

'Notebook cleaning time' provides some tidbits

RALEIGH - Time to clean little items out of the notebook, again. Democratic gubernatorial candidate Mike Easley, the state's attorney general, spoke to reporters at the top of a hotel stairwell after appearing before the American Association of Retired Persons last week. Reporters asked Easley if he'd answer a few questions, a reasonable request considering that Easley has been mostly unavailable to the press this campaign and that his public schedule has been very limited.

"Fundraising is taking entirely too much time for everybody in every race, especially for us," Easley said. "We don't have the national money. Their campaign is being funded out of Washington." Easley was referring to national Republican money that is flowing to his opponent, Richard Vinroot, who is also spending a lot of time raising money. Easley continued: "Campaigning is the chance for people to get to you." Sure was, but only for a few

Today in North Carolina

PAUL O'CONNOR



minutes. Easley kept trying to move away from the reporters, as his staff conjured up, in emergency tones of voice, the need for the candidate to stay on sched-

ule. Asked why he was in such a rush, Easley said he didn't know, but that he had to go. Guess he was off for more fundraising, now that he'd given the press all of five minutes for questions. At the same time, Vinroot was holding a press conference across town. Vinroot's communications consultant, Jack Hawke, wants the world to know that Vinroot was not the first gubernatorial candidate to run negative ads this year. He says Easley was

first — which is probably correct given a small Easley ad buy this summer. Hawke was responding to a column about Vinroot's rising negatives in the Mason-Dixon poll. TV viewers in the east have probably seen Rep. Art Pope's ads in which the somewhat cerebral, some would say nerdy, Raleigh Republican rows a canoe. He looks as comfortable as Mike Dukakis looked in his tank. He recently ran into Jack Nichols, his Democratic opponent, and caught a little ribbing

for the canoe ad — implications that he's not much of an outdoorsman. "That's not true," Pope said. "I've been canoeing since I was six." But from the "You can't win for losing" department, it turns out that Nichols is an avid canoeist who often takes three-or four-day trips, and who has traveled the Boundary Waters Canoe Area in upper Minnesota, Pope said.

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The appeal of offensive news still enduring

GIBSONBURG, OHIO — Folks who insist they read only The Wall Street Journal and National Geographic, with maybe an issue or two of the Smithsonian

It's just small talk

ELIZABETH SCHUETT



thrown in for idle chat, scare me. I suspect they're not being truthful. Or maybe it's just that they have never had to stand in a supermarket checkout line when the person two carts ahead of them has bought a bunch of stuff with the bar-codes missing from the bottom. This is a prime-time, trash reading moment.

Tell me you've never sneaked a glance at the sleaze tabloids racked up there. And that you've never wanted to know more about a headline boasting an in-depth interview with a Martian claiming George W. is his long lost uncle who was banished to Earth as a punishment for syntax abuse.

I have. And I laugh to myself — Ha! Who'd buy that stuff? And then I answer myself, Millions, apparently, because folks don't keep printing papers that won't sell.

Non-journalism has been around forever. It probably began with the first guy in the cave who set about chiseling stuff on the walls like, "Pterodactyl admits love tryst with Madonna."

Around the turn of the 20th century, a couple of now legendary New York newspaper owners, Joseph Pulitzer (World) and William Randolph Hearst (Journal) were slugging it out on the newsstands.

Pulitzer, who is credited with being a master synthesist rather than an innovator, took a lesson from the Chicago Times when it ran a story on four murderers who found God just before being hanged. "Jerked to Jesus," was the Times headline.

In a Sunday supplement, Pulitzer's World ran a story about a French scientist and explorer who claimed to have discovered a race of savages with well-developed tails. There was even a drawing of a "human man-monkey with a tail" clinging to a tree. "To be certain that I was not the plaything of an illusion," the explorer is quoted as saying, "I felt his tail."

Meanwhile, back at the Journal, Hearst was holding his own in the inflammatory news department. "Babies Killed by Score" the headline of one evening edition proclaimed. "Twenty bodies have been re-

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Voting for the bonds; my own special reasons

"When are you going to weigh in on the bond issue in your column?"

Some people who know that I worked for University of North Carolina (System) and for several of its campuses have been asking me that question.

It is their way of telling me that I should share my opinion about the upcoming vote on the higher education bonds with my readers.

While I was on the university payroll, I was reluctant to use my column to push the higher education agenda - thinking my editors and readers might see a conflict of interest. And even though I have left the university it is hard to break the old feeling of restrictions.

But now, as an ordinary taxpayer, I have a right to share my opinions about how my tax money is to be spent. No, I have a duty to speak out.

So here is what I think. The higher education bond referendum is a critical opportunity for us to improve our state - not just for those who will be students in the universities and community colleges, but for all of us.

The public information effort by the universities and community colleges has laid out the case for the investment in great detail. And the broad, bipartisan coalition of the state's political and business leaders in support of the bonds gives assurance that the vote is not a Republican-Democrat or liberal-conservative issue.

State Treasurer Harlan Boyles, whose protectiveness over the state's credit rating is legendary, supports the investment and assures us that the bonds can be repaid without increasing our taxes.

(And the viewers of UNCTV's great programs - such as North Carolina Bookwatch - know that without funds from the bonds to meet the Federal requirement to convert to digital transmitting, North Carolina's state-wide public television network may lose its broadcast licenses.)

This broad-based support boosts my commitment, but my vote in favor of the bonds will also be a matter of personal urgency based on things I have seen during my 12 years of working in the university environment.

For example, last year while I was working at UNC-Pembroke, I got a chance to watch its science faculty in action. Although that institution focuses on instruction of undergraduate students, the faculty's

One on One

D.G. MARTIN



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Choice improves achievement

BY SHERRI JOYNER

RALEIGH, NC - In August, two studies were released measuring the effect of private school scholarships for low-income students. The results are astounding and demonstrate that choice programs can narrow if not close the racial performance gap surprisingly quickly.

A Harvard study showed that after two years in private schools, students receiving scholarships in New York City, Dayton, Ohio, and the District of Columbia scored 6 percentile points higher than those students who applied for scholarships but did not receive them and therefore remained in the public school system.

The other study, by Jay P. Greene at the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, examined evidence from the Children's Scholarship Fund (CSF) in Charlotte - a private scholarship program that serves mostly minority students. After only one year in private schools, students receiving a CSF scholarship improved their standardized math test scores by between 5.9 and 6.2 percentile points, and improved their standardized reading test scores by between 5.4 and 7.7 percentile points.

Not only did test scores soar in Charlotte, but so did parental satisfaction. Choice parents were nearly twice as likely to be "very satisfied" with virtually all aspects of the schools - including safety, discipline, facilities, and moral values - as public school parents were.

The improvement in test scores caused by the

Charlotte CSF program were larger than those observed in the Tennessee STAR study of class-size reductions, and the CSF program is less expensive. When the Tennessee STAR study was released showing the class size reductions boosted test scores, politicians and teachers' unions exalted the results and encouraged educational policies that would reduce class sizes. Now that a new study

shows that allowing parents to choose the school that is right for their children produces an even larger academic gain, will these same groups clamor to give scholarships to poor children to attend private schools? Probably not.

The Manhattan Institute study also showed that private schools in Charlotte were not creaming the best students from the public schools and dumping the worst. Opponents argue that private schools will refuse students because of stringent academic standards. According to the Charlotte study, only two students failed to attend the school of their choice because of an admissions test, and there was no evidence that any students were expelled for similar reasons.

Opponents also argue that the money spent on scholarships would be better spent improving public schools. This is not the case. Looking at previous studies that identify the cost and success of education reforms, it is easy to see that scholarships for private schools are the most cost-effective solution.

Carolina BEAT

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THE CHOWAN HERALD

(USPS 106-380)

Telephone: (252) 482-4418

PUBLISHED EVERY WEDNESDAY
By Cox North Carolina Publications, Inc.

Entered as a second-class matter August 30, 1934 at the Post Office of Edenton, North Carolina, under Act of March 3, 1870.

E.N. Manning - Publisher Emeritus
David W. Crawley - Publisher

Rebecca Bunch.....Editor
Derrick Armstead.....Sports Editor / Staff Writer
Mia Noble.....Advertising Rep.
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SUBSCRIPTION RATES

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Outside NC.....	\$28.95	\$15.95
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Which type of tax cut is most beneficial?

BY DR. MIKE WALDEN
NC Cooperative Extension Service

Fall is in the air, the election is around the corner, and presidential candidates are touting their favorite tax-cut plans. While every candidate proudly states that his or her tax-cut plan is the very best, tax-cut plans can be so complicated that two analysts

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You DECIDE

can interpret the same plan quite differently.

How can the average person judge tax-cut programs? There are many ways, but one of the most important questions is whether the tax cut is targeted or across the board.

A targeted tax cut is one that is only available to taxpayers who meet certain conditions. For example, the home mortgage interest tax deduction is a tax cut targeted to homeowners with mortgages, because they're the only ones who qualify. Renters and homeowners who have paid off their mortgages don't get this tax cut.

The current federal income tax code is chock full of targeted tax

cuts. Households with child-care expenses, excessive medical expenditures and college and retirement savings are among those eligible for tax reductions.

These targeted tax cuts differ from across-the-board cuts, which give all taxpayers a specified percentage tax cut regardless of how they spend or save. In the purest form of across-the-board cuts, all taxpayers receive the same percentage reduction. In a variation of the across-the-board cut, the percentage reduction can vary by the taxpayer's income.

There are some clear pluses and minuses to each approach. Targeted tax cuts certainly help specific types of taxpayers, so if you're in one of these groups, you may like the cuts. For example, if a targeted tax cut is provided for elderly households with prescription drug costs and you are one of these households, then you may support this

approach. However, if you don't have significant prescription drug costs, this targeted cut may be irrelevant.

There's one big caveat to targeted tax cuts. Often they only apply to households with incomes below a certain level. This means the designer of the target tax cut must decide which households, based on income, deserve the tax reduction and which don't. Obviously, there's no easy way to do this, and any income limit will raise questions of fairness.

Many people are calling for simplification of the tax code, but targeted tax cuts do just the opposite: They complicate the tax code. Targeted tax cuts add more deductions and credits to the tax code - and taxpayers must make an effort to find out if they qualify.

And taxpayers also have to do

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