

THE BRUNSWICK BEACON

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Board Must Take The Blame For 'Budgetgate'

There are a couple of theories floating around about how Brunswick County's proposed new budget got to be in such a terrible mess. But no matter which scenario you choose to believe, the buck stops with the board of commissioners.

Their original budget proposal called for the elimination of the Resources Development Commission, even though the commissioners don't have the power to do that, because the RDC was established by an act of the N.C. General Assembly.

It would dissolve the Brunswick County Library Board, a group of unpaid volunteers carefully chosen to represent all areas of the county. Instead, the plan puts the fledgling library system under the control of a new county manager who hasn't even been hired yet.

It would do away with the Brunswick County Parks and Recreation Department and make this unknown county manager responsible for a wide range of public services currently supervised by a veteran director and two assistants, all of whom would be fired.

It would demote the county's most experienced and dedicated emergency management official to the position of fire marshal, while putting his likewise dedicated but far less qualified assistant in charge of our response to a hurricane, a hazardous waste spill or a nuclear meltdown.

Oh yes. The proposed budget also would raise property taxes by 10 percent.

Job creation. Access to knowledge. Exercise and recreation. Emergency preparedness. Taxes. These are the issues that define our quality of life. They are not concerns to be taken lightly.

The commissioners could have initiated a spirited debate about how effective the RDC has been in attracting business and industry to Brunswick County.

Valid questions might be raised about how much tax money we spend on district parks and recreational programs.

It may be time to consider how many expensive pieces of equipment we need to maintain an adequate level of emergency preparedness.

These are the kind of policy considerations that are supposed to guide the budget process. Commissioners are elected to establish policies that reflect our priorities. County managers are hired to draft budgets that implement those policies.

Unfortunately, that is not how Brunswick County government is working under our current board of commissioners. Because they don't set any policies. At least not in public.

No commissioner has publicly advocated the elimination of the RDC, or the library board, or the parks and recreation department or the position of emergency management director. Nor has there been any public discussion by the commissioners OR ANY VOTE to formally remove those proposals from the budget.

The morning after it was released to the public, Commissioner Chairman Don Warren quickly distanced himself from the budget, claiming it was all the work of Interim County Manager John Harvey, who accepted the blame. A week later, Warren released a statement calling most of the government restructuring proposals "unacceptable."

Again, there was no public discussion of those proposals. Instead, Warren claims that he personally (i.e. secretly) "polled a majority of the commissioners" who supposedly agreed to these new changes in policy over the telephone.

In a series of workshops last week, Warren asked Finance Officer Lithia Hahn to prepare estimates of how much of its 1992-93 budget each county department will actually spend. These figures were used as a baseline to target next year's appropriations.

Good idea. One that sounds vaguely like a policy. One that could have been explained to Harvey months ago, sparing him a lot of wasted effort and public humiliation.

Last Thursday night the board held a public hearing on a budget that didn't exist. The commissioners never voted to recommend or reject the original budget. They talked about removing some of the more offensive proposals. Then they assured the public that it had been done.

But they never voted to change a thing. They never allowed the public to see exactly what budget they were holding a hearing on. And they don't plan to hold another hearing on whatever budget they really will consider adopting.

And where did all those "unacceptable" and supposedly rejected budget proposals originate?

Some say Harvey was merely implementing campaign promises made by some of the commissioners. Others insist that the interim manager had an agenda of his own and used the budget as a carrot and stick to reward friends and punish enemies.

But any way you slice it, the commissioners must shoulder the blame for what one public hearing speaker called "Budgetgate."

The board appointed Harvey interim manager and asked him to draft a budget. It turned out to be a disaster. If he was acting under their direction, the commissioners should have the courage to admit their mistake.

On the other hand, if they really let their county planning director decide how to spend \$48 million of our money without giving him any policy guidance, they should be held accountable.

In about 515 days.

Eric Carlson



A Different Kind Of Budget Hearing

It was a different kind of hearing, as budget hearings go. Not in length, mind you, but in content and tone.

I was there last Thursday night, along with about 150 to 175 others.

Most of the audience were passionate supporters of one cause or program or another. While funding had been tentatively restored next year for most of the agencies or programs concerned, the speakers wanted to make sure commissioners knew the impact if that decision were reversed.

Commissioners had also announced publicly they intended to hold the tax rate at the current levy; that tended to defuse some of the usual criticism.

Most speakers were there to educate a newly constituted board of commissioners on the value of using county tax money to help (not bankrupt) their particular not-for-



Susan Usher

profit programs. Very few were there to lambast commissioners or anyone else responsible for the budget that was originally proposed. Except for a few almost obligatory comments, there seemed to be almost tacit agreement that was history.

Their general message: By giving a token sum, the county sends the message to these programs that (1) what you're doing is important; (2) you are appreciated; and (3) yes,

Brunswick County is better off because your services are available.

Just as important, those small sums of money help ensure an opportunity for people like Teddy Altreuter of Carolina Shores North and Carmen Coles of Long Beach to give, and give, and give some more, time collectively valued at far more than the county's contribution.

Volunteers in just one program, the cooperative extension service, contributed services worth \$116,000 in 1991—that's just the hours that were counted, and that's assuming that their skills were only valued at \$5 per hour!

Teddy is a volunteer with the Brunswick County Literacy Council; Coles with the Brunswick County 4-H program. Like most of the others in the audience, these two women give generously of their time

to help make life better for Brunswick County residents, in providing children and/or adults opportunities they might not have otherwise to grow and to be productive.

Most of these volunteers have little to gain personally from their volunteer work—except the satisfaction of having helped someone, the sense of being needed, the feeling that something you're doing is making a difference.

And I doubt a one of those volunteers would disagree with Lloyd Klutz of Leland, the one speaker who said he didn't "expect to get much applause."

Klutz reminded the audience of two things: (1) the "helping hand" starts at the end of one's own wrist; and (2) not to forget "how big the boat can get" when you're pouring money into it.



I've Got Something To Say To Y'all, Sugar

A recent column in the business section of the state's largest newspaper said we Southerners should lose our accents if we ever wish to make it to the top in the high-powered world of big business.

The writer—a recovering drawler, thanks to the aid of a speech coach capable of making anyone sound as if he or she were brought up in the Great Plains—says people in power think a Southern accent is sign of sloth and "ignorance," as one of my high school teachers use to say.

Oh, and maybe we should consider some nips and tucks to avoid age discrimination. And some liposuction just in case someone higher up on the old career ladder has a thing about love handles or thunder thighs. A sex change operation might even be worth considering.

Otherwise we might never get the opportunity to work in a skyscraper blown up by terrorists or to spend 40 of our 90 working hours per week talking on airport pay phones.

Forgive me for becoming shrill, but that kind of "advice" ticks me off—at the knucklehead who gave it and the newspaper that deemed such malarkey to be a worthwhile business page topic.

I think I was in college before I



Lynn Carlson

knew I had a Southern accent. And then I couldn't figure out how in the world all those Yankees wound up at the University of South Carolina and where they got off chiding us natives for sounding like we grew up there. It was during this period that I learned the meaning of the word "chutzpah."

(HUT-spa: Yiddish for supreme self-confidence, nerve, gall; or, as a New Yorker friend explained to me, "It's like you murdered your parents and pleaded for mercy on the grounds of being an orphan.")

I simply do not buy the premise that a majority of non-Southerners are repulsed by the way we talk. Or that what we're saying gets perfunctorily dismissed unless what we are saying happens to be worthy of perfunctory dismissal.

I concede that very bad usage and gross disregard for the alphabet invite prejudice, and that's not totally unwarranted. But it has nothing to do with the accent; speakers of every American regional cadence and affectation do it, too.

In these parts, I never cease to be amazed at the number of people in positions of power who say "wif" and "dat" and "Norf Callina." I've been hearing it all my life, but it still makes me cringe.

And I don't have a clue why others I know for a fact to be intelligent consistently replace the "n" in Brunswick with an "m." It just goes with the territory, I guess.

We Southern women tend to jump half an octave at the end of every sentence so that statements come out sounding like questions. Because I don't like to appear ambivalent, I've deliberately broken myself from doing that.

I also make it a point not to talk to adults as if I'm cooing at a litter of puppies and not to call grown people "sugar" and "honey" unless I feel genuine affection for them. But these are personal choices which have more to do with the Golden Rule than with any career goals.

All that notwithstanding, if a Southern accent is such a hindrance, explain to me how come:

■ Ted Turner has a zillion dollars in his checking account and Ross Perot has two zillion.

■ The entire country hung on every word uttered by Senator Sam Ervin, self-proclaimed "country lawyer" from Morganton, N.C., during the Watergate hearings.

■ Ditto for bourbon-and-honey-voiced Shelby Foote of Memphis during Ken Burns' "Civil War" series on public television.

■ Texas Governor Ann Richards was able to bring down the house at the 1988 Democratic National Convention with some well-drawled wisecracks that would have flopped had they come from the Elmer Fudd voice of Paul Tsongas (who I once heard referred to by a Spartanburg radio station as "Mr. Teason-gass").

I'll stand by my solid belief that if you have something to say that's worth listening to, people will do so, as long as you can manage to say it a way that engages them.

And, more importantly, that the real key to communication is not knowing what to say, or how to say it, but when to shut the heck up. That would be now.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Defender Says Gause Not 'Overpaid' As Columnist Asserted

To the editor:

To improve our report card, I agree that some changes must take place in the Brunswick County schools. I continue to believe that children can succeed as we create the proper environment for learning.

May I ask what qualifies Susan Usher to say Freeman Gause is "overpaid" in his present position? Should I conclude (through her style of journalism) that her insensitivity to this individual reveals that she might be overpaid?

In the article Usher stated, "This is a job where Gause can—and I hope will—do a great deal of good..." as referred to his performance in his new assignment. I hope I'm more sensitive than I should have been, but part of her article has innuendoes that sound like something learned at Jim Crow University. Will there be additional articles on persons that are classified as "overpaid," or is this it?

It is difficult to achieve anything when those recruiting "can't find qualified" African Americans for certain positions. It's equally frustrating when those already in certain positions are classified as "overpaid" or over-qualified. The present atmosphere is very sensitive as related to the number of minorities in leadership positions.

I would appreciate Usher's most effective journalism skills in the future.

Moses E. Stanley
 Sunset Beach
 (EDITOR'S NOTE: Susan Usher's comments were not made in a news article but in an opinion column on the Beacon's May 27 editorial page.)

It's Time To Stop Criticizing

To the editor:
 I would like to ask some of the citizens of Brunswick County if they have nothing better to do but try to find

someone to criticize.

I read the Beacon weekly and I think (Eric Carlson's column is a lot more exciting to read than all the bad things that are going on in the Bolivia complex! His columns are well-written with a wry sense of humor thrown in. And just because you do not agree with his opinions give you no right to attack his professionalism.

I have only been a Brunswick County resident for one year. I brought my children to a beautiful, peaceful, safe place to protect them from the big city life. I thought the people here were loving, considerate and the old-fashioned people I longed for. I am disappointed.

Each week some use the Beacon to be malicious, to stab at others and attack either their character or chosen profession or even political choice. A newspaper is a source of information and entertainment, so why don't you just enjoy it in the context for which it is written.

Furthermore, if these people would engross themselves in a community service to help those in need, they would not have the time to be so critical.

Marilyn Mejorado
 Supply

(More Letters, Following Page)

Write Us

The Beacon welcomes letters to the editor. All letters must be signed and include the writer's address and telephone number. Under no circumstances will unsigned letters be printed. Letters should be legible. We reserve the right to edit libelous comments. Address letters to The Brunswick Beacon, P. O. Box 2558, Shallotte, N. C. 28459.