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BLUFFTON, INDIANA • Wells County's Hometown Connection

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County Health Board again delays decision on health officer

By HOLLY GASKILL

Bearing stark contrast to its 4.5-hour hearing just two weeks ago, the Wells County Board of Health met publicly for just under a minute Wednesday evening.

The special session convened, and board member Bart Hott motioned to table a decision regarding the removal of Health Officer Dr. Kay Johnson. Board member Dr. Mary Donley seconded, and the board unanimously approved.

There was no further discussion, and the

meeting concluded. A handful of audience members, who had waited outside the meeting room for nearly an hour, briefly sat in shock as the board members donned their winter coats and headed out.

The board held an executive session for nearly two hours before the public meeting, which was scheduled to begin at 6 p.m. or directly following the executive session.

Board President Chris Esterling declined to give further explanation for the

(Continued on Page 2)



Pictured is Health Board President Chris Esterling (left) and County Attorney Ted Storer during Wednesday's brief special session regarding the removal of the county's health officer. (Photo by Holly Gaskill)



Man at work

Eddie Baldwin mans equipment on Main Street in Bluffton preparing the sewage pipes for a new liner. (Photo by Jonathan Snyder)

Ballot is taking shape for primary

By HOLLY GASKILL

Candidate filings are in full swing for the May primary.

Currently, there are no contested races within the county and only two for state elections. Two weeks remain for filing, with the deadline at noon on Feb. 9.

Incumbent State Rep. Matt Lehman has filed for the District 79 seat and Rob Miller (R) will contest State Rep. Lorissa Sweet for District 50. There are also nine running for 3rd District U.S. Representative — republicans Grant Bucher, Mike Felker, Jon Kenworthy, Tim Smith, Marlin A. Stutzman, Eric Whalen and Andy Zay, and democrats Kiley M. Adolph and Phil Goss.

As of 4:30 p.m. Wednesday in the Wells County Clerk's Office, only Valerie McCray (D) had filed

for senator and Eric Doden (R) for governor.

In Wells County elections, District 2 and District 3 commissioners will appear on the ballot. Blake Gerber, currently occupying the District 2 seat, has filed for reelection.

Meanwhile, Vicki Andrews, Scott Elzey and Seth Whicker have filed for their current At-Large seats on the County Council.

Rina Stuck has filed to run for recorder, a position she previously held for eight years in Wells County, reaching her consecutive term limit. The county's current recorder, Carolyn Bertsch, has now encountered the same limit.

Similarly, Treasurer Kathy Peeper has reached her term limit. (Continued on Page 2)

Property tax exemptions could benefit child care options

Indiana Republican lawmakers said Tuesday a pending bill would also incentivize businesses to offer care for employees' kids.

By CASEY SMITH
Indiana Capital Chronicle

Indiana lawmakers are looking at new property tax breaks as a way to alleviate the state's child care deserts and help working Hoosiers find more affordable options.

Senate Bill 147 seeks to make for-profit child care providers tax exempt, and provides a partial property-tax exemption for businesses that offer onsite child care for employees.

Expanded access to afford-

able child care is high among the Republican majority's priorities in this year's session. Gov. Eric Holcomb additionally laid out a plan to increase the number of child care and early education providers across Indiana in his 2024 legislative agenda.

"Not only is it important in the Statehouse, it is important to every single employer and parent who really wants to enter the workforce. There is no silver bullet that is going to fix the problem and we have to look at multiple ways to

address the issue," said Sen. Linda Rogers, R-Granger, one of three GOP authors on the bill. "This legislation needs to move forward and provide one more tool to increase affordable child care and learning opportunities for families."

The bill was discussed Tuesday in the Senate tax committee but has not yet moved. Committee chairman Sen. Travis Holdman, R-Markle, said amendments and a vote on the bill are expected next week.

Incentivizes for more child care

Already, child care centers in schools, nonprofits and churches are tax exempt.

Current Indiana law also allows for-profit early childhood education providers to be exempt from property taxes — but only those servicing children between the ages of four and six.

For-profit providers additionally have to meet other requirements to qualify for any existing tax breaks. The provider must be the property owner, and services offered must primarily be educational. Certain state standards of quality need to be met, too, and participation in the state's early education evaluation program is

mandatory.

Senate Bill 147 would relax those requirements, though.

Rogers said many Hoosier parents who want to work have children of all ages, but "many" child care providers "are not willing to accept infants and toddlers."

She emphasized that her legislation would increase the opportunity for parents to find reliable care, including for younger kids, and encourage for-profit facilities — which the senator said are currently at a "disadvantage" — to charge lower fees.

The senate bill additionally requires Indiana's Family (Continued on Page 2)

Americans' economic outlook brightens as inflation slows

By CHRISTOPHER
RUGABER
AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — After an extended period of gloom, Americans are starting to feel better about inflation and the economy — a trend that could sustain consumer spending, fuel economic growth and potentially affect President Joe Biden's political fortunes.

A measure of consumer sentiment by the University of Michigan has jumped in the past two months by the most since 1991. A survey by the Federal Reserve

Bank of New York found that Americans' inflation expectations have reached their lowest point in nearly three years. And the same survey, released last week, found that the proportion who expect their own finances to improve a year from now is at its highest level since June 2021.

Economists say consumers appear to be responding to steadily slower inflation, higher incomes, lower gas prices and a rising stock market. Inflation has tumbled from a peak of around 9 percent in June 2022 to 3.4 percent. According to the Federal Reserve's preferred

price gauge, inflation has reached the Fed's annual 2 percent target when measured over the past six months.

What's more, paychecks have outpaced inflation over the past year, thereby easing Americans' adjustment to a higher cost of living. Weekly earnings for the typical worker — halfway between the highest and lowest earners — rose 2.2 percent last year after adjusting for inflation, the government reported last week. By that measure, inflation-adjusted pay is 2.5 percent higher than before the pandemic.

"While falling inflation took some time to feed through to consumer sentiment, it appears the good news is finally getting through," said Grace Zwemmer, an analyst at Oxford Economics.

Consumers' inflation expectations are important because they can become self-perpetuating: When people expect inflation to stay high, they often change their behavior, by accelerating purchases before prices rise further, which can, in turn, fuel more inflation. By contrast, lower inflation expectations can reverse that dynamic and help cool inflation.

Even with the steady slowdown in inflation, prices are still nearly 17 percent higher than they were three years ago, a source of discontent for many Americans. Though some individual goods are becoming less expensive, overall prices will likely remain well above their pre-pandemic levels.

That dichotomy — a rapid fall in inflation with a still-elevated cost of living — will likely set up a key question in the minds of voters, many of whom are still feeling the lingering financial and psychological effects of the worst (Continued on Page 2)

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Outside

A good day to kayak to work, fog continues

Today	Friday	Saturday
High 49	High 44	High 43
Low 38	Low 36	Low 34

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Health Board

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decision. “We tabled (a decision), and that’s what we voted on,” he told The News-Banner. County Attorney Ted Storer advised the board would have further discussion in executive session and a public meeting regarding their final decision.

The board unanimously voted to ini-

tiate the process for Johnson’s removal on Dec. 6 and took the matter under advisement after their public hearing on Jan. 10.

During the hearing, Esterling and board member Steve Bales claimed that Johnson had not taken responsibility during the department’s staffing issues in 2023, among other issues

with her leadership. Johnson and her legal counsel, Martha Lemert, argued that the county had never held expectations for more involved leadership from the health officer nor communicated something was wrong.

The next regularly scheduled meeting is at 6:30 a.m. on Feb. 16.

holly@news-banner.com

Primary ballot

(Continued from Page 1)

and one of her deputies, Pam Gregory, has filed for the position.

Surveyor Jarrod Hahn has also filed again for his seat.

Nine have filed for the 12 delegates to the Republican convention—Case Ferree, Sandra Garcia, Brandon Harnish, Becky Holdman, Travis Holdman, Josh

Hunt, Zachary Rodgers, Joan Whicker and Preston Wright. As the time of print, none have filed for available four delegates to the Democratic convention.

The following have filed for precinct committeeman: Andrews, Jeffrey Espich, Garcia, Harnish, Holdman, Hunt, Michael Jackson, Mike Lautzenheiser Jr.,

David Rigney, Zachary Rodgers, Nathan Stauffer, Stuck and Preston Wright.

The primary is on Tuesday, May 7. Voter registration is open through April 8 and early voting begins the following day.

Each school board also has members with terms ending; filing for the general election begins May 21.

At the Jan. 16 meeting of the election board, the board learned that former Rockcreek Township trustee Nathanael Wilson had submitted his resignation from the role. At the time, Clerk Beth Davis expected someone would be appointed to fill the vacancy by the board’s next meeting, Feb. 13.

holly@news-banner.com

Property tax exemptions

(Continued from Page 1)

Family and Social Services Administration (FSSA) to prepare a report that evaluates all the licensing requirements for all different types of child care facilities in the state.

“So many people who want to enter the workforce have these young children, and they have no place to take them,” Sen. Linda Rogers, R-Granger, said.

“Currently, every single facility that is licensed has a multitude of different types of requirements,” Rogers said. “We need to look strictly at health and safety and what matters most and apply those to all different facilities.”

Holdman asked if the proposal “provides a carrot to put people into the business of child care that currently aren’t doing so in their places of business?”

Rogers agreed, saying the “current, narrow exemption” prohibits child care providers that want to accept infants or toddlers.

“So many people who want to enter the workforce have these young children, and they have no place to take them,” she continued. “This certainly will provide an opportunity to bring more people into the child care business.”

Rogers noted, as well, that she doesn’t believe “there’s a huge fiscal impact to this.” She pointed out that Indiana has few for-profit child care centers, currently. And even if more providers come online, that means more people entering the workforce.

“So, that will kind of offset any of the fiscal impact due to the loss of property taxes,” Rogers said.

There are currently 21 such providers licensed in Indiana that would likely qualify for the exemption, according to a legislative fiscal analysis.

Bill still needs work

There are currently 64 on-site corporate-sponsored child care centers in

Indiana, according to FSSA reports. That includes companies like Eli Lilly in Indianapolis and Toyota’s manufacturing plant in Princeton.

Andrew Berger with the Indiana Manufacturers Association said most of those are in a separate building on the property.

He said there are 20,000 active manufacturing openings in Indiana, but without better child care options, filling those positions will be difficult.

“This is an economic development issue. We’ve had so many great manufacturing announcements in Indiana. The one thing that’s going to limit our ability to take advantage of that growth is going to be availability of workforce, and clearly child care is a critical element of that,” Berger said. “We need to support the growth. Having companies that are more incentivized to provide child care — and take advantage of that — is going to mean much more tax revenue economic growth in the long term. That is going to be an immediate hit.”

Mike Garatoni, president of for-profit Growing Kids Learning Centers, which operates nine licensed child care centers in Northern Indiana, said private providers are necessary to ensure parents have options, including for those working non-traditional shifts late at night or on weekends.

“If you’ve got a tax bill that comes due, regardless how many kids you’ve got, you have got to pay the taxes. That is a difficulty to opening a school and keeping it open,” Garatoni said. Although he was not aware of any child care providers that have been forced to close due to tax bill expenses, he added that “a lot of folks have a hard time making ends meet — and putting money back into a program — to make it successful and to serve the community.”

Still, as drafted, the bill stipulates that only the employees of a particular business can take advantage of the

onsite child care facility.

Sally Rideout, representing several Indiana chambers of commerce and economic development organizations, explained that some Hoosier employers have “banded together” to create a shared program that might be housed at one site, with child care slots available to children of employees from other participating employers.

Rogers said it was a “great point” and promised to look at possible fixes in the bill over the coming week.

Sen. Andrea Hunley, D-Indianapolis, further expressed concerns about the tax burden shift for Hoosier property owners. She emphasized that in Marion County, for example, “we already have many properties that are exempt from property taxes.”

“We use tax policy in ways that incentivize the kind of behaviors that we ideally would like to see ... and we have identified, as a state, that child care is a crisis area, and an inhibitor, for all kinds of other economic activity,” Rogers said in response. “The reality is that without more seats, without doing something to address the supply side, those families are going to continue to face long wait lists, inability to access care, and rates are continuing to go up because of inflation. We have to figure out how to support providers and families both.”

Last week, another Senate committee unanimously passed a separate bill that aims to increase accessible and affordable child care options for Hoosier families.

Senate Bill 2 would remove certain regulations for child care programs throughout the state and expand opportunities to work in child care.

The bill also expands opportunities for the children of childcare workers to be eligible for certain assistance, and gives child care workers currently employed by licensed child care programs eligibility for public subsidies.

Economic outlook

(Continued from Page 1)

bout of inflation in four decades. Which will carry more weight in the presidential election: The dramatic decline in inflation or the fact that most prices are much higher than they were three years ago?

Consider the price of food, one of the items people encounter most frequently. Grocery inflation has plummeted from a year-over-year peak of 13.5 percent in August 2022 to just 1.3 percent. Yet a typical basket of groceries still costs 20 percent more than it did in February 2021, just before inflation began to accelerate. On average, chicken prices are up 25 percent. So, too, is bread. Milk is 18 percent more expensive than it was before the pandemic.

The cost to rent an apartment has also soared and is still rising faster than before the pandemic. Rental costs are up 6.5 percent from a year earlier, nearly twice the pre-pandemic pace. At their peak in early 2023, rents were rising nearly 9 percent annually.

Sharply higher costs for such necessities as food and rent still represent a heavy burden for people like Romane Marshall, a

30-year-old software engineer who lives on the outskirts of Atlanta.

In late 2020, Marshall took computer coding classes to try to move beyond the warehouse and customer service jobs he had previously held. When he was hired by a professional services consulting firm in April 2021, he was “ecstatic.” After he completed an apprenticeship program the next year, his pay jumped from \$50,000 to \$60,000.

Yet his expenses kept rising, too. When he moved to a new apartment to be closer to work as his company shifted from full-time remote work to a hybrid schedule, his rent doubled to \$1,475 a month, from the \$700 he’d paid for a room in a friend’s house.

Marshall says his typical grocery bill is now about \$120 to \$130, up from just \$70 to \$80 three years ago. To keep his electricity costs down, he only occasionally turns on the heat in his apartment.

“There have been some positive changes, it’s just that things got expensive,” he said. “The only thing I notice is that the price of food is still high.”

Some Americans do have a cheerier outlook now.

Hiring has remained solid, with the unemployment rate remaining below 4 percent for nearly two years, the longest such stretch since the 1960s.

Dana Smith, a software developer, says he’s optimistic that the economy is improving. He and his wife have both received pay raises that have helped offset the price spikes of the past three years.

Smith, 40, lives in Matthews, North Carolina, about a half-hour from Charlotte, where he and his wife bought a home about three years ago. It has since risen about 30 percent in value, boosting their household wealth.

“My perception,” he said, “is that the economy is getting better and better.”

The public’s growing optimism about the economy could point to newfound enthusiasm for Biden’s candidacy this year, after weak polling has defined much of his time in office. Still, Ryan Cummings, an economist who has analyzed consumer confidence and how it’s affected by political views, cautioned that politics might limit how much public sentiment can improve.

Americans’ economic outlooks, he said, are

increasingly driven by political partisanship rather than by the economy’s underlying performance.

“As the election goes on,” Cummings said, “and it becomes more clear that the 2024 race will be Trump vs. Biden, Republicans might dial up their pessimism more than Democratic sentiment is increasing, pulling sentiment back down, regardless of economic fundamentals.”

The University of Michigan survey found that consumer sentiment among Democrats jumped a sharp 11.8 percent in January, the second-largest such increase on record. (The biggest increase among Democrats occurred immediately after Biden’s presidential victory in 2020.)

Many Americans might still favor having the government take steps not only to slow inflation but also to try to reduce overall prices to where they were before the pandemic. In a classic 1997 research paper, the Nobel Prize-winning economist Robert Shiller found that two-thirds of respondents to a survey he conducted agreed that the government should try to reverse a 20 percent spike in prices.

Weather

Thursday, January 25, 2024

(24-hour observations at 9:58 p.m. Wednesday)

High: 44; Low: 37; Precipitation: .25 inches of rain
Wabash River Level (at the Main Street bridge): 4.38 feet at 9:45 p.m. Wednesday

Wells County forecast

Today: A 50 percent chance of rain, mainly after 1 p.m. Areas of dense fog before 1 p.m. Otherwise, cloudy, with a high near 49. Northeast wind around 5 mph becoming east in the morning.

Tonight Night: Rain, mainly before 1 a.m. Low around 38. East wind around 10 mph becoming west after midnight. Chance of precipitation is 80 percent. New precipitation amounts between a quarter and half of an inch possible.

Friday: Cloudy, with a high near 44. West wind 10 to 15 mph, with gusts as high as 20 mph.

Friday Night: Cloudy, with a low around 36. Northwest wind around 5 mph becoming northeast after midnight.

Saturday: A 20 percent chance of rain after 1 p.m. Cloudy, with a high near 43.

Saturday Night: A 50 percent chance of rain. Cloudy, with a low around 34.

Sunday: A 20 percent chance of rain before 1 p.m. Cloudy, with a high near 38.

Sunday Night: Cloudy, with a low around 30.

Monday: Mostly cloudy, with a high near 38.

Monday Night: Mostly cloudy, with a low around 30.

Tuesday: Mostly cloudy, with a high near 41.

Tuesday Night: Mostly cloudy, with a low around 33.

Wednesday: Partly sunny, with a high near 47.

2 US-flagged ships come under attack by Yemen’s Houthi rebels

By JON GAMBRELL, Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Two American-flagged ships carrying cargo for the U.S. Defense and State departments came under attack by Yemen’s Houthi rebels on Wednesday, officials said, with the U.S. Navy intercepting some of the incoming fire.

The attacks on the container ships Maersk Detroit and Maersk Chesapeake further raise the stakes of the group’s ongoing attacks on shipping through the vital Bab el-Mandeb Strait. The U.S. and the United Kingdom have launched multiple rounds of airstrikes seeking to stop the attacks.

Meanwhile, Qatar, one of the world’s top exporters of liquefied natural gas, warned that its deliveries were affected by ongoing Houthi attacks over Israel’s war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

Danish shipper Maersk, in a statement to The Associated Press, identified two of its vessels affected by the attacks as the U.S.-flagged container ships Maersk Detroit and Maersk Chesapeake. It said the U.S. Navy was accompanying its ships at the time.

“While en route, both ships reported seeing explosions close by and the U.S. Navy accompaniment also intercepted multiple projectiles,” Maersk said. “The crew, ship, and cargo are safe and unharmed. The U.S. Navy has turned both ships around and is escorting them back to the Gulf of Aden.”

Maersk said both vessels carried cargo belonging to the U.S. Defense and State Departments, as well as other government agencies, meaning they were “afforded the protection of the U.S. Navy for passage through the strait.”

The ships were operated by Maersk Line, a U.S. subsidiary of Maersk that is “suspending transits in the region until further notice,” the company said.

The U.S. military’s Central Command in an online statement blamed the Houthis for the attack, saying they fired “three anti-ship ballistic missiles.”

“One missile impacted in the sea,” the statement said. “The two other missiles were successfully engaged and shot down by the USS Gravelly,” an Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyer.

Central Command did not respond to further questions from the AP.

The Houthis, who have been launching attacks on ships since November over Israel’s war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip, later claimed the attacks in a prerecorded statement by their military spokesman, Brig. Gen. Yahya Saree. He vowed the Houthis would continue their attacks.

Since November, the rebels have repeatedly targeted ships in the Red Sea, saying they were avenging Israel’s offensive in Gaza against Hamas. But they have frequently targeted vessels with tenuous or no clear links to Israel, imperiling shipping in a key route for global trade.

The U.S. and the U.K. have launched rounds of airstrikes targeting suspected missile storage and launch sites used by the Houthis in their attacks. The rebels now say they’ll target American and British ships as well.

Meanwhile, Qatar announced its shipments of liquefied natural gas had been affected by the Houthi attacks. Previous shipments had been delayed previously before heading through the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea.

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Elks makes donation to Boys & Girls Club

On Monday, Bluffton Elks 796 donated to Wells County Boys & Girls Club \$2,500 from our Elks National Foundation Community Investment Program grant. (Photo provided)

College scholarships available through ISA

Wells County Sheriff Scott Holliday announced today that the Indiana Sheriff's Association will again be awarding college scholarships to qualified high school seniors or college students who are pursuing a degree in criminal justice studies. There will be approximately 40 \$750 scholarships awarded to qualifying students throughout the state.

The Indiana Sheriffs' Association Scholarship Fund was established for the purpose of receiving, investing and dispensing of funds to provide college scholarships to qualified students who are committed to pursuing an education and career in the law enforcement field.

To qualify for one of these scholarships, the applicant

must be an Indiana resident, be a current member of the association or the dependant child or grandchild of a current member of the association, attend an Indiana college or university, major in a law enforcement field and enroll as a full-time student (12 credit hours).

Applications needed to apply for the scholarships are available from your high school counselor of the sheriff's office. The scholarship application can also be downloaded from the Indiana Sheriffs' Association website: www.indianasheriffs.org. The applications must be completed and received by the Indiana Sheriffs' Association on or before April 1.

Police Notebook

INCIDENTS

City:

Wednesday, 2:05 p.m., Spring Wayne Apartments. Welfare check requested for juvenile.

Wednesday, 3:19 p.m., Premier Flats. Report of young female outside crying.

Wednesday, 5:51 p.m., North Main Street and South Sutton Circle Drive. Driver cited for expired plate.

Wednesday, 6:55 p.m., 121 North Main Street. Report of a truck sideswiping a car while attempting to pull out of parking space.

Wednesday, 9:09 p.m., 800 block of South Johnson Street. Welfare check requested for an older man stumbling and appearing to be heavily intoxicated.

Thursday, 7:18 a.m., Inteva. Report of a disgruntled former employee making threats to caller. HR requested trespass warning.

County:
Tuesday, 1:05 p.m., Ind. 124 and 200 West, Bluffton. Driver cited for speeding.

Tuesday, 2:09 p.m., Wells County Jail. Caller reported man sent messages to daughter from jail with whom a

no contact order is in place. Jordan C. Pettit charged with invasion of privacy.

Tuesday, 3:44 p.m., Wells County Jail. Warrant served to Stephanie Jarrett at the jail.
Tuesday, 3:45 p.m., Wells County Jail. Warrant served to Trey O'Reilly at the jail.

Tuesday, 6:22 p.m., Wells County Jail. Warrant served to Madeline Shanks at the jail.

Tuesday, 7:44 p.m., 400 South and 500 West, Liberty Center. Caller reported he believed he was followed by SUV and believes vehicle has been breaking into properties and taking puppies.

Wednesday, 1:25 a.m., Ind. 218 and Ind. 3, Warren. Officer checked on vehicle with hazards on side of road. Driver advised they pulled over due to extreme fog.

Ossian:

Wednesday, 7:06 a.m., Ind. 1 and 800 North, Ossian. Subjects in vehicle with dead battery advised help was on the way.

ARRESTS

Madeline Katherine Shanks, 20, Bluffton, disorderly conduct, a Class B misdemeanor. Bond set at \$1,000.



Chance is a six-month-old, domestic short hair male.

A Talk with Tego



Charlie is a six-month-old, domestic short hair male.



Tessa is an eight-month-old, domestic short hair female.



Tego

Tego's Tips: Make sure pets are secured safely away from activities, people, and food when having parties.

These are just a few pets available for adoption at the Wells County Animal Shelter, 1613 W. Cherry St., Bluffton. For more information call 824-6063.

Lawmakers pump the brakes on proposal to raise speed limit

By LESLIE BONILLA MUÑIZ
Indiana Capital Chronicle
Hoosiers won't soon be zooming down their highways at a legal 75 miles per hour.

A House roads committee on Tuesday heard legislation that would boost the limit up from the current 70 miles per hour, but won't advance it — for now. It did, however, move long-sought legislation allowing jurors to know when someone in a car crash wasn't wearing a seat belt.

"We all know this isn't going to get a vote today, and that's okay," Rep. Ben Smaltz, R-Auburn, said of his House Bill 1308. "... I have carried issues that have taken me 10 years to get done the right way."

Smaltz said he wanted to start the conversation because Indiana's roads are in "excellent condition" thanks to recent funding increases.

He also said advancements in vehicle technology — made since Indiana raised the speed limit from 65 to 70 miles per hour in 2005 — have improved safety.

And he read off a list of state highway fatality rates to note that few of the states with 75 mile-per-hour maximums are among the states with the deadliest roads.

Witnesses, however, said the change could cost lives.

The bill would raise speeds on all federal highways outside urbanized areas with more than 50,000 residents and on highways for which the Indiana Finance Authority is responsible.

The higher speed limit on the Indiana Toll Road would save drivers going from Ohio to Illinois less than nine minutes, according to

its operator, the Indiana Toll Road Concession Company.

"Those nine minutes would certainly — undoubtedly — escalate the risks," Operations Director Christopher Norvell said.

Norvell said that linear increases in speed exponentially hike crash lethality.

He told the committee that the Toll Road wanted to see crash data, "detailed" engineering studies and road geometry statistics to ensure that higher speeds wouldn't lead to more crashes or make them more severe.

The bill would increase the speed limit only for buses and vehicles weighing under 26,000 pounds. Asked if keeping heavier vehicles like semi-trailers at 65 miles per hour would aid safety, Norvell said it could actually hurt.

When trucks are required to go slower than cars, he said, car drivers try to get around them — and can cause more crashes. The risks are higher when the speed difference is larger; the bill would bring the differential from five to 10 miles per hour.

Other witnesses said parts of Indiana's highways aren't meant for such speeds.

"There are curves on the interstate system that are not designed for 75 miles per hour, so special signing would be necessary to

account for those locations," said Andrea Zimmerman, deputy chief of staff for the Indiana Department of Transportation.

She said the agency has "significant concerns" with the bill.

Toby Randolph, a civil engineer representing the Hoosier chapter of the American Council of Engineering Companies, said engineers design roads around an intended speed — usually five miles above the posted speed limit.

"All aspects of that roadway are based on (speed): everything from horizontal curves, vertical curves, your stopping sight distance, your cross slope ..., clear zones," Randolph said.

Smaltz said he was "pleased" to learn that roads are typically designed speeds five miles per hour above the posted limit because it means "they're already designed for 75."

Cocktails to-go bill makes a splash

By LESLIE BONILLA MUÑIZ
Indiana Capital Chronicle

It's 5 o'clock somewhere — and in Indiana, bars and restaurants could soon offer customers "happy hour" drink deals under legislation that also authorizes alcohol carry-out orders.

Abbi Raben, representing the Indiana Restaurant & Lodging Association, said House Bill 1086 would allow retailers to boost traffic during slow hours "while also ensuring that it's done in a responsible manner."

Retailers currently are limited to all-day alcoholic beverage specials, which she noted isn't always "the most economical choice" for businesses.

The bill would allow retailers to reduce drink prices for up to four hours a day, but less than 15 hours in a week. Happy hours wouldn't be allowed between 10 p.m. and 3 a.m.

Retailers also would be banned from serving bottomless drinks and from allowing games or contests determined by how much alcohol a customer consumes.

Blake Fogelsong of Clancy's Hospitality said many of the company's six restaurants planned to offer happy hours from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. if the bill became law.

But not everyone was happy.

Lisa Hutcheson of Mental Health America of Indiana said drink specials are correlated with heavier alcohol consumption and could negatively impact people struggling with substance use disorder.

She also suggested the change could

increase alcohol-related crimes.

Hutcheson told the committee that if the bill proceeds, lawmakers "should at least" consider new restrictions: banning happy hour advertising on social media, banning advertising outside of the retailers and requiring customers purchasing discounted alcohol to also buy food.

The bill would also legalize carry-out alcohol.

Retailers would have to put the beverages in containers of less than four quarts that bartenders and restaurant staff can seal. The bags would have to show when they've been tampered with and be labeled as containing alcohol.

But if retailers violate those requirements, the Indiana Alcohol and Tobacco Commission could revoke their carry-out privileges.

"We see this as a modern trend of how consumers want their products ready to go, including cocktails," Fogelsong said.

But Rep. Matt Lehman, R-Berne, said the bill's language could allow retailers to pour half-drunk cocktails in to-go containers.

"I think we've got to be careful," he said. An ATC representative confirmed the bill didn't "expressly prohibit that possibility."

The bill lastly requires retailers to purchase liquor liability insurance or an endorsement with coverage of at least \$500,000 to obtain or renew a retailer's permit.

The committee voted to move the bill 12-1, with Lehman voting against.

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Small school corporations face some tough choices

This month, my colleague Dagny Faulk and I released a study titled "School Corporation Size and Student Outcomes." This is the newest of perhaps a dozen studies we've authored on the key issues of government size, cost and effectiveness. The largest of these was a book examining government consolidation in the U.S. through two centuries.

Our K-12 school study was funded by the Chamber of Commerce and is an update of earlier work we published on the cost and effectiveness of school corporations.

The goal of these studies was to isolate how the size of school corporations affected the performance of students. To do so, we needed to control for student demographics, poverty, share of English Language Learners, changes in enrollment and other factors that might also affect performance.

There is an abundance of research finding that very small school corporations have worse educational outcomes for students than more modestly sized ones. There are also studies finding that very large school corporations shortchange students. These studies find that the size of affected small corporations are under roughly 2,000 students, and large corporations closer to 50,000 students.

Here in Indiana, 162 out of 290 school corporations enroll fewer than 2,000 students, and none close to 50,000. For Hoosiers, small school corporations are the issue. The challenge is exacerbated by the continued shrinking of school corporations. Of the small schools, 120 are smaller now than they were a decade ago. The simple fact is that there are almost no organically growing school corporations under 2,000 students and many more that will shrink to fewer than 2,000 in the coming decade.

This is worrisome because smaller school corporations do worse on the most important metrics of performance than larger schools. Small corporations have substantially lower pass rates for the IREAD and ILEARN tests, lower SAT scores, a smaller share of students graduating with honors diplomas and a smaller share heading to college.

Our study carefully lays out the data and analysis, with some stark findings. For the smallest corporations, even modest increases in enrollment boost scores substantially. A corporation with 1,000 students could boost pass rates by more than 10 percent by adding 100 more students to their rosters. This is reflective of the power of overhead costs on providing instructional content.

Among the most worrisome figure is that about 60 of the state's smallest school corporations offer no Advanced Placement classes in the STEM fields of calculus, biology or chemistry. This shocks me as a parent and professor. Colleges keep close tabs on course offerings, and schools that offer no AP STEM classes are loudly saying, "Don't admit our students; they aren't ready for college."

Many rural community leaders complain about shortages in nurses, physicians and pharmacists. So, this is a good opportunity to connect the dots between educational and economic outcomes. Few universities will wish to admit students in business, the sciences, or healthcare who haven't taken an AP STEM class. And, even if they do, the outcomes for students who didn't take an AP class is substantially worse than those who did.

So, if you have low educational attainment that is keeping your local economy from growing, or if you face a local nursing shortage, it is time to connect the dots to local school corporations.

Fortunately, there are some bright points. Smaller school corporations do better than larger schools in CTE courses, but even there, fewer students in small corporations complete the technical honors degree. Thus, few benefit from the extra, and relatively low-cost, CTE courses. In many other areas, like FAFSA completion or graduation rates, small and large corporations aren't statistically different. That's about the end of the good news.

Still, our research, and that of many scholars before us, tells a clear story. Very small school corporations, with roughly 2,000 or fewer students, are shortchanging the educational outcomes of a substantial share of their students. This is a tough, but unambiguous conclusion. Our study made no recommendations on how to address this problem. I can think of four options.

First, school corporations could do nothing. For most communities this is a very, very high-risk strategy. Another two or three generations of declining enrollment aren't guaranteed. But if I were a betting man, I'd put my life savings on a wager that 90 percent of Hoosier school corporations with fewer than 2,000 students today will be much smaller by 2040. This will be a disaster for many places across the state.

Second, school corporations could structurally consolidate, or merge. Here, the state could help by allowing some flexibility in the size of school boards for a few years after merging. This offers the opportunity for school corporations to divert resources towards the courses they lack and fill the educational gaps they face. The challenge is that smaller corporations tend to cluster, so it may take multiple mergers to make a single "average-sized" school corporation.

Third, school corporations could functionally consolidate services. A potential model for this is to extend how schools now offer CTE education through the 49 CTE districts around the state. This service could be offered for AP STEM classes. Corporations could also share more costs from transportation to teaching and administrative staff. I suspect the legislature could take several low-cost steps to help school corporations do this.

Fourth, school corporations could hold school funding referenda. Tax increases are always unpopular, but small school corporations are predominately located in counties with very low effective tax rates. This would be an excess burden in no communities.

Indiana school corporations have been through two consolidation waves. The first accompanied the invention of the automobile, and the second followed the big declines in agricultural employment. Another wave of changes lies in the near future, as population decline continues across much of the state.

There are no easy solutions to the problem of flagging performance in small schools. That is because the problem does not lie in the quality of the administration, the dedication or skill of teachers, the smarts or diligence of students or the concern of parents. The challenge with small schools is simply the age-old problem of economies of scale. It is a dollars and cents problem, that managed poorly will exacerbate the challenges facing many of Indiana's most vulnerable communities.

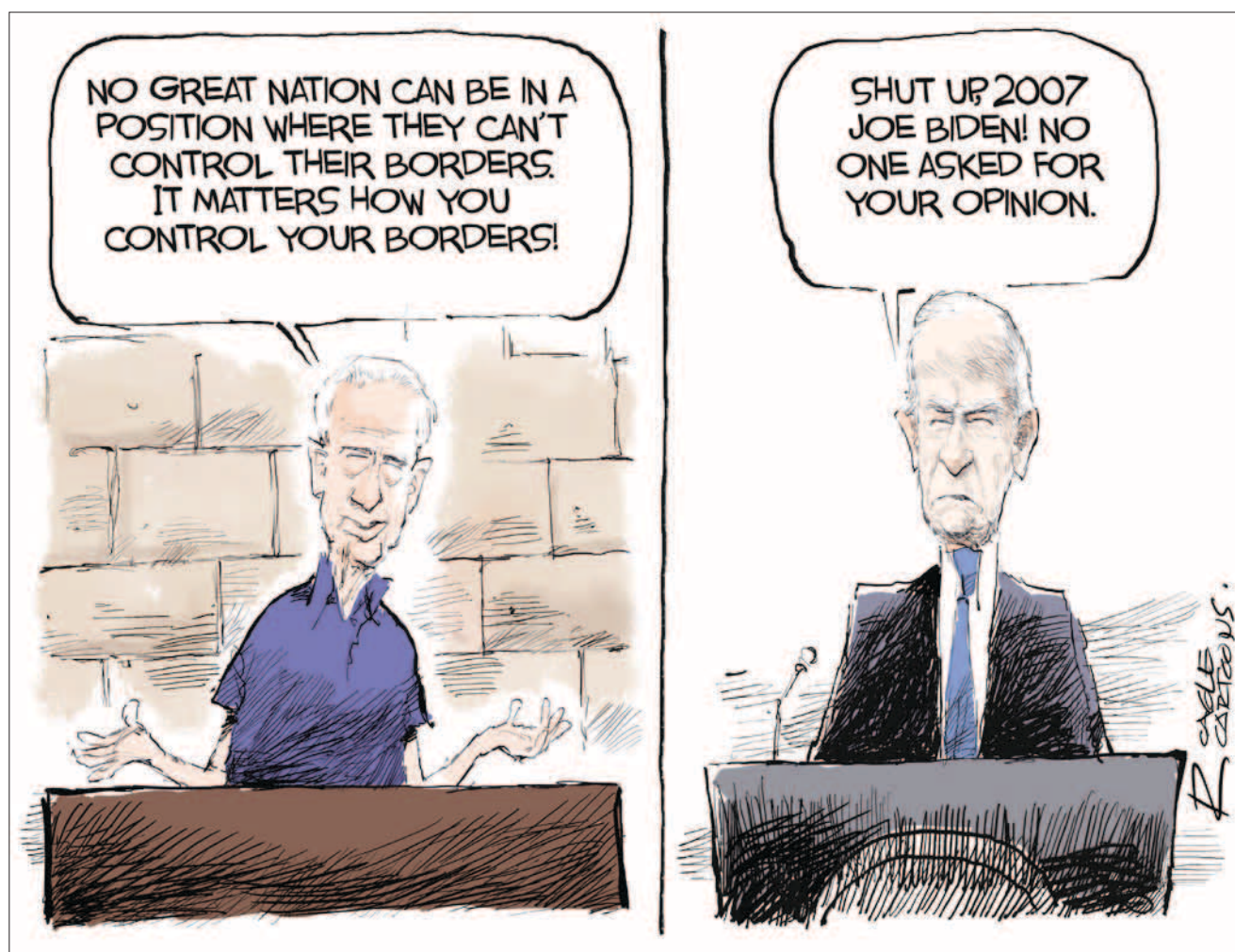
Finally, like many others in the debate, I doubt the efficacy of state mandates on corporation size. These are inherently local matters, with local solutions. Indiana needs many more vibrant, growing communities, with superb schools that draw new residents. For well over half of school corporations that means facing unpleasant facts and a difficult set of options about the future.

Michael Hicks is the George and Frances Ball Distinguished Professor of Economics and the director of the Center for Business and Economic Research at Ball State University.



Michael Hicks

Hoosier Opinions



Joe Biden's death wish

There's a lively internal debate in the GOP about the politics of a potential immigration deal with Joe Biden.

Should Republicans, as Donald Trump is arguing, steer clear and let President Biden continue to bear the political costs of the border crisis? Or should they move the ball on policy as much as possible, even if it somewhat alleviates Biden's difficulty going into the election?

This is a fascinating discussion, but it raises the question of why Biden wouldn't make it moot by helping himself out of his own border crisis.

There is no reason why Biden needs to wait on Republicans to try to constrain him into enforcing the law; he could start enforcing it himself.

Joe Biden's border crisis, which he initiated immediately upon taking office, is the starkest example in recent memory of a president engaging in wholly avoidable political self-harm.

George W. Bush's presidency was blighted by the Iraq War. But Bush launched the operation on the assumption that the war would be relatively quick and easy, and once the insurgency began in earnest, there was no easy way out.

In contrast, Joe Biden has it within his power to improve the border situation almost immediately -- this is a crisis largely of choice.

Democrats hurt themselves badly with Obamacare in 2010, but it was a longtime priority that the party was willing to pay a significant political price to achieve.

In contrast, Democrats haven't spent a generation campaigning on open borders.

Regardless, Biden's standing on the border is catastrophic. In the latest ABC News/Washington Post poll, just 18% approve of his handling of the border, while 63% disapprove. His approval has dropped by half since the spring of 2021, and he has "the lowest rating on immigration for any president in past ABC News/Washington Post polls to ask the question since January 2004."

This weakness doesn't come in isolation. Biden is running against a Donald Trump who has made the

border his calling card from the beginning.

The former president often implausibly promises to solve problems with ease, such as his pledging to end the Ukraine war in 24 hours. But he will indeed, if elected again, immediately deliver a border with almost no illegal crossings.

There will again be a "Trump effect," with migrants holding back out of fear that the infamous border hawk might -- who knows? -- drone them at Eagle Pass.

Rarely is the choice on a policy matter so stark as that between the Biden border, nearly open as a matter of preference, and the Trump border, tightly controlled as a matter of the highest priority. If Biden loses in the fall, this contrast will be one of the reasons why.

There are signs that the Biden White House understands the yawning vulnerability it has created for itself. And it may be trying to reduce the flow of migrants, so long as it doesn't have fingerprints on it. Todd Bensman at the Center for Immigration Studies reports that daily numbers have gone down, apparently because Mexico has started cracking down on illegals after talks with the Biden administration in December.

This is progress, but why wouldn't Biden simply return to the Trump policies that worked and take credit for ending a crisis that extends from El Paso to Chicago? He's probably been so stubbornly opposed to doing so because a de facto open border has now entered the Left's catechism. At this point, the thought of Biden admitting that things are out of control and Trump policies are the answer is as inconceivable as Mike Pence saying that, upon further reflection, we need a regime of legal abortion for humanitarian and political reasons, or Claudine Gay turning against affirmative action because it is corrupting the academy.

Republicans will have to decide what to do on a border deal, perhaps sooner rather than later. But Biden is deciding to give Donald Trump an invaluable political gift every day.

Rich Lowry is on Twitter @RichLowry



Rich Lowry

The season of white-on-neutral

Today's the 25th. 'Tis the month after Christmas and all through the house, not a creature is stirring, not even my spouse. Our stockings are doubled, 'cause toes are a-frigid, with visions of springtime, and snow must be riddled.

At the end of January and throughout February, Angelkeep watches for a tiny sign of spring. *Once*, in this writer's lifetime — 2012 — crocus bloomed February 6th. Crocus color brings joy after a bleak winter of white layered on neutrals of gray, charcoal, and browns, colors of a winter season in Indiana.

To get technical, white is refracted vision of all hues combined. Can you wrap your brain around that fact? Cognitive reason suggests one should consider winter the most colorful season. It tops colors of spring's crocus and tulips. Betters a summer of 40 shades of green. Out-blisses autumn's leaf spectacle. But, no, snow seems colorless. But it DO make the cardinals pop red, like blood-shot eyes from the cold winter blizzard winds from the frozen north.

Without the white stuff, how could the snow removal guys make a living?

Angelkeep Journals never considered highlighting a snowflake for a column feature.

"Well it's about time," shouts a bazillion snowflakes bashing six arms simultaneously against the thermal pane windows between Anglekeep's great room and deserted patio.

Angelkeep introduces "Snowflake" with the guidance of Caltech Physics Professor K. G. Libbrecht, a North Dakotan native who knows flakes better than the frozen tip of Angelkeep's nose. North Dakota sees snow abundantly. It also has abundant

Angelkeep Journals

nicknames like Flickertail State, Sioux State, and perhaps due to so much snowfall, the Roughrider State.

Most Hoosiers recognize a snowflake when it falls as a dendrite. However most Hoosiers could not define a dendrite if the existence of the game of basketball depended on it.

A dendrite, a.k.a. snowflake, is a crystal formed from an air vapor particle that grows with six arms. In a perfect state, that technically nonexistent, each arm is exactly like the others (see your cell phone's snowflake emoji.) The fern-like pattern of the six snowflake arms creates the "Hollywood" image, or the type of snowflake always used by advertising gimmicks trying to sell warm clothing to protect us all from all those gazillion snowflakes.

In truth, in certain situations, those snowflakes, when they congregate (aggregate a better scientific word) can kill us. Angelkeep's cardiologist warns against fighting snowflakes with shovel, broom, and even a blower. Angelkeep pays a snow removal-ite to relocate offensive snowflakes to the edge of the driveway and walks. Heart. Smart.

Dendrites require higher humidity than stellar plates. Stellar plates, also a snowflake, appear more similar to a coffee cup saucer with a nice off-white hexagon design in the center under the cup, with six more hexagon designs circling the central image. All



Alan Daugherty

of the additional six show as sextuplets. They all look exactly like the other. Artists call that radial balance. Amazon Prime calls it big bucks (but with free shipping) when sold in a set of twelve matching sets.

Angelkeep calls out, "Who cares, as long as it's Starbucks Sumatra going into the cup."

Angelkeep put away two large wind chimes, two and three feet in length, for winter preservation. Snowflakes harm wind chime strings. Two additional wind chimes yet hang and ring in the blizzard breezes of winter since they have copper wire strings. They can't be heard from inside. Snowflakes deaden sound as they, when in aggregate, possess an insulating capability.

That's a slow way to introduce yet another shape and type of snowflake. Columns form in temperatures of -5 to -10 Celsius during lower humidity. Needles form. Yes they are true snowflakes that appear the shape of a needle. Some aggregate together forming side-by-side and resemble a set of wind chimes. Others appear like hexagon plumbers' pipe connectors.

Prior to that in colder and dryer temps you can find thin plate snowflakes designed like an iron hexagon storm drain cover. Those begin as a solid plate snowflake. It is just a thin hexagon crystal, free of marks, like a six-sided coin with no design or date.

All snowflakes can have frozen droplets formed against them. It makes a dendrite look like grandma's retro brooch. That's called rime. Angelkeep will save rime for another time.

Rime with time is rhyme without thyme.

Mr. Daugherty is a Wells County resident who, along with his wife Gwen, enjoy their backyard and have named it "Angelkeep."

The News-Banner

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Sister abuses alcohol and me

Dear Annie: I was, not for the first time, physically assaulted by my sister on Christmas a couple of years ago. It has been an ongoing pattern since we were young, and these days it is triggered by her drinking. I seem to be her go-to punching bag. This was my last straw, as I am an adult and can choose who I have in my life. I have decided to avoid that kind of toxicity.

The problem is, she lives with my mother. I told Mom I choose not to be around this sister. I understand her choices as a mother, and I asked her to please understand my choice as an adult to avoid any abuse. Mom has been very understanding and comes to visit when she can (we live near each other). I miss out on a lot of family communication for weeks because I can't call her without my sister answering the phone or listening in on our conversations. I'm lucky if and when Mom calls me; it's usually when my sister is not home.

As for any holidays I host, I invite Mom, but because she feels bad for leaving my sister out, she won't come. Ever since the Christmas incident, the family will get together, and because my sister is there, I will not come. They all know this.

I feel the family has chosen her over me, knowing she is my aggressor, and it saddens me so much. I wonder, do families ever tell abusive family members to sit out a holiday? Or do they feel like it's our problem, as the victim, that we won't deal with these people? I have a cousin going through the same ordeal, and we both feel so abandoned. We don't speak ill toward them; we just refuse to be around them. Therefore, it seems the only reason we can't be there is because they are there.

Will we ever get our chance to have a holiday with our families again? It's all so sad. — Left Out

Dear Left Out: Your sister is a bully — punching you after she starts drinking, secretly listening in on your phone conversations, and making your mom feel guilty so that she can only contact you when your sister is not around. You, on the other hand, are a real champ for saying you won't put up with being abused. Your feelings of isolation, however, are undoubtedly painful.

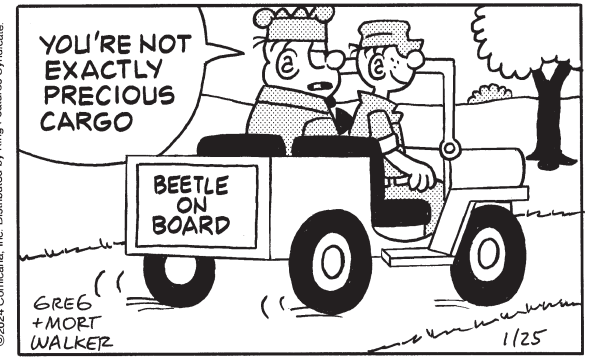
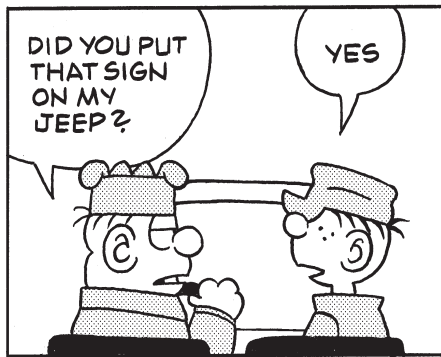
Such complex dynamics are not uncommon in families, and it's important that you create an environment where everyone feels safe and welcome. Start by having an honest conversation with your family and sharing your perspective on the holidays as you have shared with me here. Perhaps there is an opportunity to have multiple celebrations or to plan an event for when your sister is out of town. While these solutions aren't perfect, they could be a satisfactory compromise. Remember that change takes time, and there might be an adjustment period as your family tries to navigate the situation, siding with the victim and not the aggressor.

"How Can I Forgive My Cheating Partner?" is out now! Annie Lane's second anthology — featuring favorite columns on marriage, infidelity, communication and reconciliation — is available as a paperback and e-book. Visit http://www.creatorspublishing.com for more information. Send your questions for Annie Lane to dearnnie@creators.com.

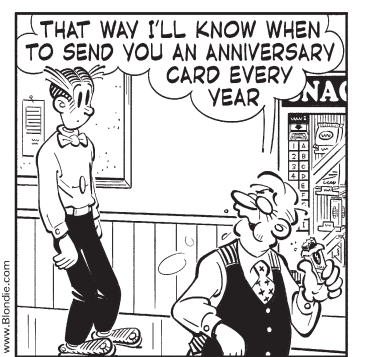
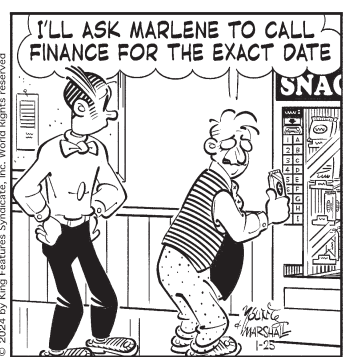
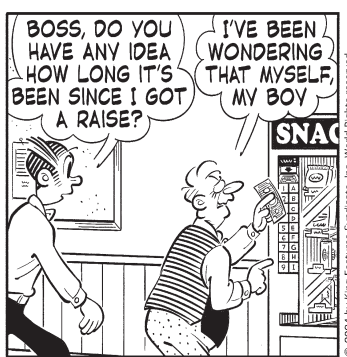
Dear Annie by Annie Lane



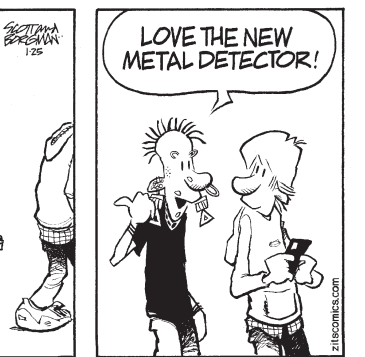
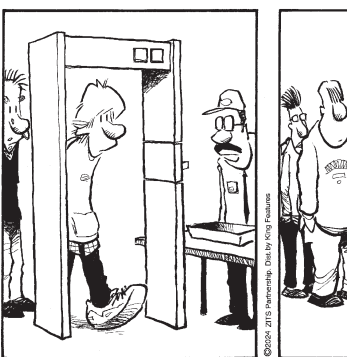
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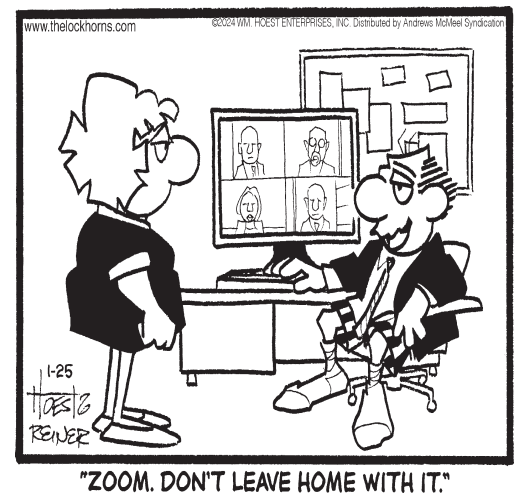


THE FAMILY CIRCUS

By Bil Keane



The LOCKHORNS



My Answer

By Dr. Billy Graham



God doesn't leave mankind in despair

York Times asks: "Why Are We So Obsessed with the End of the World?" The Wall Street Journal runs a review: "You, Me and the Apocalypse Review." Psychology magazines print similar stories. World leaders often take up the matter of nuclear war. This subject is on the minds and lips of world citizens. But the truth of these matters will only be found in the pages of God's Word.

Mankind has always dealt with war, but never on the scale predicted by Jesus. The world has no answers, but God does. We would do well to pay attention and study so that we can recognize the signs of the times. Jesus tells us that the state of

the world will grow darker as we near the end of the age. The Apocalypse carries a booming lot of truth: Trouble ahead.

God doesn't leave mankind in despair. The paradise that man lost will be regained and one day we will live in a brand new world. We can know that we are safe in God's keeping by repenting of sin and knowing Him as Lord and Savior (see Romans 5:10-11). This is the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

(This column is based on the words and writings of the late Rev. Billy Graham.)

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Q: Watching the events in the Middle East, and particularly in Israel, makes me wonder if Armageddon is upon us. Growing up, I thought this idea was ridiculous. But after watching our culture implode, it doesn't seem so off track to consider we may be on the brink of this prophetic war. — A.W.

A: People may say they doubt the realities of such things as Armageddon, the apocalypse, and the end times, but it's spoken of from many platforms, not just in the pulpit.

Newsweek has featured cover stories: "Armageddon." The New

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CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

Crossword puzzle grid with clues for Across and Down. Includes solution time: 24 mins. and Yesterday's answer 1-25.

TV schedule table with columns for time slots (5 PM to 12:30) and rows for various channels (WINM, CBS, Antenna, ABC, NBC, etc.) listing programs and their start times.

Raiders win in nail-biter over Blackhawks on Senior Night

By RYAN WALKER
PONETO — Southern Wells squeaked out yet another close victory down the stretch in its 34-31 victory over the Cowan Blackhawks (3-17) Wednesday night.

This is now the Raiders' (6-14) second win in a row with a spread of less than three points with last week's barn burner against Heritage 36-35.

Southern Wells head coach Jessica Killingbeck attributed the win to the team's love for its lone senior, Karlee Warner, on Senior Night. The players on the floor and the bench were energized the entire game along with the boisterous student section chanting her name all night.

"It just shows how much Karlee really means to this team," Killingbeck said after the game. "I could tell on the bench how much (the team) really wanted it for Karlee because of how much she's poured into this program. She's the type of player that it doesn't matter what grade you're in or who you are, she will take anybody under her wing. She's a great leader and I think tonight's win just shows her how much this team appreciates her."

Warner started the game and the third quarter, and hit a jumper near the free-throw line that began the second half.

Southern Wells had the lead for the majority of the night despite Cowan's constant fight to come back.

Both teams hit the same number of shots in the first half (seven), but the Raiders gained a 19-15 edge with a pair of triples by Grace and Collena Reeves.

Just as the Blackhawks sniped a one-point lead

with two minutes left, Collena Reeves hit her only two field goals in the half to regain the lead by four.

The Raiders held the Blackhawks in check in the third quarter to just two made shots, while scoring nine points in the process. Collena Reeves hit her second triple of the night and scored eight total points in the game. She had more open looks in the backcourt, and perhaps more than usual due to the threat in the post Kenzie Paxson and Ashlie Needler present.

The duo of forwards are coming off of a double-double game against Heritage and other teams are starting to key in on them, but that opens up the gates from long range.

"Kenzie and Ashlie have been such a threat down low for us that (opponents) are starting to collapse on them and are now opening up our three-pointer shooters," Killingbeck said. "And as a three-point shooter, you should be really happy about that."

Even though they hit one more three than Cowan did, Southern Wells certainly would take it in its three-point victory.

The fourth quarter was where Cowan lived to give itself a chance.

Three-straight buckets to open the fourth quarter after Needler's basket inched the deficit to just 30-26 in favor of the home team.

Needler punched back with two more makes in the post, but Brooklyn Hall was fouled on three straight possessions and had her opportunity at the charity stripe.

The first was a shot at a three-point play, but she did not convert. The second was

on a close call down in the paint by Paxson, and she hit both of them. That brought the score down to 34-30.

The third go around was with 40 seconds to go when Erika Beavans reached in too far and got the Blackhawks in the automatic double-bonus. She hit one of the free throws, and the Raiders rebounded.

After rushing down the floor, the Raiders had a wide-open look with Paxson down low and just missed the bottom of the net, giving it right back to the Blackhawks.

On the final possession, Cowan cleared room for Elizabeth Sizemore, who had nailed the only triples for her team, at the top of the key. Her open shot just tinkered off the rim and Southern Wells secured the rebound and the win.

Killingbeck has been happy with the way her team has fired themselves up in the final part of the regular season. They've won two close games in a row and have a legitimate shot to make it to the sectional final. Their matchup with Lakeland Christian (9-12) next Friday at Northfield High School is one that they saw in Game 2 of the season. The Raiders won that first meeting 42-21, but Killingbeck thinks the Cougars have gotten much better, but so have her Raiders.

"I think we're taking the things that we're talking about in practice and starting to implement and transition those into game-like scenarios," Killingbeck said. "We've started to work on situations in practice and talking about scenarios like this tonight ... I think those types of things they're soaking in in practice"

Their regular-season finale will be on the road against Southwood, a make-up game from earlier in the season. The junior varsity game will not be played, and the varsity will start at 4 p.m. on Saturday.

sports@news-banner.com



Southern Wells guard Collena Reeves (right) stares down Cowan's Brooklyn Hall (left) during Wednesday night's girls' basketball game. Reeves scored eight points and helped the Raiders defeat the Blackhawks 34-31. (Photos by Ryan Walker)



Southern Wells senior Karlee Warner (middle) walks with her parents, Jacob and Laura Warner, while being honored before the game for Senior Night.

SOUTHERN WELLS 34, COWAN 31
At Southern Wells
COWAN (3-17): Davelynn Lindsay 6-15 0-0 12, Brooklyn Hall 2-8 3-5 7, Elizabeth Sizemore 2-9 0-0 6, Madison Morris 1-2 0-2 2, Alyssa Stevens 1-2 0-0 2, Savannah Hall 1-8 0-2 2, Kylee Bergstrom 0-0 0-0 0, Reagan Gill 0-2 0-0 0. **TOTALS:** 18-46 3-9 31.
SOUTHERN WELLS (6-14): Ashlie Needler 6-10 14, Collena Reeves 3-10 0-0 8, Kenzie Paxson 2-5 1-4 4, Gracie Reeves 1-3 0-0 3, Karlee Warner 1-4 0-0 2, Erika Beavans 1-4 0-0 2, Kyah Thomas 0-1 0-0 0, Aubrey Meyer 0-0 0-0 0, Kaylea Coffel 0-1 0-0 0. **TOTALS:** 14-38 3-7 34.
Cowan 5 10 4 12 — 31
So. Wells 8 9 9 6 — 34
 Three-point FG: Cowan 2-16 (Sizemore 2-9, B. Hall 0-2, S. Hall 0-2, Stevens 0-1), Southern Wells 3-14 (C. Reeves 2-7, G. Reeves 1-2, Thomas 0-1, Warner 0-3, Coffel 0-1).
 Rebounds: Cowan 20 (S. Hall 11, B. Hall 3, Lindsay 2, Morris 2, Stevens 2, Southern Wells 24 (Needler 11, Paxson 7, C. Reeves 5, Coffel 3, Beavans 2, G. Reeves 1, Meyer 1). Turnovers: Cowan 9, Southern Wells 15. Fouls: Cowan 5, Southern Wells 12. Fouled Out: None. Technicals: None. JV: No game.



Heading to Semi-State
 Avery Hunt (left) and Miken Habegger both qualified to advance to the bowling Semi-State round at Thunderbowl Lanes in Fort Wayne. Habegger bowled a series of 563 while Hunt had a 515. (Photo provided)

RACING NEWS

Meyer Shank Racing watching race from afar after cheating

By JENNA FRYER
AP Auto Racing Writer

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. (AP) — Michael Shank spent Friday at his mother's house in Ohio bitterly watching a timing and scoring feed from the first IMSA practice of the sports car season.

It was agonizing for the owner of the team that is the two-time defending winner of the Rolex 24 at Daytona, but was shut down at the end of 2023 in large part because of a cheating scandal that tarnished last year's Rolex win.

"I'm just down, just bummed," Shank told The Associated Press in a telephone interview. "When it's time for us not to be sports car racing, I'd like to be able to choose that, not have it chosen for us. That's the biggest disappointment. We had a lot of success at a high level, and unfortunately we lost a partner and were not able to continue."

Some six weeks after the 2023 victory — the third overall for the Shank organization and second consecutive in the most prestigious endurance race in the United States — IMSA ruled that Meyer Shank Racing had manipulated tire pressure data during the win and that Honda Performance Development self-reported the cheating. IMSA allowed the No. 60 ARX-06 to keep the victory, the Rolex watches and the trophy, but levied six substantial penalties against the team that ultimately led to the firing of an MSR engineer and the shuttering of the team.

MSR was the reigning IMSA champion at the time and jostling with fellow Acura team Wayne Taylor Racing for Honda's dedicated support. Although Shank thought the team could repair its relationship with Honda and Acura, he could not. Honda moved its factory support to the Taylor team for a second entry.

Without the backing of a manufacturer, Shank had to close the IMSA program despite three 2023 wins, including the season finale, and a third-place finish in the final season standings.

"We were in a bad spot and we understood where we stood after that," Shank said. "We got fixed what we needed to get fixed, we focused on the best possible finishes we could achieve, and at the end of the day, we had the best results of everyone out there."



Norwell's Middle School girls' basketball teams pose with both of their eighth and seventh grade trophies, winning the Northeast 8 Conference Wednesday night. The eighth grade team won 57-34 over DeKalb, and the seventh grade team won 33-29 over Columbia City's Indian Springs. (Photo provided)

Norwell sweeps middle school Northeast 8 girls' hoops titles

Both Norwell Middle School basketball teams took home the Northeast 8 Conference championships Wednesday night in front of a full crowd.

The eighth grade team defeated DeKalb's Middle School team 57-34. Mia Kurtz was the leading scorer with 23 points, followed by Chloe Comer with nine, Daisy Swineford (7),

Maggie Neuenschwander and Miyah Foss (6), and Addison Parsons and Ava Mason (3).

The seventh grade team defeated Indian Springs (Columbia City) 33-29. Ally Graft led the team with 12 points, followed by Avery Thornton (6), Rilynn Hoopingartner and Hadley Meyer (5), Kendall Fegley (3) and Leah Randol (3).

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UN court to issue ruling on request for order to halt Israel's Gaza offensive

By MIKE CORDER
Associated Press

THE HAGUE, Netherlands (AP) — The United Nations' top court will issue a decision Friday on South Africa's request for interim orders in a genocide case against Israel, including that Israel halt its offensive in Gaza.

The decision is a preliminary stage of a case filed by South Africa at the International Court of Justice alleging that Israel's military action in its war with Hamas in Gaza amounts to genocide. Israel strongly rejects the accusation and has asked the court to throw out the case.

The court in The Hague, Netherlands, announced the timing of the interim ruling on Wednesday. South Africa's Foreign Ministry said Foreign Minister Naledi Pandor would travel to The Hague to represent the country at Friday's ruling.

Israel launched its massive air and ground assault on Gaza soon after Hamas militants stormed through Israeli communities on Oct. 7 and killed some 1,200 people, mainly civilians.

Israel often boycotts international tribunals and U.N. investigations, saying they are unfair and biased. But the country's leaders sent a high-level legal team to two days of hearings earlier this month. That was a sign of how seriously they regard the case and an indication of likely concerns that any court order to halt opera-

tions would be a major blow to the country's international standing.

If the court grants some or all of South Africa's eight requests for so-called provisional measures, it is unclear if Israel will comply.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed to press ahead with the offensive until "complete victory" against Hamas, which started the war with its assault across the border on Oct. 7, killing some 1,200 people and abducting another 250.

Gaza's Health Ministry says the offensive has killed at least 25,490 people — the majority women and children — and wounded another 63,354. Its count does not differentiate between civilians and combatants. U.N. officials have expressed fears that even more people could die from disease, with at least one-quarter of the population facing starvation.

Israel's attacks have driven nearly 85 percent of Gaza's population of 2.3 million from their homes. Much of northern Gaza, including Gaza City, has been reduced to rubble.

Friday's ruling will not be on the merits of South Africa's claims. Israel can still challenge the court's jurisdiction and the admissibility of the case before any hearings on the legal merits of the case.

For it to order so-called "provisional measures," the 17-judge

panel must decide that the court appears to have jurisdiction in the case, that there is a dispute between South Africa and Israel about the 1948 Genocide Convention and that there is an urgent need to order emergency measures while the case continues.

At hearings earlier this month, South African lawyers said that acts by Israel's military and statements by senior officials demonstrated intent to commit genocide against Palestinians in Gaza.

"The scale of destruction in Gaza, the targeting of family homes and civilians, the war being a war on children, all make clear that genocidal intent is both understood and has been put into practice. The articulated intent is the destruction of Palestinian life," said lawyer Tembeka Ngcukaitobi.

He said the case's "distinctive feature" was "the reiteration and repetition of genocidal speech throughout every sphere of the state in Israel."

Malcolm Shaw, part of Israel's legal team at hearings in The Hague, rejected the accusation of genocidal intent and called remarks cited by South Africa "random quotes not in conformity with government policy."

Israeli legal advisor Tal Becker told the court that the country is fighting a "war it did not start and did not want."

"In these circumstances, there

Cease-fire efforts for Israel-Hamas war gain steam

By JOSEF FEDERMAN
Associated Press

Efforts to reach a new cease-fire between Israel and Hamas appear to be gaining steam.

Egyptian and U.S. officials confirmed this week that they are actively pursuing ways to halt a war that has raged for over 110 days. An Egyptian official said that Israel has presented a proposal for a pause in fighting, while the White House said it dispatched a senior envoy to the region for consultations with Egypt and Qatar.

Any deal would have to include a pause in fighting, an exchange of hostages held by Hamas for Palestinian prisoners held by Israel and large quantities of desperately needed humanitarian assistance for the war-battered Gaza Strip.

But finding a formula acceptable to both sides has been elusive. The gaps between Israel and Hamas remain wide, and the chances of an agreement anytime soon still appear slim.

"There are contacts all the time but they have not yielded results," said an Israeli official, speaking on condition of anonymity because they were discussing behind-the-scenes negotiations. "There is a long road ahead."

can hardly be a charge more false and more malevolent than the allegation against Israel of genocide," he added, noting that the horrible suffering of civilians in war was not enough to support an allegation of genocide.

The case strikes at the national identity of Israel, which was founded as a Jewish state after the Nazi slaughter of 6 million Jews

during World War II.

South Africa's own identity is key to it bringing the case. Its governing party, the African National Congress, has long compared Israel's policies in Gaza and the West Bank to its own history under the apartheid regime of white minority rule, which restricted most Black people to "homelands" before ending in 1994.

Experimental gene therapy allows kids with inherited deafness to hear

By LAURA UNGAR
AP Science Writer

Gene therapy has allowed several children born with inherited deafness to hear.

A small study published Wednesday documents significantly restored hearing in five of six kids treated in China. On Tuesday, the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia announced similar improvements in an 11-year-old boy treated there. And earlier this month, Chinese researchers published a study showing much the same in two other children.

So far, the experimental therapies target only one rare condition. But scientists say similar treatments could someday help many more kids with other types of deafness caused by genes. Globally, 34 million children have deafness or hearing loss, and genes are responsible for up to 60 percent of cases. Hereditary deafness is the latest condition scientists are targeting with gene therapy, which is already approved to treat illnesses such as sickle cell disease and severe hemophilia.

Children with hereditary deafness often get a device called a cochlear implant that helps them hear sound.

"No treatment could reverse hearing loss ... That's why we were always trying to develop a therapy," said Zheng-Yi Chen of Boston's Mass Eye and Ear, a senior author of the study published Wednesday in the journal *Lancet*. "We couldn't be more happy or excited about the results."

The team captured patients' progress in videos. One shows a baby, who previously couldn't hear at all, looking back in response to a doctor's words six weeks after treatment. Another shows a little girl 13 weeks after treatment repeating father, mother, grandmother, sister and "I love you."

All the children in the experiments have a condition that accounts for 2 percent to 8 percent of inherited deafness. It's caused by mutations in a gene responsible for an inner ear protein called otoferlin, which helps hair cells transmit sound to the brain. The

one-time therapy delivers a functional copy of that gene to the inner ear during a surgical procedure. Most of the kids were treated in one ear, although one child in the two-person study was treated in both ears.

The study with six children took place at Fudan University in Shanghai, co-led by Dr. Yilai Shu, who trained in Chen's lab, which collaborated on the research. Funders include Chinese science organizations and biotech company Shanghai Refreshgene Therapeutics.

Researchers observed the children for about six months. They don't know why the treatment didn't work in one of them. But the five others, who previously had complete deafness, can now hear a regular conversation and talk with others. Chen estimates they now hear at a level around 60 percent to 70 percent of normal. The therapy caused no major side effects.

Preliminary results from other research have been just as positive. New York's Regeneron Pharmaceuticals announced

in October that a child under 2 in a study they sponsored with Decibel Therapeutics showed improvements six weeks after gene therapy. The Philadelphia hospital — one of several sites in a test sponsored by a subsidiary of Eli Lilly called Akouos — reported that their patient, Aisam Dam of Spain, heard sounds for the first time after being treated in October. Though they are muffled like he's wearing foam earplugs, he's now able to hear his father's voice and cars on the road, said Dr. John Germiller, who led the research in Philadelphia.

"It was a dramatic improvement," Germiller said. "His hearing is improved from a state of complete and profound deafness with no sound at all to the level of mild to moderate hearing loss, which you can say is a mild disability. And that's very exciting for us and for everyone."

Columbia University's Dr. Lawrence Lustig, who is involved in the Regeneron trial, said although the children in these studies don't wind up with perfect

hearing, "even a moderate hearing loss recovery in these kids is pretty astounding."

Still, he added, many questions remain, such as how long the therapies will last and whether hearing will continue to improve in the kids.

Also, some people consider gene therapy for deafness ethically problematic. Teresa Blankmeyer Burke, a deaf philosophy professor and bioethicist at Gallaudet University, said in an email that there's no consensus about the need for gene therapy targeting deafness. She also pointed out that deafness doesn't cause severe or deadly illness like, for example, sickle cell disease. She said it's important to engage with deaf community members about prioritization of gene therapy, "particularly as this is perceived by many as potentially an existential threat to the flourishing of signing Deaf communities."

Meanwhile, researchers said their work is moving forward.

"This is real proof showing gene therapy is working," Chen said. "It opens up the whole field."

Estimate shows rural Americans, men more likely to suffer hearing loss

By DEVI SHASTRI
AP Health Writer

MILWAUKEE (AP) — A new estimate shows hearing loss affects approximately 37.9 million Americans and is more common in rural areas than urban ones and in men than women.

The study, published Wednesday in *The Lancet Regional Health-Americas Journal*, is the first to estimate hearing loss rates at the state and county level, and was led by NORC at the University of Chicago. The estimates are for 2019 and only include people who have hearing loss in both ears.

While the study could not explain the reason for the geographic divide, experts who treat hearing loss say there are two factors to consider: how loud noises are and how often people hear them.

A person who rides the subway in a bustling city could, in theory, go six to eight hours before being at risk of hearing loss, said audiologist Nicholas Reed, an assistant professor of epidemiology at Johns Hopkins University who co-authored the study. On the other hand, hunters who don't wear protection can damage their hearing with just a few pulls of the trigger.

Experts say rural Americans need better access to hearing screenings and specialists. Many jobs in rural areas may use loud machinery. Popular leisure activities in these areas, like hunting, woodworking and riding all-terrain vehicles, also put hearing at risk.

The study also found men were more likely than women to have hearing loss, starting at 35, which is in line with previous estimates. The highest rates were among non-Hispanic white people and those 65 and older.

"The number one risk factor for hearing loss is age," said David Rein, director of NORC's public health analytics program and the paper's lead author.

Audiologist Melanie Buhr-Lawler, a clinical professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, said she saw the threats to hearing health growing up on a farm in rural Wisconsin and later researching hearing loss in rural residents.

"People who live in rural areas have a hearing health double-whammy," said Buhr-Lawler, who was not involved with the study. "So they're more exposed to high noise levels through their work, be it mining or farming or other rural occupations, but also through leisure activities."

For years, her research team handed out thousands of ear plugs at a tractor pull in Tomah, Wisconsin, to raise awareness.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention funded the study.

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