

Most Answering Survey Rate Brunswick Schools As Middling

BY SUSAN USHER

Brunswick County's schools are mediocre, place too little emphasis on academic success and have room for improvement in almost all areas, believe a majority of those responding to an attitudinal survey conducted in February by the Southport-Oak Island Chamber of Commerce.

Basing percentages on the total number of surveys returned, nearly 56 of those surveyed ranked the schools as fair to middling when asked to grade the public schools on an "A" to "F" report card scale. Of those, 37.5 percent graded the schools as "C," or average, while only 17.5 percent gave the schools an "A" or "B."

However, more than four out of every 10 (42.6 percent) gave the schools a "D" or "F," mostly "D"s.

How did participants reach those conclusions?

More than 81 percent said they use teacher quality, among other criteria, to judge school system performance, while 69 percent listed curriculum quality and 60 percent consider standardized test scores.

Most were unimpressed with the school system's educational programs for non-college bound students, college-bound students and students with special needs.

While 20 respondents didn't answer the question, two out of every three (66.7 percent) ranked discipline and lack of parental interest (66 percent) as the biggest problems facing the schools, followed by lack of student interest (62 percent) and drugs and alcohol (58 percent).

Two issues raised frequently by school officials, overcrowding and lack of financial support, drew fewer supporters, 49 percent and 37.7 percent, respectively.

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Interestingly, while 69 percent rated lack of parental interest as a problem, 76 percent of the respondents rated their own involvement as "high" and 23 percent described themselves as school volunteers.

Sixty percent said they think the schools place too little emphasis on academic success, while 34 percent believe current emphasis is sufficient.

The chamber's education committee conducted the survey in cooperation with the county schools, the South Brunswick Islands and North Brunswick chambers, with the aim of finding ways it could help the school system improve.

The effort "can't produce anything but

positive results," said Superintendent Ralph Johnston. "We're already addressing some of the issues and we're already using some of the data from the survey."

The survey itself had two specific goals. The first was to gauge the validity of this problem statement:

"Too many students in Brunswick County are, upon graduation from high school, either unprepared for the job market or in need of remediation upon entry into colleges and universities."

"Many potential businesses and residents choose to go elsewhere because of perceptions about the quality of education in this area."

"It is desired that the quality of education in Brunswick County, as well as the perception of that quality, be such that residents and potential residents not only consider it

adequate for their needs, but also are attracted to the area as a result."

The committee also wanted to identify the areas relating to education that are of most concern to Brunswick County residents, so that the committee, school system and community can focus on those areas for improvement. The education committee plans to start work in July with the schools on projects "to make a positive impact on education in our county," according to chamber executive Karen S. Hope.

"We have a lot of work to do," said Frank Blackmon, a CP&L manager and education committee member who presented the results to the school board earlier this month. "If one group here could take one problem, and another group take another problem, perhaps we could solve some of these problems."

THE BRUNSWICK BEACON

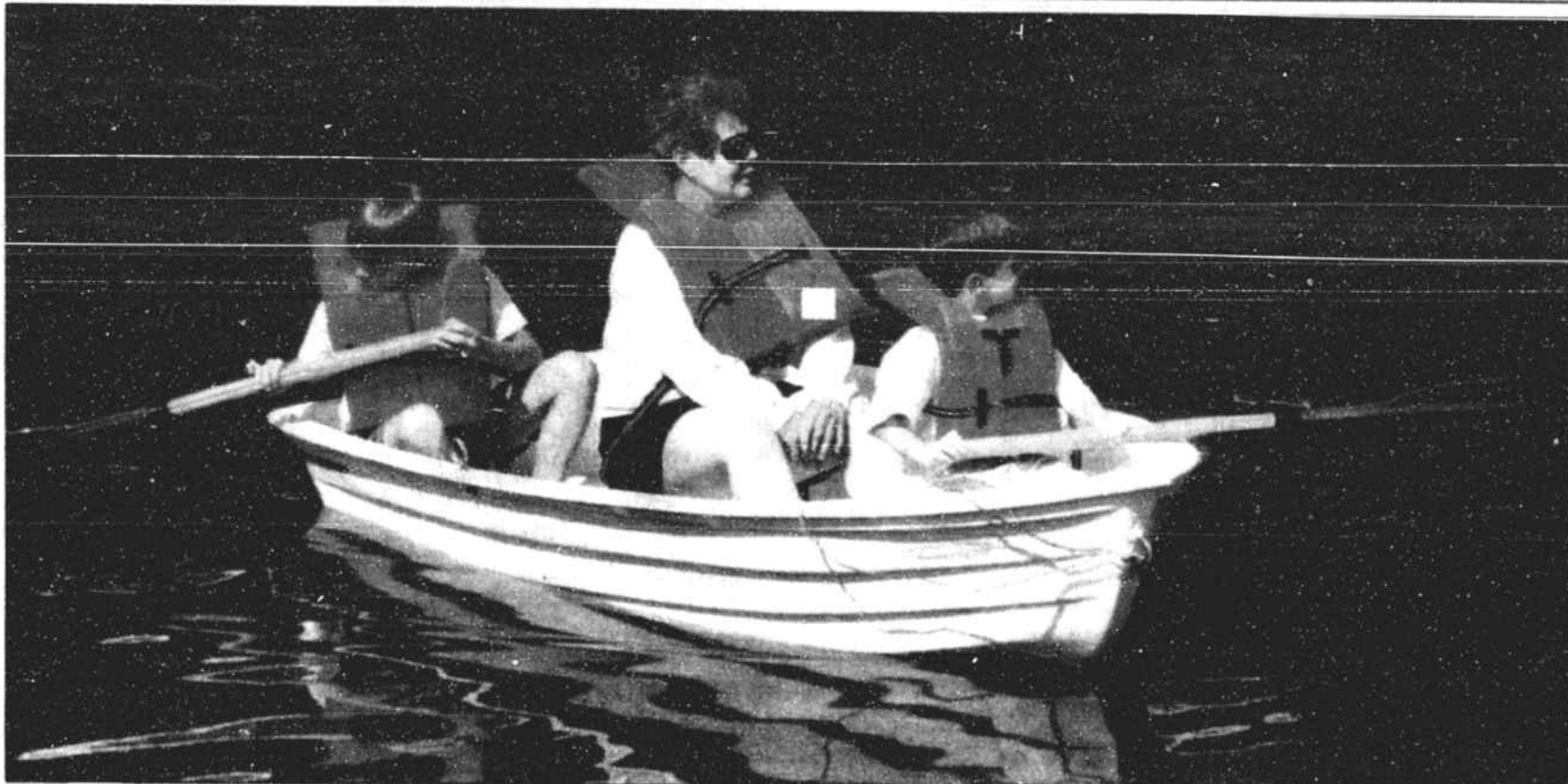
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STAFF PHOTO BY ERIC CARLSON

Gently Down The Stream

Vacationers take advantage of a lazy late spring day to explore one of the finger canals at Holden Beach—the slow, quiet way.

IMMUNITY STILL A QUESTION

Former Clerk Sues County In State Courts

BY ERIC CARLSON

Two weeks after Regina Alexander's lawsuit was dismissed in federal court, the former clerk to the Brunswick County Commissioners has appealed the decision and filed a new state court action against the county and the three board members who voted to eliminate her job.

While making the same charges of racial and political discrimination alleged in her federal complaint, Alexander's new lawsuit also claims that former board Chairman Kelly Holden and fellow commissioners Donald Shaw and Jerry Jones violated an employment contract with her.

The new lawsuit asks the court to award her additional damages for "emotional distress, embarrassment, humiliation, anxiety and damage to reputation" that allegedly resulted after she was fired "for unjustifiable motives." The suit was entered two days before the three-year deadline for filing such an action in state courts.

Earlier this month, U.S. District Court Judge James C. Fox ruled that the commissioners had "legislative immunity" and could not be sued in federal courts for cutting Alexander's paid position from the 1991-92 county budget. Holden said at the time that her job was one of 20 eliminated during a reduction in the county work force that was needed to help to balance the budget.

Alexander's lawyer, Martha Geer of Raleigh, said Tuesday that she has appealed Fox's ruling to the U.S. Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals. Because the judge "did not rule on the merits of our claims" and left open the possibility of a trial in state court, Geer said she hopes the case can be heard before a Brunswick County jury later this year.

"The federal ruling shouldn't have any bearing on the state claims at all," Geer said. "Both sides

"If you purchase liability insurance, you waive all immunity defenses. That's just a slam dunk."

—Attorney Martha Geer

have already prepared their case for federal court, so I'm ready to go and they're ready to go. I'd like to see us go to trial as soon as possible."

Geer said the claim of "legislative immunity" won't apply in the state courts because the North Carolina Constitution does not protect county officials from being sued for official actions that improperly cause damage to an employee.

Alexander's attorney also asserted that the county gave up the right to claim immunity from civil action when it bought liability insurance to cover possible losses in such cases.

"If you purchase liability insurance, you waive all immunity defenses," Geer said. "That's just a slam dunk. It's so clear under state law that I wouldn't even raise it as a defense, although they probably will."

County Attorney Mike Ramos took a different view. He agreed that legislative immunity "probably hasn't" been formally recognized as a defense in North Carolina courts. But because of that, the state appeals courts are likely to look to federal rulings for guidance in deciding whether legislative immunity should apply.

Ramos said he "totally expected" to see the Alexander case in state courts and plans to introduce a motion asking a local judge to grant the same immunity allowed by the federal judge. He

also expects that ruling to be appealed all the way to the N.C. Supreme Court by whichever side loses.

"It's a complete defense for us, so we'll file it in superior court and take it as far as we have to go," Ramos said. "Appeals courts are expensive, but not as expensive as a trial would be."

Consequently, Ramos said it would be unlikely for a jury to hear the Alexander case for two to three years.

Alexander, who is black and a registered Democrat, was a county employee for more than 16 years and clerk to the board for over 10 years. Her position was written out of the budget after Republicans Shaw and Jones joined Holden to form a party majority on the county board in 1990.

"Prior to 1990, defendant Holden had reported to political supporters that he did not believe that the clerk to the board should be black," the Alexander lawsuit says. "He also stated that the board needed to fire (Alexander) because of her political affiliation."

At the new board's first meeting, the commissioners voted not to re-appoint Alexander, a move that was "applauded" by political supporters, the suit claims. In the following weeks, the three board members named in the action "refused to communicate or work with" Alexander.

"A political supporter of defendant Holden advised (Alexander) to distance her self from the commissioners in the minority, L.E. (Gene) Pinkerton and Frankie Rabon—individuals that Holden perceived as adversaries."

Both Pinkerton and Rabon were also Republican commissioners.

In their final meeting of the fiscal year, Holden, (See ALEXANDER, Page 2-A)

Manager Seeks Deeds Job Cuts, New Pay Classes In Budget Plan

BY ERIC CARLSON

Three jobs would be cut from the register of deeds office and all Brunswick County employees would be given new salary classifications under a revised spending plan submitted to the board of commissioners by Interim County Manager Charles McGinnis Monday.

The proposed \$43 million spending plan calls for a county tax rate of 58.5 cents per \$100 of property valuation, a reduction of 9.5 cents from the previous year. But since most residents saw their property tax values increased by the recent county-wide revaluation, most taxpayers should receive about the same tax bill for 1994 as they did for 1993, McGinnis has said.

At a budget workshop held before their regular meeting, the commissioners gave tentative approval to a proposed "reduction in force" that would trim two full-time positions and one part-time job from Register of Deeds Robert Robinson's budget, yielding an annual savings of \$48,705.

Calling Robinson's office "over-staffed," McGinnis said only five counties in the state have as many positions allocated to their register of deeds.

"The only county I could find with a comparable workload was Dare," McGinnis said. "Their volume is a bit higher and they have eight employees plus the register of deeds."

There are currently 13 full-time workers assigned to the Brunswick County Register of Deeds office. A part-time temporary position was requested this year. McGinnis recommended that the new job be cut from the budget along with two positions that have not been filled for the past year.

The commissioners informally accepted McGinnis' budget recommendations, including \$27,097 in miscellaneous cuts, and considered an additional \$25,000 reduction in the county administration budget.

Despite recent protests from school system supporters who want more money for the board of education, the commissioners made no mention of the \$4.7 million chasm between the school spending request and the county manager's recommended education budget.

The board was scheduled to hold another budget workshop Wednesday night at 6 p.m., after which the final spending package could be approved.

Several representatives of county-funded agencies appeared at Monday's meeting to ask for increases in their proposed budget allocations. No one from the school administration or board of education attended.

Economic Development Commission Director Tom Monks requested money for a new car, updated computer equipment and full-time status for a part-time employee.

"This is the minimum we need to maintain the momentum we've developed over the past year," Monks said.

Brunswick Community College President Michael Reaves asked the commissioners to increase the county's recommended allocation to the college by \$139,932 to help pay operational costs for the newly completed Odell Williamson Auditorium.

County cafeteria manager Robert Smith asked the commissioners to reconsider McGinnis' recommendation to shut down the in-house food service.

(See COUNTY, Page 2-A)



PHOTO CONTRIBUTED

Bull On Board

Dan Coley of Albemarle shows off a beautiful, 28-pound bull dolphin landed during a recent fishing trip aboard the "Seahorse" out of Holden Beach. Last week was a good one for area anglers as a high-pressure weather system created excellent fishing conditions offshore.

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Supply's 'Miracle Baby' Comes Home

BY LYNN CARLSON

The youngest heart transplant recipient ever at UNC Children's Hospital came home to Supply for the first time on Sunday, four months after being born with what only a blessing kept from becoming a fatal abnormality.

Logan Pottorff, son of Eddie and Alicia Pottorff of Supply, was born with hypoplastic left heart syndrome—the side of the heart which pumps oxygen to the body was not developed. His only hope was a heart transplant, realized when a donor organ became available March 24. His new heart came from a 20-pound two-year-old whose identity is unknown to the Pottorffs.

Until Logan reaches the weight of his donor, his left bronchi will continue to be almost completely compressed and his left vocal chord will be paralyzed, making it tricky for him to eat and difficult for him to cry, according to his mom. Otherwise, he's not too fragile to be held and played with, as long as he's protected against sunlight and sick people.

He now weighs 11 pounds, 4 ounces, and is almost 24

inches long. His feeding tube is out, and he's eating by mouth—a super-thick "sludge" of formula, high-calorie supplement and rice cereal, Alicia Pottorff said Tuesday.

Logan still requires weekly treatments in Chapel Hill, special formulas and ten medications. Tack on the \$200,000 transplant costs, the expense of 17 weeks of high-tech hospitalization, endless prescriptions, and medical care estimated to cost \$3,000 a month for the rest of his life, and you get a bill few families could pay.

The Pottorffs have been taken under the wing of the Children's Organ Transplant Association, which has raised about \$2,000 for Logan so far in a trust account at NationsBank, according to Pam Bates, coordinator for Logan's local fundraising campaign.

But for now, financial worries have been obscured by the joy of a sick baby's second chance. "He's great. We're blessed," proclaims his very tired mother.

If you're on the street in Brunswick County and come across an infant wearing tiny sunglasses or a miniature surgical mask, you'll know you've seen a miracle.