

# THE BRUNSWICK BEACON

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## Does County Need Its Own Veterans' Officer?

Does Brunswick County need its own veterans' service officer? That may be the more appropriate question to be asking, rather than the one we're hearing, i.e., that of whether one must be a veteran to be the most qualified person to deal with veterans' affairs.

The question of need came up about eight or so years ago when the veterans' service officer was about to retire. The county seriously considered closing the office, but bowed under an emotional onslaught.

Local veterans organized and lobbied heavily for the office to remain in business. It was an election year and incumbents were seeking re-election; the vets won. And one of the most vocal leaders of those lobbyists, a military retiree, got the job.

Now that veterans' service officer has retired and the question must surface again—in different times. Brunswick County's not exactly flush these days; it's looking for ways to tighten spending while maintaining essential services.

Veterans want a service officer. It's more convenient, it's more personal.

They will tell you that 90 out of 100 counties have a full-time veterans' service officer and that Guilford County has two.

They will tell you that, according to the U.S. Veterans Administration, there are approximately 5,990 veterans living in Brunswick County, plus dependents and survivors, and that they need a local service officer.

They will tell you that veterans' benefits and compensation are the equivalent of a small industry in Brunswick County, with an estimated \$4.85 million coming into the county during 1991 alone. Add on the multiplier factor of your choice and there's a trickle-down effect of predictable and impressive impact.

Veterans will tell you, very loudly and clearly, that Brunswick County has a "moral obligation" to maintain a veterans service office, that through their service to the country veterans have earned that extra attention from county taxpayers.

But there is more to the story. Emotions aside, other than added convenience, what does a local office provide that isn't already available to local veterans through some other means?

To listen to some local veterans, you'd think there was no other agency out there a veteran can turn to for help.

Yet, both the state and federal governments have agencies that do nothing but work with veterans, the Veterans Administration and the N.C. Department of Veterans Affairs.

There are at least three major national veterans' organizations—American Legion, Disabled American Veterans and Veterans of Foreign Wars—that offer some forms of assistance to their members. That help may extend to special service days or even a mobile office.

Plus, many other government agencies have veterans' affairs specialists—from the financial aid offices of state-supported schools to state Employment Security Commission offices. And veterans' concerns also get the attention of our congressional delegation.

The North Carolina Dept. of Veterans Affairs has a district office in Wilmington. It is to serve an estimated 38,000 veterans living in District 4, which includes Brunswick, New Hanover, Columbus, Onslow, Pender and Bladen counties, as well as veterans' dependents and survivors.

The district office is staffed with two service officers and two clerks. The senior service officer will tell you that in an "ideal world" the two officers would only rarely deal directly with veterans, and would deal almost exclusively with county veterans' service officers, providing technical support and help with complicated or "problem" cases.

But it's not a perfect world, in more ways than one. For fiscal year 1991, Brunswick County has budgeted \$57,958—roughly half its contribution to the Brunswick County Public Library and almost \$1,000 per veteran—in local money to operate the veterans' service office. It gets no state or federal money for that purpose.

Meanwhile, New Hanover's 14,300 veterans are being served by the district office in Wilmington, at state expense. New Hanover County hasn't had a local veterans' service officer in 15 years, though lobbying is currently under way to hire one.

Somewhat or another, the district's two service officers and two clerks manage to support service officers in five other counties while directly serving in New Hanover County alone more than twice the number of veterans we have in Brunswick County. That's with an officer going at least two days a month to each of the other counties.

Still, we're told Brunswick County needs a veterans' service officer and an assistant or clerk to serve our much smaller population of veterans. But the numbers don't appear to justify that. It appears that many of those 6,000 veterans only have occasional need of a veterans' service officer.

In November—a month in which activity at the office showed an actual increase—the activity report shows 110 requests for service in person and 117 by telephone; incoming contacts—125 written and 52 "other," outgoing contacts—115 written and 58 "other".

Disabled American Veterans, Veterans of Foreign Wars, American Legion—these veterans' organization in the United States offer education and public information to help keep veterans and their dependents informed of their rights and of benefits for which they might be eligible.

Some of the organizations also offer direct help in obtaining benefits, either through service clinics on special days, or in one case, a mobile office. Some have specialists who actually represent veterans in claims procedures.

It seems that help for veterans is only a phone call or a short visit away—and might not necessarily involve a trip to Wilmington in every instance.

A district service officer already makes two trips a month to Brunswick County, providing technical assistance to the service officer here and helping with more complex cases.

Following the model used by the Social Security representative who visits the county each week, that time could be just as easily spent in appointments with veterans whose concerns cannot be handled by mail or over the telephone or who can't get to Wilmington readily.

To ask the question again: Does Brunswick County need a veterans' service officer? Brunswick County has other, more pressing needs; demands for services that would reach and benefit a much broader sector of the community.

For that reason Brunswick County Commissioners ought to seriously consider downscaling, or perhaps, eliminating the veterans' service officer.

## Sometimes You Can't Tell What Day It Is

When you're in the newspaper business, sometimes you can't tell what day it is. That's especially true during the holiday season.

When I arrived at work last Wednesday, a note on my computer terminal said, "Today is Thursday." I could have shot the messenger, but instead I gritted my teeth and realized it was the ugly truth. Just keep the Christmas spirit, be thankful for the reminder from my news editor and get to work, a voice told me.

When I got in my car in Maco, it was Wednesday. But when I arrived in Shallotte later it was Thursday. I had somehow lost an entire day—had driven right past it—but not really.

The culprit is the holiday season. In order to keep the weekly newspaper on schedule, sometimes we have to throw Wednesday right out the window around here. I'm not complaining. I like holidays, too, and plan to enjoy Christmas and New Year's days with the family. I just

Terry Pope



want to file a complaint with the board of trustees that's responsible for scheduling two holidays on back-to-back Wednesdays.

This week, we will have an even shorter schedule, for New Year's Day is upon us and Christmas is still in the air. It can give a journalist a bad case of jet lag, even when he's gone no further than the drink machine out by the fire station.

That means we have three working days instead of the usual five to prepare for the Jan. 2 issue. It's like cramming a week of school into three days. Throw in some last

minute Christmas shopping, plenty of eating, and the college football bowl schedule and it doesn't leave much time. One must set priorities.

When you're pulling out your hair at work, things are still normal elsewhere. You return home and Thursday is still Thursday and Friday is still Friday. The television schedule doesn't change, you're still running low on cat food and things are piling up for you to do over the weekend.

Finally, you get through Thursday, which is a Friday, and then comes Friday, which is a Monday. So on Friday we work a busy schedule at the newsroom while Fridays at other places during the holiday season tend to be slow, a time for office parties, reflection, taking unused vacation time and making of New Year's resolutions. School is out and most people are at the shopping centers.

Some mornings I have awakened before the alarm sounds and couldn't tell what day it was. That's what it feels like this week. As I lay there

beneath the warm blankets, my mind tries to think of what happened the day before so I can tell if it's a work day or weekend, whether to get up or just sleep late.

It's the strangest feeling. I've thought of what it must be like not to have to worry about what day it is. Like dogs. Do you think they care or know what day it is?

We have learned to not like having our schedules changed. I guess I've fallen into that category, too.

We want our parking space open when we get to work. We want to go to lunch on time and for the whistle to blow at 5:30 p.m. sharp so we can go home. We want a part of our lives to stay routine, to stay on schedule. We want the baby to sleep when we sleep, the dog to ask for permission to go outside at some time other than 2 a.m.

But for now Thursday is Friday, Friday is Monday, and Monday is Tuesday.

It takes some getting use to.



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## The In-Laws Had Better Like Coconut

We did something right this year. Often the Christmas holiday period is one of frantic rushing for the two of us. You probably have experienced this at some time in your own life.

Usually by this time during the holidays, after trying to meet deadlines at work and at home, I'm stressed out and sick with the flu or a virus of some kind, which puts us even further behind. Then I get cold sores and look as miserable as I feel and take it all out on you-know-who.

But not Christmas 1991. We decided some tasks were going to get done sooner at home, some how,

Susan Usher



some way, and that we were going to celebrate Christmas this year with the joy the occasion warrants.

We made time to participate in a Christmas program at church.

We mailed greeting cards in mid-December—although we had to skip

the personal notes inside to manage that trick.

We purchased or made all gifts well in advance, and wrapped them at least two weeks before the big day. The box to my sister and her family in Indiana arrived there with more than a week's leeway.

We've got a few cookies baked for sharing, but we're not going to try to see everybody we know over the holidays. Just during midwinter.

Our home and yard are decorated and are as clean as they're going to get. We wouldn't wince if unexpected company showed up. In fact, we'd welcome it.

I'll confess there was one short period when it didn't look like everything would get done.

But it all worked out, and we're not feeling much pressure.

When we head to Don's parents for Christmas Day, the packages will include something I hadn't found time to make in a number of Christmases: a fancy cake. To be exact, a three-layer white cake with lemon cream filling and seven-minute frosting, mounded with scads of flaked coconut and decorated with cherries and lemon twists on top.

Now, I just hope Don's family likes coconut.

## Here's Looking To A Better 1992

If someone had asked me one year ago what I'd be doing by Christmas of 1991, you would not have heard me say that I'd be married, living on the North Carolina coast and working at a newspaper as a journalist.

Many of you out there have done what I have: changed my life drastically (and for the better) within a short amount of time.

It helps if you have supportive, patient people around you at these times to help you get used to all the new things in your life.

My husband and I have been getting used to living with each other after many years of being single. Luckily, he's very patient with me.

I'm getting used to living where there are no hills, no movie theaters and loads of new rules, speech patterns and terminology to learn.

But, these are differences that everyone gets used to once they have lived someplace for a while, and I, too, will grow accustomed to them.

Having a husband who was born and raised here helps. It's like having a reference encyclopedia with you at all times.

For me, the most bizarre thing was to start working at this newspaper. Without having a day of journalism or photography school under my belt, I found myself hired and doing very unusual things.

I've encountered new issues and public officials, had to report on sewer projects, town ordinances and school programs. And none of them

have anything to do with my familiar home state of Georgia!

And in the midst of all this learning, I've made some pretty embarrassing blunders.

I've taken photos of people that didn't come out because I didn't know how to set the camera when using a flash...through four rolls of film.

There have also been town officials and people in the public eye that I've misrepresented while explaining a new town policy or project.

What's nice is that these people have been very patient with me, taking into consideration that I know little of the history of this area, and have not treated my mistakes too seriously.

Nobody has called for me to be tarred and feathered...yet.

As I reflect on the hardest transition of the past year, I'm grateful that as I struggled, the people of Brunswick County have been supportive.

The town officials I've met and interviewed have always been help-

ful friendly, and have taken the time to explain some of the history of local issues and projects that I otherwise wouldn't have known.

It's also very encouraging to have someone I meet at a public event give me words of praise if I've done a good job on a particular article. That sort of thing makes me think I'm not making mistakes everytime I sit at the computer.

Actually, it's been very interesting learning about all the different communities in Brunswick County. Each town council has a collective personality all its own, and I'm even beginning to be able to analyze certain issues and see how they affect different parts of each community.

But I still have a long way to go. My colleague Doug Rutter put it

well about a month ago when he asked his sports-page readers to "give me time to grow," since he was new to interpreting and reporting sports events.

I look forward to my own growth at the *Beacon* in 1992, and ask that persons who read my coverage of their area continue to be patient with me.

I have been lucky. Many people who make the mistakes that I've made don't last too long at their profession, but I have been allowed to learn from each mistake and that, hopefully, will equip me to report the news a little better in 1992.

But keep the tar and feathers handy, just in case.

### LETTER TO THE EDITOR

### Postage Up, Service Is Down

To the editor:  
 I know what Gus Barbetta is going through about his paper (letter in Dec. 12 issue). I had been taking the *News Reporter* of Columbus County, where I was from, to keep up with the news from back home.  
 It comes out twice a week and some weeks the Monday paper would get here after the Thursday paper would. Some weeks they both would come together and sometimes they both would come the next day.  
 I just don't know why, if they can come 130 miles overnight one week, why can't they come every week like that?  
 I got so mad writing the post offices to try to find out why it would take five to six days for it to get to me. I still would like to take the *News Reporter*, but if I can't get it in two days, I feel my \$31.50 a year would be a waste.  
 (See POSTAGE, Following Page)