

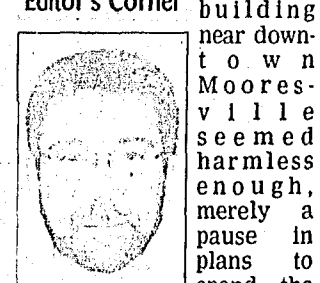
Viewpoint

"Although I disagree with everything you say, I will defend unto death your right to say it"

Leaders scramble to save deal for hospital

Three weeks ago, it grabbed a front-page headline, then was quickly obscured by the ongoing financial soap opera of the Iredell-Statesville Schools.

At the time, the Iredell County Board of Commissioners' decision to delay the purchase of the former Lake Norman Regional Medical Center building near downtown Mooresville seemed harmless enough, merely a pause in plans to spend the \$1.9 million until the state antes up an anticipated \$2.7 million in reimbursements from the repeal of the inventory tax and intangible property tax.



Dale Gowing

But now, regardless of whether the state comes through with the money, it's looking more and more like Mooresville's hopes for turning the vacant hospital building into a consolidated center for government and human services offices may be dead in the water.

The county has a signed contract with owner Health Management Associates of Naples, Fla., but indications are that just enough votes will be changed on the county commission, possibly next month, to nix the project.

And that has other commissioners and South Iredell business people concerned. They like many area residents, believe the transformation of the former hospital building into government offices is an ideal use of the building and a good use of taxpayer money. This area of the county is growing faster than any other, and satellite offices of county departments are scattered throughout South Iredell. Putting them under one roof, easily accessible to the citizenry in a centrally located area near downtown, is wise. And the county's original decision to spend \$1.9 million to make the project happen was wise, too.

Commissioners Sara Halre Tice and Karen Ray still strongly favor the plan. Steve Johnson, who was the only commissioner to vote against it in March — despite giving the plan his blessing during a close session in January — opposes it. Tommy Bowles is riding the fence now, but his fellow commissioners fear he will vote "no" under intense pressure from ultra-conservative elements in the county.

That leaves Godfrey Williams with the swing vote, and therein lies the problem. In theory, Williams likes the plan and believes it should be funded. But if Mooresville's Bowles changes his March vote and opposes the old hospital's purchase, it appears certain that Williams will do the same, killing the project 3-2. That's because Williams, a Statesville resident, will deem it political bad form to vote in favor of a Mooresville project that even a Mooresville commissioner opposes.

To avoid this scenario, influential members of the

"U.S. Senator Jesse Helms has announced that he will retire when his term expires in 2003..."



"...in other breaking news, the Political Cartoonists' Society has just declared a national day of mourning!"



Look out, the lawmakers are projecting a shortfall, again!

By JON SANDERS

Jane, Joe, Johnny and Sue Lawmaker may be broke again, and that means trouble in Tootlesoto Homestead, where they live. According to the Lawmakers, they are expecting a four-percent increase in revenue next year, but that won't be enough to cover their projected spending.

The Lawmakers' budget crisis has their neighbors worried. Not just out of neighborhood concern, but also because whenever the Lawmakers run out of money it's not long before they hit them up for "contributions." "We've all asked them, 'If you say you don't have enough money to buy everything on your budget, why not cut some things out and buy only the important stuff?'" said Prudence Fair, who lives nearby. "But the Lawmakers can't bear to hear talk of reduced spending. We'd say, 'Surely there must be something you can do without,' and they'd always snap back, 'There isn't; stop being insensitive!'"

"It's probably not neighborly to tell this, but I use the Lawmakers to teach my children about financial responsibility," said Bonnie Thriftwise, another Tootlesoto resident. "They're the perfect example of

what not to do." "You too? So do I!" blurted her neighbor Sarah Spendwell. "Right now I'm trying to teach my kids about the difference between needs and wants, and how you put your needs first, including your need to save for a rainy day, and then you take care of your wants with what's left. The Lawmakers have it completely backwards. I'm no wonder they're always frantically begging from us, saying they won't be able to eat this month without our help."

"I tried to tell them they could eat if they would put off building that huge wing to their house, but Joe would have none of that," Thriftwise said. "He said it was the kids' new study 'economy engine.'"

Fair groaned. "Everything is part of their economic engine." Thriftwise continued. "He said it was vitally important. To hear him go on, you'd think the Lawmakers were all going to die if they didn't build the study area."

"Study area?" Spendwell asked. "So that's what they bought that big-screen TV for?"

"Oh, they can justify most everything in the name of education," said Fair. "If they buy a luxury car, it's for education, because they drive their

kids to school in it. If they take a vacation, it's for education, because the sea air helps to clear their kids' minds. I don't think they've ever helped their kids in their schoolwork, but once they complete that work, and once they complete that work, and once they complete that work, they'll swear up and down that they've done more than us."

"The Lawmakers use what we accountants call 'Hello-Bankruptcy budgeting,'" said Roger Numbercrunch, the Lawmakers' accountant. "They assume they will earn more and more money every year and budget on the basis of those expected increases. Then they treat every budget item as critically necessary and refuse to make cuts when something unexpected happens."

Numbercrunch chuckled. "I'll never forget the Flat Tire Crisis of February."

Numbercrunch said he's quit trying to reason with his clients and is just glad he's on their budget. "Every time I suggest cutting out superfluous spending items they look at me like I've spoken a foreign language," he said. "I call it Responsibility."

Meanwhile, the Lawmakers were diligently working on a solution. Joe suggested instituting a lottery on his property. "If everybody spends \$100 a month on it," he said, "just think of

what we could do for education with that money!"

Jane thought they should look elsewhere first. "Do we charge the neighbor kids when they play with Johnny and Sue's toys? Do we make our foul-mouthed neighbors contribute to our Swear Jar? I think it's time we closed some loopholes around here," she said. "That money rightfully belongs to us — and to our kids' education!"

The Lawmakers also considered increasing the sales taxes on Sue's lemonade-for-education stand and making the kids pay Lexus fares for school transportation. Then they discussed whether they should try to target all neighborhood families, or only those in the two-story houses.

Reminded that the neighborhood consensus was that their crisis could be solved if they just focused on the really necessary things in their budget, the Lawmakers angrily brought the interview to an abrupt close. "It's all necessary!" they shouted. "And don't slam the gold-plated door of Education behind you on your way out!"

Jon Sanders is a director of the John Locke Foundation, a non-partisan public-policy think tank in Raleigh.

Letters to the editor

To the editor,
Iredell County politicians: Do you ever leave Mooresville on US 21 at Exit 33, at about 5:45 p.m.? How ridiculous is it that such a traffic jam occurs, and that there is such danger to motorists driving up I-77 North and trying to turn left onto Williamson Road, or south onto the Interstate, or toward the hospital?

Whatever happened to the big traffic circle proposed for Exit 33 when the hospital was built? What a terrific political record you have to run on for re-election. Where are all those tax dollars going?

Arline J. Reilly
Mooresville

To the editor,
Let's hear it for the nice people! There is always news about

the bad things people do, so we should make an effort to tell about the nice people. I had a bad fall in the parking lot at Staples on Saturday, and almost before I hit the ground a very nice young boy came to my rescue! He offered his cell phone.

Then, almost immediately, several other people came, offering to help. My husband and I thanked them very much, but said we would go to the Emergency Room. All the staff at Lake Norman Regional Medical Center were wonderful. I came away with several stitches in my head, abrasions and bruises on my face, a bad bruise to my shoulder and a broken big toe — but with a song in my heart, knowing there are such wonderful people ready to help.

Tressie Wells
Mooresville

Capital roll call

A look at how our area's state legislators voted in Raleigh during the past week:

N.C. House

HB1188 — Voter Rolls (Concurrence Vote): Allows county boards of elections to withhold voter record information in cases of domestic abuse protective orders. Adopted 108-0. Sent to the governor for approval. YES: Mitchell Setzer, Frank Mitchell

HB1362 — Health Care (Directives Registry): Directs the Secretary of State to establish and maintain a statewide, on-line, central registry for advance health care directives, including a health care power of attorney, a declaration of desire for a natural death and a declaration of an anatomical gift. Adopted 114-0. Sent to Senate for consideration. YES: Setzer, Mitchell

SB119 — District Court

Echoes of the past

Continued from page 10A

has been "the land of the free and the home of the brave." Had we lost in arms, "Traitor" would have been our middle name.

Success is a mark of honor; failure the other side. This should not be. Everybody honors the 12th of October and all of you children can tell the reason therefore. How long since then? Who is the hero of that event? And was he honored and properly regarded for his daring adventure?

We think not. Few great men are given due meed of praise while alive. After they are gone hence, we see them with other eyes and discover their merits.

In childhood days, about a mile south of Prospect Church, lived a West family. Parents, James and Dorcas, and children Robert, Crawford, Lizzie and others. Quiet, unostentatious, and evidently diligent, else they could not have made a subsistence on land not very fertile. As a child and boy I visited them betimes, being in school with the elder children, and have pleasant recollections of their family life. They were

My wife Judy and I took one

Editor's Corner

Continued from page 10A

South Iredell business and governmental community are pressuring Bowles, through phone calls and letters, to affirm his March vote in favor of the purchase.

In the meanwhile, officials of Health Management Associates are in quandary as to what to do. They haven't put the old building — which was renovated a dozen years ago and is in good condition — back on the sales market,

because they feel like they've already got a deal.

"We're hoping the county will honor its commitment," says Leigh Whitfield, spokesperson for Lake Norman Regional, owned by HMA. "We have no plans to pursue another buyer, because as far as we're concerned we have a buyer."

Buying the hospital, adds Commissioner Karen Ray of Mooresville, "is the right thing to do."

Even if the state comes up with the \$2.7 million tax reimbursement, the county was going to have to borrow the \$1.9 million to purchase the former hospital and renovate it. And if Iredell reneges on its deal with HMA, it could cost the county \$10,000 in earnest money.

But losing 10 grand isn't the problem. Losing an opportunity to create a dynamic government/human services center in South Iredell is.

— O. C. Stonestreet III

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