company. Conveniently, Wal-Mart owned 99 percent of this holding company. It used this complicated set-up to avoid state taxes by making rent payments on its stores to the holding company and then deducting that amount from its tax bills.

Unfortunately for Wal-Mart, the Department of Revenue didn't buy it and neither did the judge. In fact, the judge found that the scheme served no legitimate business purpose and was used solely to lower the company's tax bills.

What's lost in most of the media coverage about this case is why it really matters and what can be done to prevent these kinds of corporate tax shenanigans in the future.

So, why should North Carolinians care about this case? If nothing else, we should care because \$33.5 million dollars is at stake. But there are much bigger reasons to care. In North Carolina today, much of our quality of life depends upon healthy public structures — things like an educated workforce, the court system and good roads. It's these investments that enable companies like Wal-Mart to profit from doing business in our state. When companies like Wal-Mart don't pay their fair share, two things happen — we forego investments that would improve our quality of life and make our economy stronger and the rest of us pay more. I'd call that a "lose-lose" scenario.

There is a change we can make to our state tax laws that would prevent corporations from trying many of these types of tax schemes in the future. It's called "combined reporting." Under this system, multi-state corporations would have to file a report with the state that discloses their entire business structure, including related entities. This would include relationships with holding companies like the one Wal-Mart owned 99 percent of and paid its rent to. Over time, using this strategy to close corporate loopholes would raise hundreds of millions of dollars that could be used for investments in things like education and roads or put back into the hands of working families by expanding the state earned income tax credit.

Twenty-two states already have combined reporting and five states have adopted this reform in just the last three years. In North Carolina, not one but two bipartisan study committees recently recommended that our state adopt this strategy as well. In the end, this really isn't about one company. It's a wake-up call that should prompt us to put into place public policies that are fair to everyone and that will improve our lives and strengthen our economy in the decades ahead.

*Elaine Mejia is director of the N.C. Budget and Tax Center.*

LETTERS

The cyclists' life

Thank you so much for the picture and caption highlighting recent autos hitting bicyclists. As a daily commuter to work through Carrboro and Chapel Hill, I am aware that we bikers can be hard to see and seem annoying to car drivers. But, it can be annoying to us bikers to have to avoid deadly obstacles in our bike lanes everyday, including cars, buses, broken glass and other debris. I just wanted to remind people that not only are we as bicyclists conserving energy and helping reduce carbon emissions, but we are actively making your car commute faster and easier by eliminating the number of cars on the road. So perhaps instead of honking angrily at us and veering into the bike lanes, you could give us a friendly wave and remember we are all just trying to get to where we are going, just like you.

Thanks.

*Ben Davis  
Carrboro*

Correction:

Our story last week incorrectly reported the stormwater mitigation cost estimate for a potential town-leased parking lot behind the KFC on East Main Street. The cost is estimated to be between \$100,000 and \$200,000.

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. Typed letters are preferred and email even more so. That said, send your letters to:

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