

# Armed Man Robs Calabash Security S&L Branch

BY DOUG RUTTER

An armed robber was still at large Tuesday night after taking an undisclosed sum of money from the Calabash branch of Security Savings & Loan earlier that afternoon.

Brunswick County Sheriff John C. Davis said nobody was injured during the robbery, which occurred at about 3:45 p.m. Tuesday.

Davis said the suspect, a white male, entered the institution on N.C. 179 east of Calabash, revealed a handgun and demanded money from a teller.

After receiving an unknown sum of cash, he said the suspect ran away from the building in the direction of nearby Marsh Harbor Golf Links.

From descriptions offered by Security Savings & Loan employees working at the time, Davis said the age

of robber could be anywhere from the late 30s to 50. He said the suspect was wearing a blue jumper or blazer and a blue baseball cap at the time of the crime.

The sheriff said he had no idea how much money was taken and noted that financial institutions do not typically reveal that type of information.

The case will be investigated by the FBI since robbing a financial institution is a federal offense.

Davis said Tuesday that federal authorities may have a better description of the suspect after reviewing film from security cameras which apparently were operating at the time of the robbery.

Immediately following the crime, law enforcement officers with the sheriff's department and local municipalities responded to the scene and set up

roadblocks at four major traffic points outside of Calabash.

Officers stopped and searched vehicles at intersections of U.S. 17 and Thomasboro Road, U.S. 17 and Calabash Road, N.C. 179 and Old Georgetown Road and at the South Carolina state line on N.C. 179.

Phil Wells of the N.C. League of Savings Institutions said Tuesday the organization is offering a \$2,000 cash reward for information leading to the arrest and indictment of the person who committed the robbery.

Anyone with information can contact the FBI office in Charlotte at (704)525-8497. Telephone charges may be reversed.

Through the end of May, Wells said there had been 72 robberies of financial institutions this year in North

Carolina. That figure, he noted, is "way up" from last year.

This week's crime is the second armed robbery of a financial institution in Calabash in the past 18 months.

On Dec. 15, 1987, a white male carrying a handgun and what turned out to be a fake bomb robbed the old United Carolina Bank branch on Ivey High Street in Calabash.

A suspect was arrested several months later in connection with the local robbery and robberies in several other locations in the southeastern United States.

Sheriff Davis suggested Tuesday that the proximity of Calabash to the South Carolina state line makes it vulnerable to crimes such as armed robbery. "We haven't had a rash of robberies, but there can be a problem because it is so close to the state line."

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BRUNSWICK COUNTY COMMISSIONERS Frankie Rabon (foreground) and Grace Beasley try to absorb budget information during one of the county board's three work sessions last week in Bolivia.

## County Board Passes 'Surprise' 5-Cent Tax Rate Increase

BY RAHN ADAMS

When the dust settled Tuesday night, Brunswick County Commissioners had adopted the county's 1989-90 budget, but at least one board member who opposed the measure was still wondering how revenue from a five-cent tax hike will be spent.

On a motion by Commissioner Grace Beasley, the board voted 3-2 to adopt the budget with a 5 1/2-cent tax rate, with 5 1/2 cents to be used for general operations and the remaining four cents allocated to "operating reserve."

The motion was made within minutes after the meeting began. Commissioners Beasley, Benny Ludlum and Kelly Holden voted for the motion. Commissioners Frankie Rabon and Gene Pinkerton opposed it.

Although county officials indicated that a total budget amount was not figured Tuesday using the new tax rate, the board's action appears to translate to a \$31 million budget, compared to the current year's \$27.3 million budget. The 1988-89 tax rate is 5 1/2 cents per \$100 of property valuation.

Over a month ago, County Manager John T. Smith proposed a \$33 million budget that included a 10-cent tax rate hike, with the increase to be used for a proposed five-year capital improvements program.

The capital program was to mainly include a new elementary school near Supply, a 911 communications facility, a new Social Services building, a jail addition and improvements to the county water system.

After the meeting, both Ms. Beasley and Holden explained that the four cents in the tax rate which were allocated for "operating reserve" are to go for capital projects.

Ms. Beasley indicated that the difficulty faced by the board was that it "could not tie X number of dollars" toward individual projects, since few definite cost estimates were available.

"I really believe it (the rate hike)

was necessary," she said. "I think this is a step toward providing the services that we're mandated to provide."

Smith told the Beacon, "I think we can live with it (the new budget), and we can get started with these capital projects." He added, however, that the county probably will not be able to complete the projects in the coming year and that alternate funding methods—such as lease-purchase arrangements—will be explored.

Pinkerton commented that he was "surprised" by the board's action, because "there wasn't anything specific as to why we're increasing the taxes."

Pinkerton, whose motion last month to fund Smith's proposed capital improvements plan was defeated by the board, added that the new budget decides nothing specific

about the capital projects. "If they had gone with the capital improvements program, I could have gone with an increase," he said.

According to Smith, the additional cent that Ms. Beasley's motion allotted for general operations will cover amendments the commissioners made last week and Monday to the county manager's original proposed operating budget, which was based on a 5 1/2-cent tax rate.

Those amendments to Smith's recommended budget included a \$500 across-the-board salary supplement for county employees, instead of cost-of-living and merit raises; a 15-percent or \$275,890 increase in the county's group insurance costs, with none of that increase passed along to employees; a \$23,640 increase for the commissioners' per diem payments. (See COUNTY, Page 2-A)

## Woman Dies In U.S. 17 Accident; 7 Others Hurt In Weekend Wrecks

An elderly Shallotte area woman died Saturday morning in a head-on collision on U.S. 17 near Shallotte, according to Highway Patrol spokesperson Ruby Oakley.

The victim was retired schoolteacher Edna Jacobs Bennett, 82, of Route 1, Shallotte. Ms. Oakley said the death was the seventh traffic fatality this year on Brunswick County highways—two more than occurred by the same time last year.

The accident happened Saturday at 10:45 a.m., one-tenth of a mile south of Shallotte on U.S. 17, when Mrs.

Bennett's southbound 1968 Chevrolet crossed the center line and collided head-on with a northbound 1986 Dodge driven by Charles D. Watterson III, 20, of Havelock. Ms. Oakley said.

Watterson and his passenger—Audra Watterson, 19, also of Havelock—both suffered non-incapacitating injuries and were taken by ambulance to The Brunswick Hospital at Supply.

The investigating officer, Trooper B.L. Wilkes, did not indicate a possible reason why the Bennett car cross-

ed the center line, although his report noted rainy weather conditions at the time of the wreck, Ms. Oakley said. Both vehicles were traveling at estimated speeds of 45 mph when they collided.

Assistant County Coroner Cleo McCranie said Tuesday it did not appear that Mrs. Bennett died of injuries suffered in the crash. Although no autopsy was done, McCranie speculated that the woman possibly died of a heart attack. She was pronounced dead at the scene of the wreck.

(See WOMAN, Page 2-A)

## Clammer Saved From Drowning

A local woman clamming in Shallotte River Monday afternoon was saved from drowning by a neighbor who apparently was at the right place at the right time.

Elsie Cumbee of Supply, who was clamming with her husband, mother and sister in the river Monday around 2:30 p.m., said she was suddenly swept into a deep hole where the water was over her head.

The group was clamming in Shallotte River near the Cumbee's vacation home at Little Shallotte River Estates near Shell Point.

When the other members of her party were unable to assist her, she said neighbor Tom Gore came to the rescue and pulled her to the river bank.

"I can't swim and I had just tried to stay alive, and he just got there in time," she said. "I had fought for my life until I was about wore out."

While struggling to stay afloat, Mrs. Cumbee said she recalled the advice given to all swimmers in trouble and tried not to panic. "I think my husband and my family was more scared than I was."

She said her sister and mother

were both bogged down in the river bottom and her husband was unable to reach her with a clamming rake.

Mrs. Cumbee added that she was very fortunate Gore was home at the time because he is usually at work at that hour of the day.

"I don't have no desire to go back into the water for a long time," she said. "The Lord was just looking out for me this time."

Mrs. Cumbee said she hopes to get a sign erected in that section of the river warning fishermen and swimmers of the potential danger.

## Legislators Tangle Over Criticism Of Brunswick County Drug Sentences

BY RAHN ADAMS

The N.C. Senate Finance Committee was expected to take up discussion again this week of a proposed bill to tax illegal drugs, after the legislation—inspired in part by drug cases in Brunswick County—was put on hold by the senator representing this area.

Last Wednesday in Raleigh, Sen. R.C. Soles of Columbus County had consideration of the bill postponed until this week. Soles said his purpose was to draw attention to inappropriate criticism of the local judicial system by one of the bill's sponsors, Sen. Robert G. Shaw of Guilford County.

"I'm very much in favor of the bill," Soles told the Beacon last Thursday, "but Sen. Shaw stood up before the committee and took the

court system (in the 13th District) to task for not doing anything to drug dealers."

Soles said he felt it was improper for Shaw to criticize the local court system, when the Greensboro legislator did not have firsthand knowledge of the drug cases that have been prosecuted in Brunswick County.

Since June 1987, local investigative grand jury probes have resulted in drug trafficking indictments against more than 100 individuals in Brunswick County, according to 13th District Attorney Michael Easley. Most of the defendants were charged on cocaine trafficking counts.

Shaw, a Holden Beach property owner, told the Beacon in April that he introduced the bill because "in many cases, the judges are not giv-

ing (drug traffickers) the mandatory minimum fine." He said he became aware of that situation from reading the Beacon's accounts the drug trafficking prosecutions here over the past couple of years.

He also introduced a companion bill dealing with mandatory minimum prison terms. The bill, which is being held in committee until a future legislative session, would require that convicted drug traffickers serve some active prison time, whether they give "substantial assistance" to investigators or not.

Under current laws, a judge may impose a lighter prison term or suspend the sentence and place the defendant on probation if the defendant is found to have provided substantial assistance. Also, the fine can be waived or reduced.

Otherwise, an individual who is convicted of trafficking in more than 400 grams of cocaine faces a mandatory minimum sentence of 35 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine; trafficking in more than 200 grams of cocaine, at least 14 years and a \$100,000 fine; and trafficking in more than 28 grams, at least seven years and a \$50,000 fine.

Of the 85 defendants who were indicted here on drug trafficking charges in June and July of 1987 and in April 1988, some 77 have been fully prosecuted, according to court records and information from the district attorney's office. Only two defendants received both mandatory minimum prison terms and fines, after they failed to get findings of substantial assistance.

In all, 46 defendants were fined,

with their fines ranging from \$250 to \$250,000. Some 55 of the defendants received active sentences, ranging from four weekends in jail to 35 years in prison; 22 defendants were placed on probation.

Noting that his figures include "spin-off" cases, Easley said Monday that 109 cases stemming from the Brunswick County investigative grand jury probes have been fully prosecuted. He said 81 of the defendants received active sentences, and 28 defendants were placed on probation.

Shaw told the Beacon Friday that he was not singling out the court system in the 13th District for criticism, as he said Soles had indicated. Shaw pointed out that all but one of the more than 10 judges who have sentenced local investigative

grand jury defendants have come from outside this district.

Despite the controversy, the Greensboro senator said he felt the controlled substance tax bill would be "all right" when taken up again by the committee this week. With a favorable report, the bill would go on to the Senate Appropriations Committee, then the Senate floor, before being sent to the State House.

The proposed legislation calls for levies of approximately \$100 per ounce of marijuana and \$200 per gram of cocaine and other controlled substances. Illegal drug dealers who do not pay the tax within 48 hours of obtaining the controlled substances would be subject to the tax, an additional penalty equal to the tax, imprisonment of up to five years and a fine.