

FOR THE RECORD

Not so quiet in the tropics

Experience tells us that this is the time of year when it's a good idea to pay some attention to what's going on in the ocean to our southeast. It's a little deceptive that the official start of hurricane season starts on June 1. During a slower than normal season like this one, you can get lulled into complacency.

So here's a reminder that the period of time from early September to early October has seen some of the worst storms in our local history.

Fran, a category 3 when it hit the coast, roared into southern Orange County on Sept. 5, 1996, packing 90 mile per hour winds.

Hazel was still a category 3 when it passed over Chapel Hill on Oct. 15, 1954.

The damage from both storms was substantial — a huge swath of downed trees, lost power and homes, businesses and croplands in ruins.

Living through something like that teaches one the simple elegance of the old Boy Scout motto: Be prepared. In this case, that means three things — a hurricane kit, an eye on the tropics and a family emergency plan.

It doesn't take long to put a hurricane kit together, and having one around can come in handy during, say, an ice storm. The basics are water, batteries, medicines, first-aid supplies and some way to cook. You can read the official list at redcross.org. Our advice is to always have too much water — fill the tub — you'd be surprised how much you use.

The family emergency plan should include a set meeting place and alternative ways to contact each other or check in, such as a friend or relative out of the storm's reach.

To learn more about emergency preparedness in Orange County and for additional tips and links, visit the county's site at [co.orange.nc.us/ems/Emergencypreparedness.asp](http://co.orange.nc.us/ems/Emergencypreparedness.asp)

You might want to do that fairly soon. We hear the surf is up in the Cape Verdes.

ENDORSEMENT LETTERS

*The Carrboro Citizen* welcomes letters of endorsement for candidates in the 2009 municipal and school board elections.

We ask that you keep letters in support of individual candidates to 325 words and multiple candidates to 375 words.

As with our general letters policy all letters must be accompanied by the author's name, address and contact information. We will publish one letter per author per month. Typed letters are preferred and email even more so. Lengthy letters written in longhand will become mysteriously lost.

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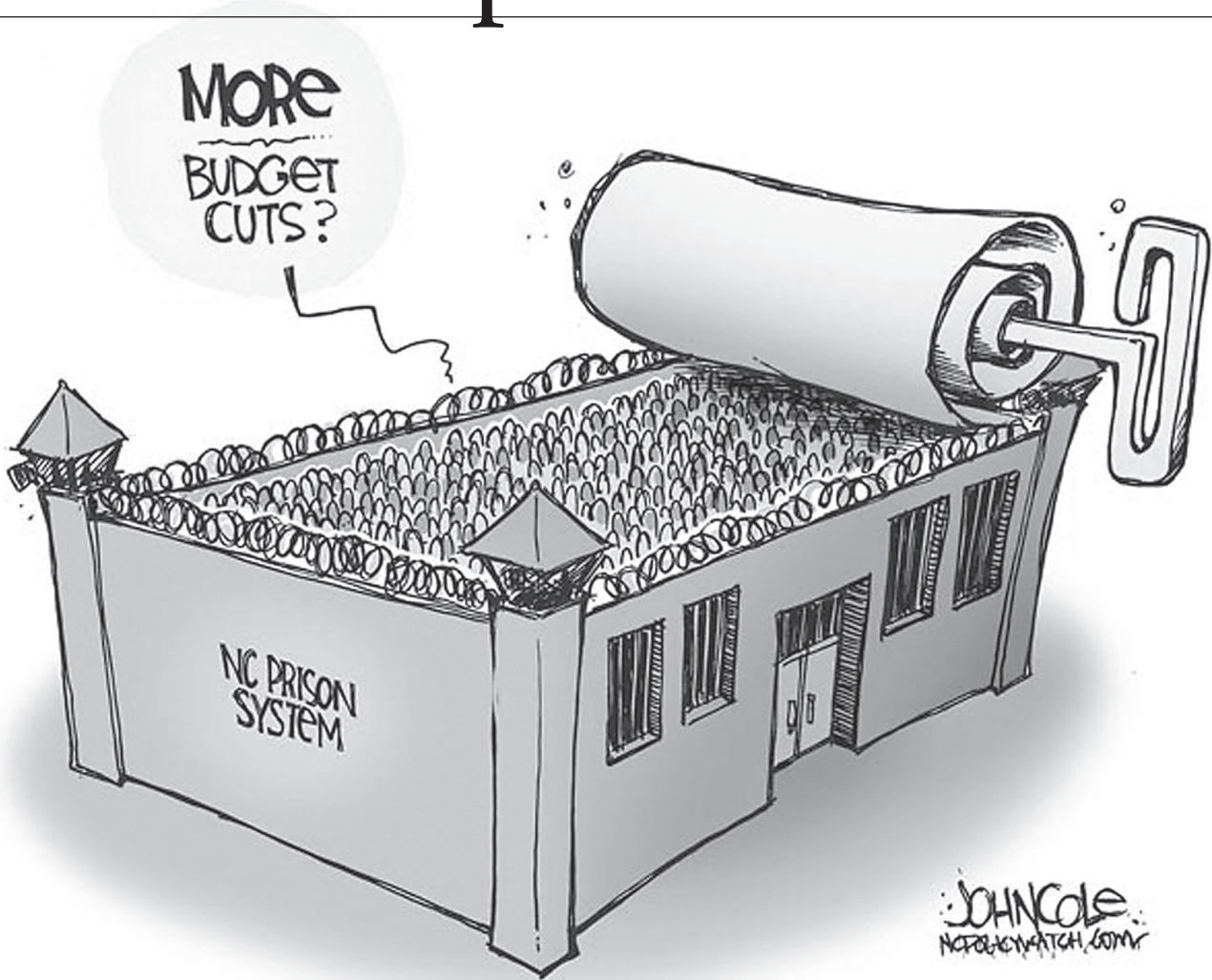
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LETTERS

Wrong on goats, wrong for Carrboro

I am one of many urban homesteaders in Carrboro. My two backyard fainting goats have reduced decades of overgrown ivy and honeysuckle to a non-invasive status. We chose fainting goats for their gentle, non-climbing reputation.

Goats have been allowed in Carrboro for decades. On Aug. 25, the board of aldermen voted to change the tract requirements for having two adult fainting goats from 40,000 sq. feet to 25,000 sq. ft, still over half of an acre. Mayoral candidate Brian Voyce and alderman candidate Sharon Cook opposed the amendment.

Brian Voyce contended that goats harbor disease and pose a threat to public health. A goat specialist at NC State's veterinary school said the most common ailment they treat is worms. According to the 2006 N.C. Rabies Report: "No rabies cases were identified among the following animals ... goats (33 submitted)."

To understand the hyperbolic nature of Voyce's claims, consider that Maple View Farms, the State Fair, Spence's Farm and the Museum of Life and Science all have hands-on livestock and are among of the most popular attractions for children in our area. Parents understand the importance of such experiences for their children.

Candidate Sharon Cook seemed confused about the nature of the or-

dinance, insisting that it was to "allow farm animals on urban properties," rather than merely to tweak the lot size for doing so.

Brian Voyce and Sharon Cook seem determined to stop any kind of green progress, be it small livestock or community gardens. Carrboro residents value the diversity, sustainability and progressive values that make Carrboro unique. Urban homesteading is part of that charm and is a rising trend in cities from Portland to

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MARIANNE PRINCE  
*Carrboro*

Support Brownstein

My family moved to Chapel Hill six and a half years ago from Florida. My husband and I have two children who attend the Chapel Hill-Carrboro school district.

After a recent article (8/13) on the candidates running for the district school board, I felt the need to make known and clarify the qualifications of Michelle Brownstein.

Shell and I have known each other since what we call "our Binkley days." I was new to the public school system, which one of my children was entering

that year. I noticed that she was very knowledgeable and understanding of my questions and concerns. Since then, I have had the pleasure to work with Shell in many ways.

When I joined the Parent Advocacy Committee at Mary Scroggs Elementary, I came to understand her deep involvement in the community's education system. Shell always pushed for the "betterment for all the children," from spearheading an expansion of the playground to making sure all the kids got enough P.E. time. Her ability to stay on task and focus was, and still is, her strongest trademark.

Although Shell has the experience and knowledge to advocate for children with special needs (whether academically gifted or with learning disabilities), her top focus and concern is to facilitate ALL children achieving their potential.

Just like Shell, I have volunteered on many committees and have been a room parent in my children's classes. If there is one person I would trust to do the right thing, it's Shell. I am confident that when Shell sits on the school board, she will be working and looking out for all the children, not just one segment.

I only hope that our district's voters take the time to make an educated decision.

MARLA MILLER  
*Chapel Hill*

Test scores are up? Kind of? Maybe?

STEVE PEHA

This past school year, almost every school in North Carolina made test score gains in reading, math and science. So what accounted for this? Did we:

(A) implement new instructional methods?

(B) lengthen the school day or the school year?

(C) buy more computers?

(D) none of the above.

The correct answer is "D: none of the above." But something important did change, and it accounted for a significant percentage of the gains.

On Aug. 6, 2009, the Department of Public Instruction put out a press release entitled "ABCs Results Released For 2008-09 School Year; Retesting Benefits K-8 Schools." Whoa there! What's this retesting? And how much did K-8 schools benefit from it?

Retesting is just what it says it is: Kids who don't pass the test the first time get to take it again. The state uses only the highest of the two scores for official measurement purposes. So how big was the retesting effect? Here's what the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction said in the Aug. 6 release:

"In mathematics, the retest moved the percent proficient from 72 percent to 79.9 percent. In reading, the percent proficient went from 58.5 percent to 67.5 percent. In science, the change was 10 percentage points — from 54 percent proficient before retesting to 64 percent with retesting included."

Looks like the state improved by roughly eight points in math, nine points in reading and 10 points in science, simply as a result of giving kids a second shot at the test. With state scores in the 50s, 60s and 70s, this increase seems quite significant to me. So what does this mean?

It could mean that the tests are not very reliable. It could mean that prior familiarity with the test produces a significant advantage. It could mean that test takers were more comfortable or more diligent the second time around. It could mean a little bit of all three.

One thing these retest increases do not mean, however, is that kids got any smarter between test #1 and test #2. So what's going on here?

When the tests were first constructed over a decade or ago, they were intentionally created to be very easy to pass. In fact, according to a variety of comparison studies, North Carolina's tests were almost the easiest in the nation. As a result, kids passed them easily and scores zoomed up. Then, over the last three years, the reading and math tests were made more difficult. This caused scores to go down.

Now retesting has been introduced. Obviously, allowing retesting makes the tests easier to pass. What does all this mean? It means we now have harder tests that are easier. What does that mean?

I have no idea.

At this point, it is virtually impossible, even with detailed test score data, for anyone to know if or by how much students have improved in reading and math since testing began. And now that retesting will be included this coming year, and probably in all years thereafter, it seems that we will be forever wondering whether our kids are getting smart or just getting smart about taking tests.

When all this testing began, we were promised two important things: that we'd know whether our kids were getting smarter and what to do about it if they weren't. When tests start out easy, then are made harder, then are made easier again, instead of getting these two things, what we get is confusion.

And yet, DPI thinks just the opposite:

"State Board of Education Chairman Bill Harrison said that this year's data give North Carolinians a clear picture of how well schools are performing. By including retest results, we can see the number of students who are able to score proficient and demonstrate they are ready for the next grade level. I am pleased that we can give schools credit for this accomplishment."

A clear picture of how well schools are performing? This situation seems more than a little muddy to me. And since I couldn't find out why the retesting option was offered this year, I'm forced to use my own student-achievement sleuthing skills.

It seems to me that the kids who would benefit most from retesting would be those who just missed passing by a few points. How many points exactly? Probably the number of points in the test's Standard Error of Measurement, or SEM. I can imagine a savvy statistician noticing after the tests got harder that many kids fell just below the passing level but within the SEM. Why not give those kids a second shot, when we know that their scores are likely to go up just enough to have them pass?

So what do we know? Obviously, retesting inflates scores. And obviously, the state feels this somehow gives "a clear picture of how well schools are performing"? But does it? Really? As someone who has followed state test scores pretty closely for the last five years, I don't have a clear picture of how well schools are performing. What I have is a clear picture of how easily test scores can be manipulated, whether kids are learning or not.

*Steve Peha is founder and president of Carrboro-based Teaching That Makes Sense Inc.*

Was 2000-2007 the U.S.'s new Gilded Age? Try platinum.

ELAINE MEJIA

In American history, the "Gilded Age" refers to the late 19th Century period in which the nation's population grew rapidly, along with the wealth and excesses of America's upper class. The wealth gap between the richest and poorest Americans soared as corporate "robber barons" hoarded vast fortunes. After a brief improvement during the Progressive Era, the Gilded Age wealth disparities returned during the 1920s and peaked immediately before the infamous stock market crash that precipitated the Great Depression.

If we continue with the metallic monikers, we might well refer to the period just prior to the current recession — the period from 2000 to 2007 — as "the Platinum Age." During that period, the income gap in the United States grew to historic proportions, with an astonishing share of the nation's wealth falling into the hands of a tiny elite.

A recently released research paper from the University of California shows that in 2007, the top .01 percent of American earners took home 6 percent of total U.S. wages — nearly twice as much as in 2000. The top 10 percent of American earners pulled in 49.7 percent of total wages, a level that, according to the research paper, "is higher than any other year since 1917 and even surpasses 1928, the peak of the stock market bubble in the 'roaring' 1920s."

Figures for North Carolina's income patterns for 2007 haven't been released yet, but the data through 2006 suggests that our state's inequality is tracking, if not outpacing, the national trend. In 2006, the average income of the top 5 percent of income earners in North Carolina was 12 times greater than the bottom 20 percent of income earners, or \$197,000 compared to just \$16,000.

This growing disparity undermines the ability of low-income families to move into the middle class and of middle-class families to accumulate the assets needed to weather economic downturns and financial troubles such as illness or job loss. And, during the Platinum Age, the federal government's actions only exacerbated the problem.

During the 2000 to '07 period, tax cuts for the rich, enacted at the behest of President Bush, made the federal tax system much less progressive than at any time in recent history, and the evidence is clear that this windfall for the well-off did not trickle down to working families.

However, tax policy can be one of the government's most powerful tools for closing the income gap. At the end of this year, Congress will face critical decisions about how to deal with the 2001 and 2003 tax cuts. In particular, legislators will decide whether income from investments really deserves to be taxed at roughly half the rate as that of income from actual work. The fate of the estate tax — instituted by Teddy Roosevelt to "break up the swollen fortunes of the rich" — will likely also be up for debate.

Here in North Carolina, the General Assembly can do a lot to address the income disparity. Legislative leaders say they will hold hearings and town-hall-style forums to discuss how the state should modernize the tax system — a move that is widely considered badly needed and long overdue. Changes currently under consideration include broadening the sales tax to include services and applying the income tax to a broader swath of income and then lowering tax rates across the board. These are all changes that, if done wisely, could stabilize the tax system and make it fairer to working families.

However, the state can and should do more to boost the wages of working families. Increasing the state Earned Income Tax Credit would put more money into the pockets of many low- and middle-income families with children. State leaders should also consider creating a tax credit for low-income people who don't benefit from the EITC, such as those on fixed incomes or without children.

It is high time that elected officials put the interests of working families first by using tax policy to create opportunity and protect the assets of middle- and low-income workers. If not, the Platinum Age will return in full force as the economy recovers. And what comes after platinum anyway? Titanium? Whatever it is, we don't want to go there.

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