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County Looks To 'De-Politicize' Schools

By BILL STUDENC
Editor

Madison County commissioners have pledged to work to get politics out of the Madison County school system, and may form a special committee to determine the best way to "de-politicize" education.

That pledge came Monday after Madison County Commissioner Reese Steen suggested that the Board of Commissioners adopt a resolution asking the General Assembly to make the county school board race a nonpartisan election.

"I can't see any reason for having a school board election on a local level where you have Republicans and Democrats running against each

other," Steen said. "Let's get the politics out and start thinking about school children."

Robert Capps, chairman of the Madison County Board of Commissioners, said he agreed with Steen, and also disapproved of the way the school board is currently set up.

"I don't like the idea of electing three Board of Education members on one side of the county and two on the other," Capps said. "At the present time, if the three board members from District 2 want something, it doesn't make any difference what District 1 wants."

The three members of District 2 represent western Madison County — including Marshall, Walnut, Hot Springs and Laurel. District 1, with two members, represents the eastern section of the county — Mars Hill, Grapevine and Beech Glenn.

Let's get the politics out and start thinking about school children.
Commissioner Reese Steen

Steen suggested that the commissioners create a new committee to study the school board and come up with the best way to establish a "non-partisan school board with different districts." That committee could include a Republican, a Democrat, a school board member, a county commissioner and several residents.

"I really feel like if we can put as much politics out of the school system in Madison County as possible, it will have a tremendous effect, now and forever," he said.

Steen's suggestion came after the commissioner did some "homework" on the Madison County Board of Education.

"I've studied the history of the school system extensively, and I've seen time and time again where the political system has had an adverse

effect on the school system, and it still is having an adverse effect," he said.

"Sometimes those effects are real; sometimes those effects are imagined, but it does create a problem in that the suspicion of wrongdoing is there," Steen said.

"It's a good point," Capps said. "I think politics should be gotten out of the school system."

Resident Bob Phillips told the commissioners he believed removing partisan politics from the school board would make it more likely that voters would approve a bond issue for school construction projects, if the need arises.

The commissioners agreed to think

about ways to remove politics from the Board of Education, and tabled the issue until a future meeting.

Commissioners also looked at ways to "de-politicize" county government, but with less agreement.

Steen again made a motion to ask the General Assembly to change the way that vacancies on the county board are filled. And, again, his motion died for lack of a second.

Currently, a vacancy on the Madison County Board of Commissioners would be filled by the county executive committee of the political party of the outgoing commissioner. The committee would nominate a

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Judge Refuses To Drop Charge Against Ponder

By BILL STUDENC
Editor

A Superior Court judge refused Monday to dismiss a conspiracy charge against Madison County Democratic Party leader Zeno H. Ponder.

Ponder's attorney, Herbert Hyde of Asheville, had filed a motion in January asking that a conspiracy indictment against Ponder be quashed and charges dismissed.

But Superior Court Judge Kenneth A. Griffin ruled against the motion, setting the stage for the trial of Ponder later this year.

Ponder, 65, has been charged with conspiring to profit from a land purchase he made while a member of the N.C. Board of Transportation.

Ponder in 1982 purchased some 300 acres of land in the Redmon Dam area of Madison County along the route of a proposed 15-mile road linking Marshall and the Trust community.

The indictment, handed down Jan. 13, alleges that Ponder "gained his knowledge of the intent of the board by virtue of his official position and then did engage in the conspiracy to place other persons at a financial disadvantage."

Hyde, in his motion heard Monday, said that the indictment against Ponder does not sufficiently inform Ponder of the nature of charges against him and is worded in such a way as to make it difficult to prepare a defense.

Hyde said the indictment consists

of "mere general or generic terms and does not sufficiently define the crime and does not set forth any of its essential elements."

The indictment violates Ponder's constitutional rights guaranteeing that defendants will be properly informed of charges against them and providing protection from "double jeopardy," Hyde contended.

Judge Griffin, after conferring in his chambers with Hyde and 24th Judicial District Attorney J. Thomas Risher for more than an hour, ruled against Hyde's motion.

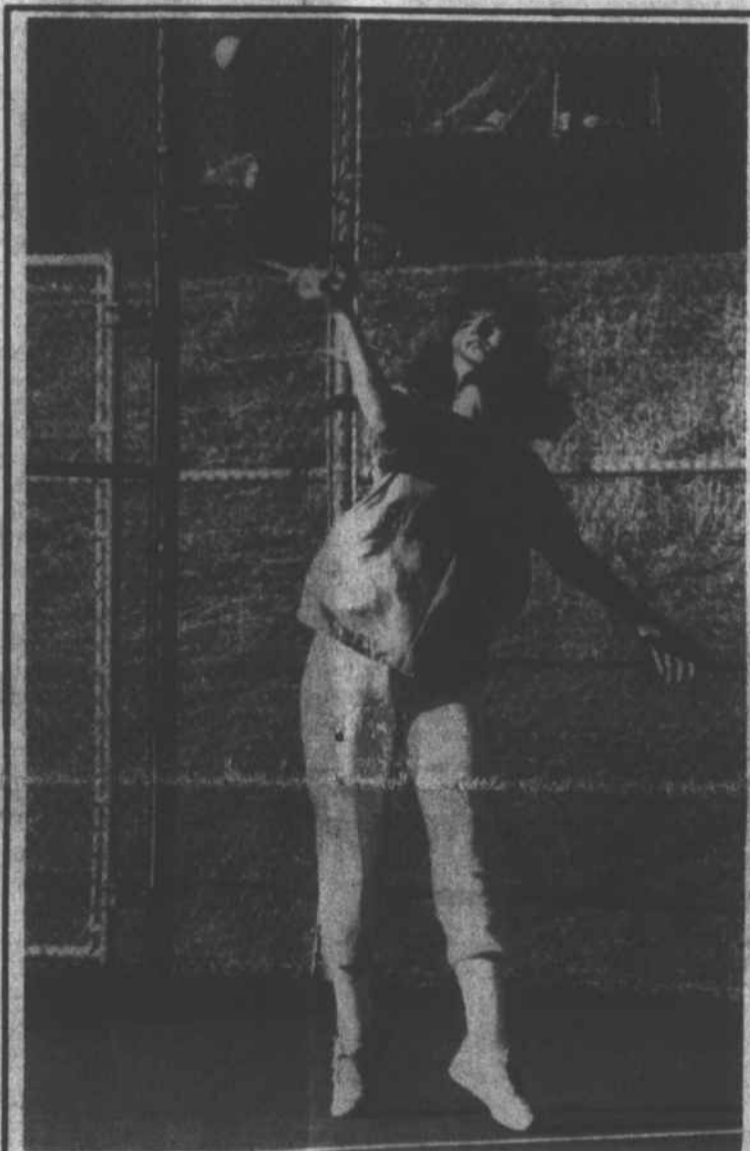
Risher submitted a bill of indictment to a Madison County grand jury in January, and the grand jurors returned it as a "true bill."

Ponder faces his second trial stemming from the purchase of the Redmon property.

He and three business associates — wife Marie, nephew Leonard and associate Marshall Kanner — were charged in a federal indictment with mail fraud. According to the indictment, Ponder and his associates had used the U.S. mail to transact the purchase of the land.

But a U.S. District Court judge, in January 1986, threw out the case, saying that a federal court was not the proper venue.

Risher and the former district attorney for Wake County had considered the filing of state charges two years ago, but said that they found insufficient evidence to warrant charges.



BILL STUDENC PHOTO

Tennis, Anyone?

Andrea Oakes takes advantage of this week's springlike weather to get in some practice strokes on the courts at North Buncombe High School. Oakes and her teammates are gearing up for high school tennis season, which begins soon.

District Attorney To Get County's Audit Report

By BILL STUDENC
Editor

The Madison County Board of Commissioners agreed Monday to pass to the District Attorney's Office an audit report outlining questionable financial transactions that took place during the previous county administration.

The commissioners did not agree, however, to specifically ask 24th Judicial District Attorney J. Thomas Risher for a full-fledged investigation of possible mishandling of county finances by former commissioners and their employees.

"I would like to suggest that we just send him (Risher) a copy of the report," said Commissioner Reese Steen. "We should write a letter and tell him we are not requesting an investigation. We are just making the report available to him."

Whether an investigation is to come will be entirely up to Risher, Steen said.

"We should just turn it over to him and tell him, 'If you see any wrongdoing or if you feel like it need investigating, do it to it,'" he said, making a motion to turn the report over to Risher.

Robert Capps, chairman of the Madison County Board of Commissioners, seconded the motion, which passed unanimously.

Roger Gregg of the Asheville auditing firm of Gregg & Lasher, P.A., told the commissioners Jan. 12 that he had found a long list of discrepancies in records of county finances during the final year of of-

fice of the former county commissioners.

Most of the discrepancies were in the form of "improperly documented financial transactions," including a "significant increase" in county payments to former officials and employees, particularly after the May 1986 primary.

Among the "questionable payments" were county checks to former county commissioners for expenses and mileage and more than \$7,500 in vacation, holiday and sick pay to employees.

The audit report also listed a number of budgetary problems and violations of state statutes regulating governmental budgets.

Capps said last week that the current commissioners had not had time to discuss the audit report to determine what action to take.

One reason that the commissioners waited nearly two months before acting was that the board felt it might cost the county more money to pursue the collection of any misspent funds than could actually be recovered, Steen said Monday.

In other action at Monday's meeting, the commissioners agreed to hire Gregg & Lasher — the firm that did the controversial partial audit of last year's finances — to complete an audit of the 1986-87 fiscal year.

Gregg & Lasher agreed to audit the county records for \$20,000, the second lowest bid received by the county.

Hot Springs Board Agrees To Keep Cable TV Company

By ANNE KITCHELL
Staff Writer

The town of Hot Springs has agreed to keep Vision Cable as the town's pay television service, despite complaints from Hot Springs residents.

During the regular meeting of the board of aldermen, town officials heard Vision Cable franchise owner Gene Johnson defend his company and service record.

According to town officials, a number of Hot Springs residents are

dissatisfied with the current cable service.

The service contract between the town and Vision Cable calls for reception of seven stations, but some members of the community have complained they can only get two or three channels at certain times.

Johnson said he took a survey of area residents and found that of 100 people polled, nearly two-thirds want to continue with his company.

Hot Springs Mayor Kenny Ramsey

said that many of the channels were off for long periods of time during the winter months.

"The only thing I ask is that you get spare parts to keep the cable service running," Ramsey said.

When asked why there would be an increase in the rates if two more stations were added to the service, Johnson said he would have to absorb the cost of maintaining the parts and equipment.

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Students Can Breathe Easier ; Spring Vacation Remains Intact

By ANNE KITCHELL
Staff Writer

In the wake of one of the most eventful winters in recent years, area superintendents and school boards have counted up the school days students have missed due to weather.

Despite frequent "mini-vacations" courtesy of Mother Nature, spring break for students in Madison and Buncombe coun-

ties is basically intact.

Madison students will have to come back one day early from Easter break, if no more days are missed, said Bobby Edwards, superintendent of schools. If more bad weather comes this way, the Madison County school board will have to decide how the time will be made up.

State law requires students to be in class 180 days a year, Edwards

said. The N.C. Board of Education must approve the shortening of a school year.

Madison County is not alone in the loss of school days. Buncombe County schools have been closed 10 days this winter.

Buncombe County Director of Pupil Accounting Tommy Koontz said the Easter break is still in place.

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Kingston's Folly?

Prison Plan Includes Landfill, State Park, Industrial Sites

By BILL STUDENC
Editor

He laughingly refers to his plan as "Kingston's Folly."

But Richard Kingston of Marshall says he's not yet ready to give up on his proposal to locate a 200-man medium-security prison in Madison County — despite a fierce public outcry at a public meeting in Marshall last week, despite the fact that neither county nor municipal officials are supportive of the plan and despite criticism from the state's highest court.

Kingston, the state's highest court

replacement for the crumbling Craggy Prison in Woodfin, he built in Madison County.

He says that the facility could mean up to 100 new jobs and \$35 million to the local economy — numbers disputed by opponents of his suggestion as too high. But Kingston also says there is more to his plan than jobs and dollars — more than he has had a chance to explain to the public.

Kingston tried to present his plan to the Madison County Board of Commissioners last Monday, but interruptions and criticism from the standing-room-only crowd made that impossible.

Kingston says he will get to the point where

we could work this thing out. Everybody got puffed up and blew this thing out of proportion," he said. "I may be a nut, but I think this is a valid, first-class plan."

His proposal calls for the construction of the prison — if the General Assembly approves legislation allowing the prison to be built in Madison, and not Buncombe, County, as the law now states — on a 200-acre tract of land in the Redmon Dam area.

Longtime Democratic Party leader Zeno Ponder is an owner of the land, however, and that fact has turned many residents against the plan.

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According to Richard Kingston's proposal, bringing a new prison to Madison County could solve the county's landfill woes, result in new industrial sites and create new industrial sites just outside of downtown Marshall.

