



**Have A Safe
And Happy
New Year!**

Making Room To Grow
A deal between Shallotte and a paper company could give the town a place to expand its sewer system. Page **12-A**.

The Year In Business
The closing of Pelican Manufacturing, the Shallotte area's largest manufacturer, leads local business news for 1993. Page **8-C**.

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A Sea Of Gifts

STAFF PHOTO BY LYNN CARLSON

Some of the 716 Brunswick County families served by the Volunteer and Information Center Christmas Tree of Hope project line up to receive their food and gift baskets as volunteers locate the appropriate packages. The giveaway, which took place last week in the county maintenance garage at Bolivia, went off "unbelievably smoothly," according to VIC Executive Director Pete Barnette. Although an accounting had not been completed as of Tuesday, Barnette said hundreds of Brunswick County individuals and groups contributed money, gifts and time valued "in the multiple thousands."

'I WAS NOT INVOLVED IN SALE,' BENTON CLAIMS

Supervisor Is Fired Over Equipment Transfer

BY SUSAN USHER

What began as a follow-up on a \$350 check with no supporting paperwork has mushroomed into the firing of a maintenance supervisor, investigation into allegations of misappropriation of school property by Brunswick County Schools employees, and efforts to better control that property.

Odell Benton, who was fired effective Jan. 3, said Tuesday he has filed a grievance against the Brunswick County Board of Education, was fired unjustly and wants his job back.

Earlier this month, the Brunswick County Board of Education filed a civil suit against Long Beach restaurateur Jarvis Jones, seeking at least \$10,000 or the return of cafeteria equipment improperly sold to him on July 20 by Rebecca Brandon, director of child nutrition.

Citing their alleged roles in that transaction, Superintendent Ralph Johnston has since fired Benton, effective Jan. 3, and reprimanded Brandon.

"They said they fired me because of involvement in the illegal sale of property, which was not true. I was not involved in the sale," said Benton, who has worked in the maintenance department 15 years, two months.

"They fired me because I'm brother-in-law to

Jarvis Jones. The only role I had was in the maintenance department delivering the equipment, which has been departmental procedure ever since I've worked there."

School system officials indicated this week that the sale and allegations raised since then by a former temporary employee point to a need for greater control of the more than \$70 million in fixed assets owned by the schools.

To that end, also as of Jan. 3, Johnston has hired that former employee, Pam Dean of Boiling Spring Lakes, to begin tracking down the school systems' fixed assets—items such as furniture and equipment—and documenting what items are where, and what items have been purchased but cannot be located.

"I don't think it's over by a long shot," said Donna Baxter, school board chairman. "It's not just the maintenance department; it's all across the county. There are no policies and no one has ever said 'you can't do this.'"

The incident, as pieced together in interviews with school system officials, happened something like this: On July 20, Brandon sold 46 pieces of used cafeteria equipment to Long Beach restaurant owner Jarvis Jones. Brandon wrote Jones a receipt and turned his \$350 check over to the finance office.

The equipment was later delivered to Jones by school system employees using vehicles owned by the school system.

Superintendent Ralph Johnston began an internal investigation of the sale when the finance staff couldn't find paperwork authorizing disposal of the equipment. State law provides that the school board declare property as surplus before it is sold or auctioned.

Baxter said soon afterward Brandon questioned the speed with which the transaction took place and prepared a written report for Johnston.

After his investigation Johnston concluded Brandon erred from lack of information, having never been told about the disposal policy.

At that time Baxter told *The Brunswick Beacon* the school system planned to begin doing a better job of informing all employees of school system policies.

School board member Thurman Gause said he is one of two board members who would have preferred a different penalty. "If she (Brandon) didn't know (the policy), she should have known it. They (Brandon and Benton) should have been treated the same."

It was in mid-October that the internal investigation took a different turn. School board member

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BOARD LIKELY TO PASS ORDINANCE

Proposed Mine Could Endanger Ammo Terminal, Commander Says

BY ERIC CARLSON

The Brunswick County Commissioners would be "derelict in their duties" if they failed to protect the public from the potential danger of blasting for limestone between a nuclear power plant and the nation's largest ammunition terminal. Chairman Don Warren said Tuesday.

Warren and the other commissioners were informed Monday that the commander of Military Ocean Terminal Sunny Point (MOTSU) believes Martin Marietta Aggregates' proposed rock quarry could pose the threat of "sympathetic detonations" to "explosive laden vehicles" passing near the mine site.

Which is one of the reasons Warren said he planned to vote in favor of an ordinance aimed at prohibiting the mine. The law was expected to pass a first reading at a special meeting of the commissioners scheduled for 6 p.m. Wednesday (Dec. 29). If so, it could be given final approval at the board's regular meeting Jan. 4.

Warren said he believes Martin Marietta officials are sincere in their threat to sue the county for at least \$2 million if the ordinance is passed. But he doubts that the company would win such a suit, given mounting evidence that the mining operation could endanger the "health, safety and welfare" of Brunswick County residents.

"We need to do what we can to protect the citizens," Warren said. "This mine has been deemed a threat to the environment and to the lives of people in Brunswick County—not to mention the economic impact it could cause if CP&L loses its license" to operate the Brunswick Nuclear Plant.

"When commissioners, who have police powers, see a threat and don't try to react, they are derelict in their duties if they don't do it."

After three drafts, the final wording of the law had not been finalized Tuesday afternoon, Warren said. County Attorney Michael Ramos has consulted with the N.C. Institute of Government to assure that the ordinance is "targeted carefully to comply with general statutes," he said.

New county ordinances must either pass a single unanimous vote of the commissioners or two majority votes. Warren said he thinks a majority of the board will support an ordinance to ban mining with explosives within five miles of MOTSU and the Brunswick Nuclear Plant.

An earlier law aimed at stopping the mine passed a first reading by a

4-to-1 vote of the board, with Commissioner Jerry Jones dissenting. The ordinance was tabled after several representatives of the construction industry complained that it could stop them from extracting gravel and other building materials from borrow pits and other small mining operations. The new law will be aimed at alleviating those fears.

Jones said Tuesday that he planned to vote against the new anti-mining law for the same reason he opposed the earlier one: First, because he feels state regulators will address the necessary safety issues. And second, because the county is likely to get into an expensive legal battle if the commissioners prohibit Martin Marietta from using their 1,000-acre tract for the purpose they bought it for.

"Personally, I don't think it should be there," Jones said. "I think there are a lot of legitimate concerns about blasting and water and the economic aspect. If it were my decision to make, I'd probably deny the permit."

"But I'm also concerned about the potential for lawsuits. Maybe it would be upheld in court. But what if it couldn't be? Look who's going to be liable," Jones said. "I wonder if our insurance will cover us if we do something that we know will bring a lawsuit. I feel we should let the state permit process take care of it."

In a letter to Warren last week, Martin Marietta President Stephen Zelnak claimed the company had "vested rights" in their property, which was purchased and improved while the county's proposed zoning law indicated that the area could be used for mining. He warned that the company was "perfectly prepared to

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INTEREST HIGH IN SHERIFF'S RACE

Filing Begins Monday For Primary Elections

BY SUSAN USHER

Filing opens at noon Monday, Jan. 3, and continues until noon Feb. 7 for candidates for the May 3 primary elections for local, state and federal political offices.

This election season will be different in Brunswick County. First, all five seats on both the Brunswick County Board of Commissioners and Board of Education are open, with winners to receive two-year terms instead of staggered, four-year terms.

Second, all candidates for local office will come under campaign disclosure reporting rules that in previous years only applied to multiple-county offices here, said Supervisor Lynda Britt of the Brunswick County Board of Elections.

Brunswick County should have come under the disclosure rules in the 1992 election, following release of 1990 U.S. Census figures that put the county's population over the 50,000 mark, State Board of Elections Deputy Director Yvonne Southerland said in recent telephone interview.

However, the state board didn't mandate it until several months ago when reviewing possible irregularities in the Long Beach municipal election.

"They had apparently just overlooked us," said Britt.

The change means more paperwork for Britt's office and for candi-

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Year Stormy For County Government

BY ERIC CARLSON

A bungled budget, allegations of personnel politics and pressure from opponents of a proposed limestone mine near Southport made 1993 a stormy year for the Brunswick County Commissioners, who face an election season that will see all five of their seats up for grabs.

Public demands on the new board began almost immediately last January as a group of parents filled the commissioners chambers to ask for help in repairing muddy subdivision roads that were rendered impassable to school busses by weeks of bad weather. The board agreed to a one-time grading of the affected roadways.

At the same meeting, Democrats voted to direct County Manager/Attorney David Clegg to "refrain from filling non-essential positions" until the new commissioners had a chance to "get a look at the size and structure of county government."

In one of several legal actions against the previous board of commissioners, former Clerk to the Board Regina Alexander filed a federal discrimination lawsuit alleging that she was fired because of her race and political affiliation. The suit is still pending.

Clegg was besieged with complaints from

county department heads who wanted to fill vacant positions, but were unable to do so because of the commissioners' hiring freeze. Health

Director Michael Rhodes said the action had created "a very serious situation" in his department. Social Services Director Jamie Orrock warned that the county could face fines, lawsuits and applications delays if vacant positions were not filled.

The county manager contended that—under the commissioners' edict—he could not hire anyone until it was determined that the position was "essential." In early March, six weeks after the board's action, Clegg finally agreed to fill some job vacancies "that directly affect human services," including 11 positions in the health and social services departments.

Zoning Workshops Begin

With the long-awaited county zoning ordinance slated for a July 1 effective date, the commissioners scheduled a series of workshops in March to explain the law's provisions to rural landowners. There were loud protests that zoning controls were not necessary in undeveloped agricultural areas. Many asked that lands north of U.S. 17 be

exempted from the law.

Commissioners got their first official look at architects drawings for new Brunswick County Library branches at Yaupon Beach and Leland and expansions to the Shallotte and Southport libraries. Creation of the four-branch system was authorized in June, 1992, with an appropriation of \$1.5 million. The new buildings are expected to open in the spring, with renovations scheduled for completion next fall.

The county's Utilities Operations Board voted unanimously to recommend that the commissioners fund a water system improvement project that would extend service to 3,700 potential water customers in the Shell Point, Boones Neck, Gray Bridge Road and Seashore Road areas. Utilities director Jerry Webb said the extension would nearly double the customer base of the water system.

The commissioners agreed to add Sunset Harbor and portions of the Mt. Misery Road area to the capital improvements project, which was approved by the with funding allocated from a refund of money that the county loaned to the Lower Cape Fear Water and Sewer Authority.

Clegg Resigns

After serving several Brunswick County ad-

(See BUDGET, ZONING, Page 2-A)

