

No Predictions

It's that time of year again, and while Forest Ranger Miller Caison hesitates to predict the course of the 1990 fire season after a "very quiet" 1989, he wants area residents to exercise caution when burning. Page 12-C.



Make All-County

The Trojans' Ricky Dantels and the Cougars' Tessa Lee are Brunswick County's cagers of the year, heading the list of high school standouts named to the all-county boys' and girls' basketball teams. Details are on Page 7-B.

New Course Opens

Golf course architect Rees Jones was at Sunset Beach last week to help celebrate the opening of his new course and a new clubhouse at Sea Trail Plantation. For this and related stories, turn to Pages 8-B and 9-B.



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Rabon, Beasley Attend Meeting

Brunswick County Commissioners Frankie Rabon and Grace Beasley were scheduled to return home Wednesday (March 21) from a five-day national conference in Washington, D.C.

Regina Alexander, clerk to the board of commissioners, said Rabon and Ms. Beasley flew to Washington Friday to attend the annual National Association of Counties Legislative Conference. Commission Chairman Gene Pinkerton initially planned to attend but canceled out last week.

Conference topics were to include issues such as solid waste, environment, land use, growth management, water quality, highways and airports. The association consists of more than 2,000 counties "dedicated in a united, non-partisan partnership with the sole purpose of improving county government all over the United States," according to association literature.

Ms. Alexander said the two commissioners' conference registration fees were \$195 each. Room rates at the Washington Hilton were \$92 per night for each commissioner during their five-night stay. Round-trip airfare between Wilmington and Washington was \$213.50 per person. Based on those figures, the trip cost \$1,737, not counting meal expenses.

The board of commissioners' regular March 19 meeting was canceled because of the conference. The board's next regular meeting will be Monday, April 2, at 6:30 p.m. in Bolivia.

Varnamtown Opponents View Taxes As Burden



RUDY SIMMONS talks about the reasons behind a move to unincorporate Varnamtown at last Thursday's town meeting.

BY DOUG RUTTER

Taxes and the fear of future tax rate increases emerged last week as two of the reasons behind a move to unincorporate Varnamtown.

An estimated 90 people crammed into Gospel Center Baptist Church last Thursday night to hear Rudy Simmons, spokesman for a group looking to revoke the town charter of Varnamtown, whose residents voted a year and a half ago to incorporate.

In February, State Rep. David Redwine received a petition bearing the names of 126 people who want "to be relieved of the burden" of being incorporated as the Town of Varnamtown.

But at last week's meeting, Mayor Judy Gaiway said only 68 of the people who signed the petition were registered to vote as of Jan. 31.

Town board member Ada McDonald noted that the number of registered voters on the petition is less than the number of people who voted against incorporation in September 1988, when 102 voters were in favor of Varnamtown becoming a town and 75 people opposed it.

Also, Mrs. McDonald said six of the people who signed the petition don't live inside the town limits, and some of the people whose names appear on the petition said they didn't know their names were on the list when contacted by telephone.

Simmons said he watched only about 10 people sign the petition and couldn't account for the rest of the signatures. "Nobody's arm that I knew of was twisted to sign that petition," he said.

During last week's hour-and-a-half discussion, Simmons was reluctant to talk about specific reasons behind the move to unincorporate the town, but he asked for a special election that would allow residents to vote on the issue.

He said residents who want to dissolve the town simply have a "different viewpoint" than people who support the town.

"The less you have to deal with the government, the better off you are," he said at the outset of the meeting, which drew the largest crowd of any board meeting held since the town incorporated in September 1988.

Simmons said town taxes are a burden for some people, and that the tax rate will likely increase in the (See VARNAMTOWN, Page 2-A)

Veterinarian Found Guilty Of Beating Pets

BY RAHN ADAMS

Having lost the first round in a criminal court battle that could cost him his veterinary license, Dr. Kenneth Neal of Calabash plans to appeal his conviction in Brunswick County District Court this week on misdemeanor animal cruelty charges.

At the close of a five-hour trial Judge Jerry A. Jolly late Monday afternoon found Neal guilty of four counts of cruelty to animals and sentenced him to four suspended one-year prison terms, five years of unsupervised probation and fines totaling \$2,000. Proceedings were interrupted on several occasions by scattered applause and laughter from spectators in the courthouse at Bolivia.

Jolly also ordered that a copy of the judgment be sent to the N.C. Veterinary Medical Board, which licenses veterinarians who practice in the state. A board spokesperson told the Beacon recently that the license of a veterinarian who is convicted of animal cruelty can be revoked or suspended after the case is reviewed by the board.

The maximum possible penalty for an animal cruelty conviction is a one-year prison term and \$1,500 fine.

Neal, 30, owner and operator of Calabash Animal Hospital, was represented by Wilmington attorney Carter Lambeth. Assistant District Attorney Thomas Hicks prosecuted the case. The lengthy trial included testimony from nine witnesses for the prosecution and 17 for the de-

The five-hour trial included testimony from nine witnesses for the prosecution and 17 for the defense.

fense.

The veterinarian's lawyer gave notice of his intent to appeal the case to Superior Court for a jury trial immediately after Jolly announced his verdicts and handed down the sentence. Neal—whose only open courtroom reaction to the judgment was to rap his briefcase lightly on the counsel table—could not be reached for comment after the trial. Hicks chose not to comment on the case because of the pending appeal, he said.

Neal was arrested Jan. 31 on the animal cruelty charges following a month-long investigation by Brunswick County Animal Control, which is a division of the Brunswick County Health Department. He was accused of beating two cats and two dogs at the animal hospital on separate occasions between Nov. 7, 1988, and Jan. 4.

The investigation was prompted by the Jan. 4 incident, in which Neal allegedly injured a 3 1/2-year-old tabby cat owned by Grissetown resident Debbie Somerset. Dog owners whose pets were involved in the charges were Shallotte area residents Al and Nell Harrelson, and Teresa Inman. The fourth animal was an injured stray cat that had been dropped off at a branch clinic Neal formerly operated in Tabor City.

Ms. Somerset filed a complaint with Animal Control Jan. 5 after former animal hospital employee Jane Burroughs of Shallotte Point told her that Neal abused the cat after he had difficulty giving it a feline leukemia test. Ms. Burroughs quit her job of three weeks after seeing Neal throw the cat against the examining room wall at least five times and repeatedly beat the animal's head against a bathtub, according to her testimony Monday. (See VETERINARIAN, Page 2-A)

Lockwood Folly River Opens; State Resumes Oyster Relay

BY DOUG RUTTER

Good news for Brunswick County shellfishermen came in two forms this week, as the state began an oyster relay program in Shallotte River and reopened a section of the beleaguered Lockwood Folly River to harvesting.

The oyster relay, the first in Brunswick County since 1988, started Tuesday morning in Shallotte River. Approximately a dozen boats each carrying two or more fishermen turned out for the first day of the relay, said Rich Carpenter, southern district manager with the state Division of Marine Fisheries, which sponsors the relay effort.

Under the program, the state pays fishermen \$1 per bushel to move oysters from polluted areas closed to shellfishing to clean waters where the oysters cleanse themselves and become safe for harvesting.

Oysters are being moved from a polluted area where the growth of the shellfish has been stunted to a better growing area downstream known as "The Swash."

The oyster relay will continue through Friday and then again April 3 through 6, said Carpenter. "Evidently it went fine today," he

"It's the section where they all want to work."

—George Gilbert
On 400-acre opening

said Tuesday afternoon. "They moved about 1,500 bushels, which is pretty good loot."

The state suspended its popular oyster relay program in the spring of 1989 due to the presence of two

oyster-killing parasites, Dermo and MSX. At the time, officials feared that the organisms would be spread from one oyster bed to another if the relay program continued.

Recent tests, however, have shown that the organisms are present in small concentrations in all shellfish areas, and state biologists no longer fear spreading the parasites.

To prevent clammers from disturbing the transplanted oysters, the state has closed to shellfishing the area where the oysters are being placed. It will remain closed to har-

vesting until next oyster season, said Carpenter.

Meanwhile, the lower section of Lockwood Folly River was temporarily opened to clam harvesting last Friday after being closed to shellfishermen for nearly a month. The river was closed to harvesting Feb. 19 because of unsafe levels of bacterial pollution.

George Gilbert, assistant supervisor of the state Shellfish Sanitation branch, said the area opened includes about 400 acres. "Basically, it's the heart of the river," he said. "It's the section where they all want to work."

County Ready To Proceed With Long-Awaited Drainage Project

BY RAHN ADAMS
Staff Writer

Local contractors got their first looks last week at a much-needed snagging and clearing project that residents in one section of southwestern Brunswick County's Cawcaw Drainage District have sought for over two years to control flooding in their area.

Brunswick County Operations Services Director Darry Somerset and officials with the county Soil and Water Conservation District office showed at least four contractors sections of the drainage district's overgrown Shingletree Canal last Wednesday and Thursday mornings. Deadline for bids on the project is March 30 at 4:30 p.m.

Calabash drainage committee member James Deehan, who has pushed for Cawcaw maintenance work over the past two years, was among several interested district residents who also surveyed the upcoming project, which will involve the six-mile canal from Thomasboro Road to near Ash-Little River Road.

"I think it's outstanding that (State Rep.) David Redwine's and (Commissioner) Kelly Holden's efforts and a lot of other people's efforts are really bearing fruit to see this job worked on," Deehan told the Beacon last Thursday. "I'm glad the county has recognized the need to work down on this end of the county."

Last November, the N.C. Department of Environment, Health and Natural Resources awarded Brunswick County a \$60,000 grant for restoration of the Shingletree Canal. Estimated cost of the project is \$90,000, with the county providing \$30,000-worth of "in-kind services"—work that will be done by Operations Services.

Interim County Manager David Clegg noted Friday

that the Shingletree project is only the first phase of a plan to restore Cawcaw's entire 16 1/2-mile canal system. Last July, the county applied for \$257,849 to maintenance of the whole district. However, the state awarded only \$468,000 for numerous water resource development projects across the state.

Clegg said he anticipates that the county will apply later this year for additional grant funding to cover the remaining portions of the three-phase Cawcaw project. In an earlier interview, he said the first phase will do much to alleviate flooding problems in the drainage district, since studies have indicated that the canal system needs only "remedial maintenance."

Deehan last week agreed that clearing and snagging the Shingletree Canal should solve drainage problems especially in the Carolina Shores subdivision where he lives. "It'll help us immensely, because this will get the water away from us," he said.

Both Clegg and Deehan also credited the N.C. Department of Transportation's recent replacement of drainage culverts under Persimmon and Shingletree roads as having aided water flow on Shingletree Canal. The Cawcaw canal system empties into the Waccamaw River in the far western tip of Brunswick County.

According to Somerset, the Shingletree project should take approximately one month to complete after it is awarded to the low-bidding contractor in early April. In the first phase of the project, 12-foot to 25-foot travelways will be cleared along one side of the canal. The second phase will involve clearing and snagging of the canal itself.

Somerset said the county will provide the contractor with equipment and operators needed to pull up (See DRAINAGE, Page 3-A)



OPERATIONS SERVICES DIRECTOR Darry Somerset shows Calabash drainage committee member James Deehan a section of the Shingletree Canal in the Cawcaw Swamp Watershed.