

Summer Thistles

BY BILL FAVER

In 37 states it is supposed to be against the law to allow one species of the many varieties of thistles to grow on one's land. These are the kinds of laws left over from another time, and no one enforces them, so thistles flourish throughout the country.

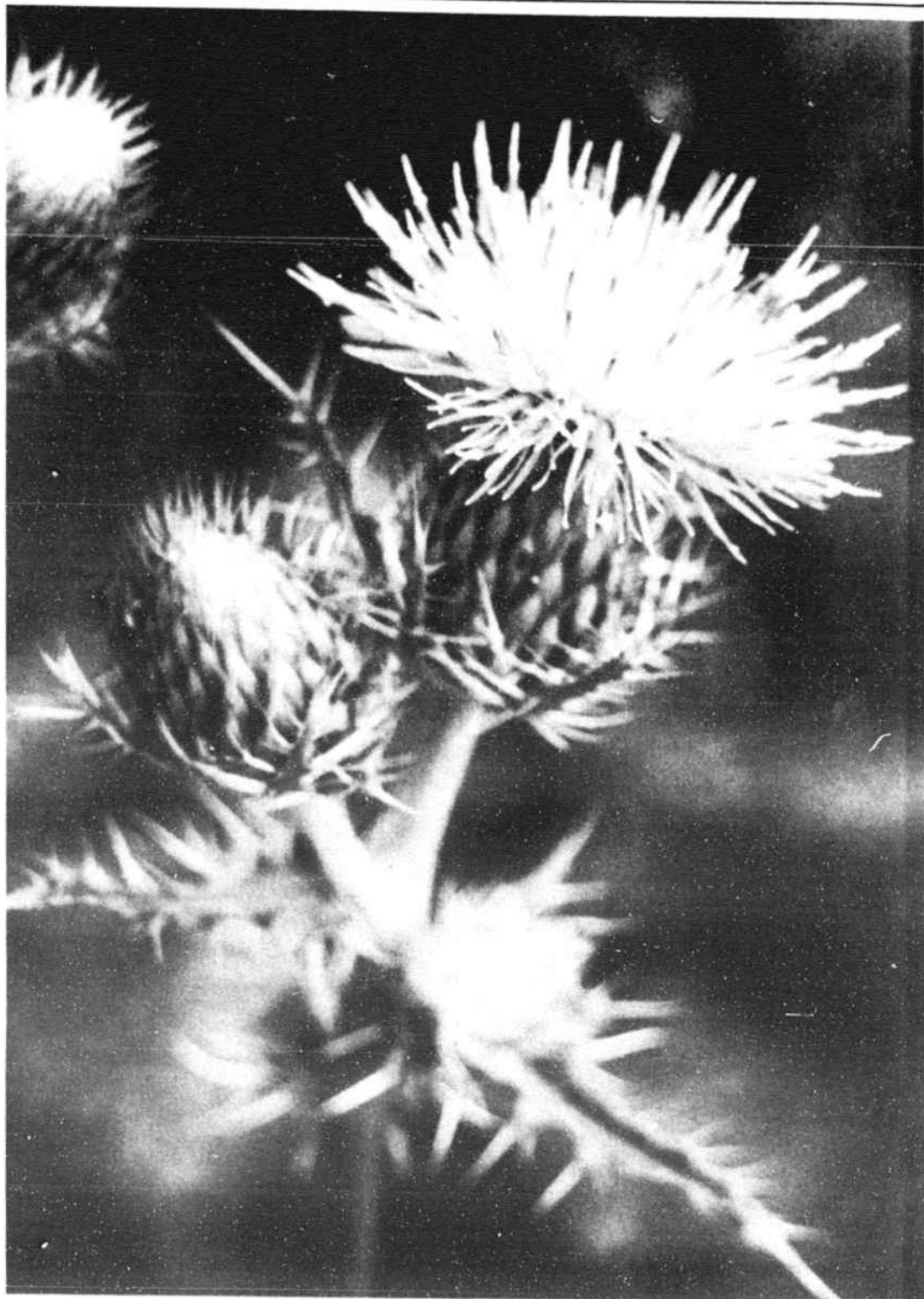
One species of thistle was the emblem for the Scottish Stuart Clan and became the symbol for the country when the clan came to power.

The origin of the thistle as the national emblem of Scotland is said to come from the Battle of Brannockburn when King Robert the Bruce was leading the Scots against the English. The English were attempting to slip up on the sleeping Scots in an early morning raid and became entangled in a patch of thistles. The cries of the raiders awoke the Scots and they successfully defended their positions. Or so the story goes!

Thistles are a part of the composite or daisy family and spread by their roots and by small tufted airborne seeds. Goldfinches and birds feed on the thistle seed and butterflies and numbers of other insects are drawn to the nectar during late spring and summer.

Flowers from the many varieties range in color from pink to purple to yellow and white. Those we see most often are purple or purplish-white. In years past, some Indian tribes used thistle roots for food. Thistles are found along roadsides and in old fields, hedgerows and waste places. Most species are considered weeds and carry names such as Field Thistle, Virginia Thistle, Swamp Thistle, Tall Thistle, and Bull Thistle.

The beauty of the flower head, the lure of the sweet nectars to bees and butterflies, and the chance of seeing goldfinches extracting seed make thistles very interesting plants to observe. Like most weeds, thistles have some beauty and some interest for us if we will take the time to examine the parts and look at the beauty in nature found there.



THISTLES ARE CONSIDERED weeds in most places, but are interesting and important as a food source for birds and insects. PHOTO BY BILL FAVER

GUEST COLUMN

Local Governments Can Learn From Charlotte

BY WILLIAM E. EGGERS

Charlotte has become the envy of America's struggling cities. While many urban centers are shrinking, Charlotte is growing by leaps and bounds.

It has grown from a small Southeastern city to a robust international metropolis of 430,000—double its population of 20 years ago. A booming economy prompted the pilgrimage: Since 1989, when New York City was losing 370,000 jobs, more than 2,000 firms were launched in Charlotte and numerous national corporations relocated there.

As the nationwide crunch in city revenues moves into its fourth year, Charlotte is beginning to attract widespread attention for something other than its economic growth: lean government. Charlotte's two-year-old program to "rightsized" city hall by cutting costs, bureaucracy, and the number of city employees, is garnering notice from the likes of influential magazines such as *Governing* and reform-minded mayors like Indianapolis's Stephen Goldsmith.

Rightsizing is very different from downsizing, say its practitioners at Charlotte City Hall. Rather than across-the-board spending cuts or other short-term fixes—which tend to be undone as soon as tax revenues start flowing back into government coffers—rightsizing is about fundamentally changing the city's structure, priorities, and service delivery. It's about asking key questions.

If we were to design city services anew, what would they look like? What services should city government provide, and at what levels? Which services should be left to the private sector?

To answer these questions, Charlotte surveyed the city council, public employees, and its customers (residents and the business community), asking respondents to rank the importance of 41 city services. This process prompted the city council to consider how much services cost compared to their importance to the community.

Not surprisingly, the police department, which runs seven out of 10 of the services ranked most important, is getting more money this year. One department getting less money is solid-waste disposal. The council voted to switch from a costly backyard garbage pick-up system to curbside pick-up, saving \$50 million a year.

In addition to redirecting taxpayer dollars to more pressing community concerns like crime prevention, Charlotte is also keeping a lid on spending growth. In the late 1980s, the city council began indexing city spending to the inflation rate (adjusted for population increases). This year the Transportation and Solid Waste departments actually saw their budgets drop in real terms—a rarity for government. To be sure, spending restraint has been made easier by shedding a few programs to the county, but even after accounting for some cost-shifting, Charlotte did in fact "go on a diet" to meet service demands without raising taxes.

One way Charlotte dieted is by increasing workforce productivity, allowing city hall to cut payroll. More than 270 positions have been eliminated, saving about \$8 million a year. The workforce cutbacks, however, didn't come from indiscriminate layoffs. By copying some of the radical changes now taking place in how private firms are organized, the city is using a knife instead of a cleaver to shrink the payroll.

But a big problem still remains. Like other big cities, Charlotte is experimenting with "community policing" as one way to make neighborhoods safer. But even if the police department is able to get more officers out from behind their desks, it won't be enough to quell Charlotte's rising wave of crime. The city simply needs more police.

The problem is how to pay for them. Tax hikes would harm the local economy. City councilman Don Reid, former president of Citizens for Effective Government, a local watchdog group, has another idea: create a brand new revenue source by selling or leasing some of the city's assets to private firms. Reid points out that a taxpayer-financed binge in the 1980s left Charlotte with plenty of saleable assets, including two coliseums, an airport, fancy government buildings, a performing arts center, and a convention center (the city is now building a new center).

Like other cities, Charlotte became enamored with the idea that "if we build it, they will come." While very popular across the country, this "Field of Dreams" strategy rarely lives up to its advance billing as a robust engine of economic development. Reid thinks that taxpayers would get greater benefits from their previous "investments" by privatizing some of these facilities.

"Experience around the country demonstrates that sports stadiums and convention centers are best run in private hands," Reid says. Experts

estimate that the new Charlotte Coliseum (home to the city's NBA franchise) could fetch about \$70 million from a private owner, allowing the city to pay off its coliseum bonds and still have \$30 million left over to pay for new police.

Reid and others also hope the city will bring the power of competition to bear on city services by opening them up to bidding from private firms. A privatization task force has recommended opening up a host of services—from grounds maintenance to garbage collection—to competition.

The task force estimates that about 41 percent of city employees now do work that could be done by private firms. Privatizing most of this work could save the city as much as \$13 million a year. With no public-sector unions to combat in Charlotte, privatization enjoys bipartisan support.

Many cities are now talking about making the kinds of changes now taking place in Charlotte. It's time other communities followed the Queen City's example.

Eggers is director of the Privatization Center at the Los Angeles-based Reason Foundation.

MORE LETTERS

Group Asks School Board To Amend Hiring Decisions

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following was presented to the Brunswick County Board of Education at its Aug. 9 meeting. It was submitted to the Beacon for reprint as a letter to the editor.

Members of the board of education, ladies and gentlemen, with your permission I would like to be somewhat lengthy tonight, but not near as lengthy as I was in my attempts to have each of you elected to your present positions. I stand before you tonight representing a few less than 800 concerned citizens across this county.

We were concerned, humiliated, disgusted, insulted, flabbergasted, stunned and bewildered when we learned that Brunswick will have no black principals this fall. Where were those lavish promises that were advocated by each of you as you met and participated in the various black churches and other black organizations of Brunswick County during your campaigns?

What has suddenly caused each of you to suddenly turn your backs, your attitudes, your minds, and your attentions against those who furnished the balance of power that elected you to your present positions? I would proudly, prayerfully, decently, intelligently, enthusiastically, eloquently and expeditiously request that each of you reconsider your previous actions and make amendments without being forced by the judicial system to do so.

If, in your opinion you so determine that your previous actions are capricious, unjust, unethical or racially discriminatory, please make proper amendments immediately.

Board members we, the black citizens of Brunswick County, feel that your treatment to us is capricious, unjust, derogatory, unlawful, ungodly and contaminated and polluted with the evil stench of racial discrimination. You have treated the black voters of Brunswick County in the same manner that Judas treated

Jesus—you broke bread with us in the evening and then betrayed and crucified us after supper.
Jesse A. Bryant
Supply

'Incredible Computer'

To the editor:
"The two most dangerous words in the English language are 'social engineering,'" said Paul Johnson, British historian. We have two engineers in the White House who want to redistribute the wealth of this country.

We have a Congress that forces the U.S. Treasury to create one billion dollars every day out of thin air so that they can bribe their constituents to continue to re-elect them.

Ross Perot claims he has the answers to our plight, but I have not seen or read his conclusive solutions. He may be waiting for the right time; Ross Perot has demonstrated that anyone who can develop a message that can capture the mood and imagination of the people can work the TV talk shows, keep repeating the 800 number, and be off and running as an independent candidate for public office.

Television, as we know it today, will be different by the next presidential election. In *Microcosm*, George Gilder said, "The new technologies completely transform the balance of power between the entrepreneur and the state...This is the age of the individuals and the family...Inventive individuals have burst every link in the chain of constraints that once bound the entrepreneur and made him a servant of parliaments and kings."

This new form of television will have an interactive computer that will feature two-way communications, known as a telecomputer, that will really transform power to the people. George Gilder was right; this will be an incredible computer!

Bob L. Johnson
Ocean Isle Beach

Write Us


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

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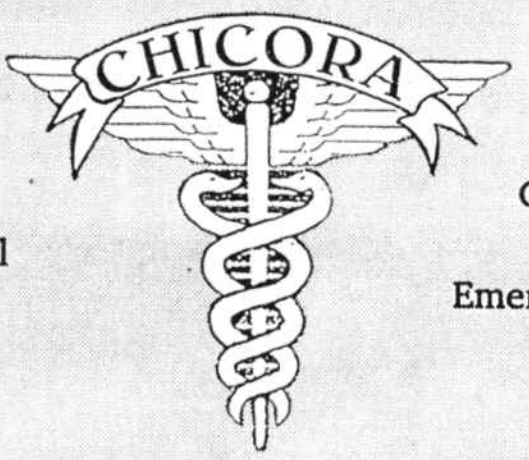
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