

THE BRUNSWICK BEACON

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PAGE 4-A, THURSDAY, MARCH 31, 1994

Costly Audits Often Result In Suggestions For More Spending

In the springtime of an election year, a candidate's fancy turns to...auditing.

It began with Commissioner Wayland Vereen's suggestion for an examination of the county school system and seems to have blossomed along with the azaleas and wisteria into a good idea—in the minds of some candidates for local office, at least—for the entire county government.

The reason being put forth by commissioner candidate Bob Slockett is that citizens tell him they think Brunswick County government is too big and its employees don't work hard enough. That's hardly a new or unusual thing for citizens to say about government in Brunswick County or anywhere else. And it's hardly justification for spending goodness-knows-how-much-money on a yet another process that's scarcely likely to change a fundamental fact of political and human nature.

It has been less than two years since completion of the David M. Griffith company's costly personnel study of most county government departments. The results of that process did turn up some good suggestions for making county government more efficient; unfortunately, most of them involved spending more money instead of trimming the budget.

If people were critical of the Department of Social Services, some of that had to do with the simple fact that folks couldn't get through on its outgrown phone system. If people were tired of waiting too long to be seen at the health department, it wasn't because all the help was in the back room goofing off. Maybe, Griffith advised, the county should revise its hiring policies and upgrade salaries so nurses would be as attracted to working for the county as for the private sector.

Some of Griffith's recommendations were accepted and some rejected. And the folks critical of county government remained so and ever shall.

If elected officials want to make citizens feel secure about the way they're being governed, there's a cheaper and more basic way to accomplish the goal, to the limited extent that it's even possible. Represent the citizenry in as thoughtful, nonpartisan, frugal and responsive a fashion as possible, and the rest will take care of itself.

College Trustees Share Vision For Tomorrow

A vision for tomorrow. That was very much on the minds of Brunswick Community College trustees during their mid-March retreat at Ocean Isle Beach.

Brainstorming for nearly three hours that Friday night, the group emerged with good ideas to pursue, ideas they revisited briefly Saturday morning. Their ideas touch all the major bases, from responsibility (being able to "guarantee" that graduates of each program leave with a specific set of skills and abilities—or else they get retrained at no cost to the employer) to responsiveness to the community.

Better learning resources, creating a campus climate that is conducive to teamwork and recognizes and builds on the strengths of a culturally diverse population. An instructional staff with a commitment to students, and recognizing and providing effective instruction.

They want to determine the college's "niche," since it can't be all things to all people. It follows that the college wants to improve its understanding of its service area and make sure its programs and services meet the community's actual needs, perhaps using community involvement focus groups.

One example of fine-tuning: Trustees want the college to look at ways to better serve small businesses, since they account for 70 percent of Brunswick County jobs.

Trustees want the college to see what it can do to change a disappointing statistic: about 50 percent of Brunswick County high school students are not going on to further their education after graduation. Working with the public schools to increase student awareness and participation in Tech Prep may be part of the answer—two years of high school work that prepares a student to enter a technical program at the community college without having to take a lot of remedial classes, and possibly with some college credits already under their belts.

The board also envisions developing more cooperative education opportunities with local businesses and industries to give BCC students on-the-job training. They see potential benefit from hiring or repositioning someone to focus on job placement for graduates.

Black males—students and employees—are in short supply at BCC, and that's one other thing they'd like to see change. There are few role models on campus for black males. While 47 percent of all employees are male, only .01 percent are minority males.

One idea is to create "successful encounters" with and at BCC and perhaps targeting counseling and other services at black males, while striving to increase the number of minority male employees.

They're also concerned about continuing to improve campus security and making sure evening students and faculty stay in the "loop" for the same level of information, services and quality of instruction available to daytime people.

From soon-to-retire President Bob Scott's comments on the future direction of the state community college system to the exchanges between BCC trustees, I was impressed most of all with the level of caring for the community college concept and its students exhibited by the nine trustees who attended the sessions I attended. Also impressive were the frankness of their discussions and the respect shown for sometimes sharply differing viewpoints.

All boards should handle themselves this well.

Susan Usher



Flickers Of Hope In The Local Drug War

"So what exactly are we looking for?" I ask Detective Lt. David Crocker as he slowly maneuvers an unmarked car through the darkened streets of Phoenix.

"Flickers," he says. "You'll probably see one up here."

Sure enough, as we pass a side street, a silhouette appears in the blackness. Then a spark of light ignites a yellow flame. It lingers a few moments and goes out.

"Yo, man!" a voice says. "Over here."

We move on without stopping as the figure advances toward the car.

"We'll be back," Crocker answers through the window in a friendly voice. He means it.

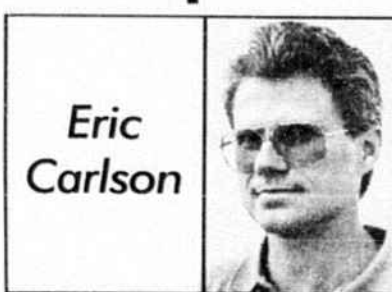
A few blocks later, he slows the car to peer down another street. Several human forms advance from the darkness. There are more flickers of light. More shouted invitations. We drive on.

It's a typical Thursday night—just business as usual—in one of Brunswick County's open-air drug markets. You can find pockets of similar activity in neighborhoods of Leland, Navassa, Longwood, Cedar Grove or Southport. But Phoenix is one of the worst.

Like neon highway signs enticing hungry travelers, the "flickers" use disposable cigarette lighters to advertise the availability of illegal drugs; mostly crack cocaine.

Some of the customers are local. Others come from neighboring counties and from across the river in Wilmington. Word of mouth directs them to the right areas. Flickers bring them the rest of the way.

Crocker has seen enough to give him a plan for the night's first assault. He pulls the car into a drive-



Eric Carlson

way and stops behind an abandoned building.

There to meet him is a State Bureau of Investigation (SBI) agent and other officers from the Brunswick County Sheriff's Department narcotics squad detectives Gary Shay, Billy Hughes, Kevin Holden and his drug-sniffing dog "Colonel."

Also on hand are members of a sheriff's department surveillance team and Ocean Isle Beach Police Officer Dan Hunter. Crocker often calls on other area police officers and deputies to work with the squad on drug operations to foster communications and teamwork between law enforcement agencies.

Tonight the targets are street-level dealers, the ones who sell individual "rocks" of smokable cocaine to an endless stream of strung-out crack-heads.

Without revealing details, the plan is simple: First, gain the dealer's confidence. Remove him from the company of his associates without raising suspicion. Transport him to a place where he can be taken into custody. Then go back and do it again.

One after another they are arrested, handcuffed and searched. Crocker catalogs and bags the evidence. There are wads of crumpled money, containers holding little white rocks, bits of metal tubing stuffed with

bronze wool to make smoking pipes.

These dealers are not the well-dressed glamour boys you see in movies and TV shows about the "exciting and profitable" world of drugs. Their gaunt features and vacant expressions suggest they are no better off than their customers, just one step higher on the food chain.

A user caught that night tells me he lost 40 pounds, his job and his wife to a crack habit that cost him \$400 a week to feed. At the time of his arrest, he had already sold practically everything he owned to buy drugs.

"I see it all the time," Crocker says. "When we pick them up, their pockets are full of pawn tickets."

For those who live in nicer neighborhoods and think the drug problem doesn't affect you, remember that those pawn tickets often represent television sets, VCRs, microwave ovens and other items stolen from homes just like yours.

Later that night, Crocker is parked in a vacant lot where he can watch for the next fish to swim into the net. Suddenly he tenses and reaches back to check for his 9mm as an unidentified car swerves into the driveway.

It is a local man with his young son sitting beside him in the front seat. He pulls up close to Crocker's door and rolls down the window.

"Good to see you up here David," the man says.

He tells Crocker that several of the area's known dealers are doing business behind a local convenience store. The detective thanks him for his help.

A short time later, a van approaches the rear of the store. Several flickers of light appear. As

the van stops, a group of men approach, hawking their wares like Baghdad rug merchants.

Without warning, the van's front and side doors fly open. A half dozen ERT members in black fatigues storm out of the van. With guns drawn, they fan out and detain several suspects. Unmarked police cars block both ends of the street.

Body searches lead to several arrests. But other suspects have apparently discarded all incriminating evidence. As the confusion subsides, officers pan their flashlights across the blanket of beer bottles, spent lighters, shotgun shells and other debris littering the area.

Detective Gene Caison discovers a plastic bag containing several rocks of crack. Deputy Rick Shupe checks the pocket of a discarded jacket and finds more drugs.

Then Detective Charlie Miller makes the big catch of the night—a bag containing about \$1,500 worth of cocaine, portioned into tiny plastic bags, ready for sale. The bag is recovered about 10 feet from the window of a car whose occupants deny any knowledge of it.

"We may not be able to arrest them this time," Crocker says. "But we definitely put a hurt on them."

Sometimes that's the most they can expect. They know the same thing will be going on tonight and tomorrow night and next week—right here in your county.

So if you see something suspicious—even just a flicker—that might suggest illegal drug activity in your area, give these officers a hand by giving them a call. The drug squad number is 253-4797.

All calls are kept confidential. You won't have to testify. And you might get a reward. We all might.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Answers Sought About Ocean Isle Beach Airport

To the editor:

What do you call a budget item that has a \$170,000 budget a year at Ocean Isle Beach? This item was listed as an asset worth over \$650,000 in 1993. This item costs the taxpayers of Ocean Isle Beach and the taxpayers of Brunswick County \$90,000 a year and all taxpayers in the county \$87,745 a year!

Is it the fire department? Is it the police department, water department, town hall, street or sidewalk improvements? Is it anything that even one percent of the taxpayers of Ocean Isle Beach use? No!

What is this item that costs so much yet can be used for free? What is this item that produces \$1 a year from a lease to the Ocean Isle Aeronautics Association? It is our own Ocean Isle Beach Airport!

Who uses it? It seems only very few people at Ocean Isle Beach use it, and quite a few from Holden Beach use it. Perhaps drug runners use it, since no one is there to see who lands or takes off. There is even a fellow who charges for airplane rides, but he doesn't pay a fee for using the airport.

What good does this do for Ocean Isle Beach? None that I can see. The only positive thing I have heard is that it may aid in attracting people to Ocean Isle Beach. I suppose Realtors and builders may benefit from this, but how can Ocean Isle Beach generate an additional \$170,000 a year in taxes at the current rate to cover this budget item?

Ocean Isle Beach generates approximately \$650,000 a year from

taxes. The budget for the airport is approximately 26 percent of this figure. How can anyone justify this? I can't.

In the meantime, the airport continues to buy additional property and is even extending the runway! Why? Is the Concorde on the way here? I would certainly like to hear a legitimate and rational answer to my questions. How about you?

Gus Mandrapolias
Charlotte

Band Slighted?

To the editor:

I am writing to let you know I am deeply disappointed in your newspaper. During the past football season at West Brunswick High School, you were very encouraging and supportive of the team, which is wonderful. There were stories on everyone supporting the team in their efforts to go to state playoff and the eventual win.

The cheerleaders, the dance team, everyone was supported and highlighted and had their pictures in the paper, with one exception—the band. They were never mentioned. All the hours and hours of practice, the hours of marching after school, the expense of the instruments and uniforms, the enthusiasm those kids put into a game performance was never mentioned.

The band members worked very hard to get the fans to the game. They cheered and encouraged the team as hard as anyone on the field. They went to Chapel Hill and played in the rain just like the football players, but they were not rec-

ognized for the effort.

Craig Morris works very long and hard hours with his band and is supportive of each and every member. It would be nice to see other members of the community recognize them too.

Carole Piver
Ash

'No Justification'

To the editor:

I am writing this letter in regard to the 1994 proposal by the N.C. Department of Transportation to replace our Sunset Beach swing bridge because our bridge has been found to be dangerous for public use.

To fully appreciate the significance of the N.C. Department of Transportation findings, one must go back to 1978 when similar hearings were held, and the transportation engineers told us that that time that our swing bridge was dangerous and must be replaced immediately!

When challenged by qualified taxpaying engineers, it was disclosed that our swing bridge consisted of two basic parts: the pilings, which are replaced on a regular basis; and the barge, which can be replaced as needed at a cost of less than \$500,000.

That was 16 years ago and, since then, the barge was replaced once and the pilings as they were needed.

The fact that property values of Sunset Beach have more than tripled since 1978, and that Money magazine in 1993 observed that Sunset Beach is rated as the fourth best place to invest your money, says

something for our way of life, including our swing bridge.

Now, as to proposed bridge costs and the position of our state and federal government to cut our state and federal deficits and to spend taxpayers' money more wisely, let's take a look at the costs of planning for our bridge replacement.

This planning, which has been going on for 16 years, is estimated to cost a number of millions of dollars. For example, the last study covered 11 possible solutions, despite the fact that everyone in government service knows that the only acceptable type bridge is a 65-foot high-rise bridge and all this so-called planning will mean coming out with increased taxes in 1994.

It is interesting to note that over the past ten years, no bridge has been built over the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway that is not at least 65 feet in height. In summary, there is absolutely no justification for the expenditure of millions of dollars of taxpayers' money for the benefit of a few developers.

To keep Bird Island and Sunset Beach safe from their conversion to a Myrtle Beach, you the voters and North Carolina taxpayers must take action now, before it is too late. Act now, and notify your government you do not want a 65-foot bridge for Sunset Beach.

Warren "Bud" Knapp
Sunset Beach
EDITOR'S NOTE: Mr. Knapp is chairman of the bridge committee of the Sunset Beach Taxpayers Association.
(More Letters, Following Page)