

## Cleaning up Grove Hill



Saturday's cleanup effort garnered many bags of debris. At top left, Nancy and Leon Powell who regularly volunteer to pick up litter collected over 75 pounds near the Jr. Food Mart while Councilwoman Pat McGraw picked up two bags of aluminum cans on Jackson Street near her home.



Starting at 6 a.m., Janice Malone and Teresa Coats picked up 225 lbs. of trash on the Mt. Zion Road. They are a part of the team of Mt. Zion Men's Ministry and pick up litter in their community often.



Councilwoman Phyllis Barnes and Gina Skipper collected over 100 lbs. of trash around town during the Alabama PALS annual statewide cleanup Saturday. The local and statewide cleanup continues this week.

# Legislative bill would cap size of municipalities that could form their own school systems

By Jennifer Harrison  
Special to The Democrat

Two Alabama legislators are proposing bills that would make it more difficult for small communities to create school systems. According to Jackson Mayor Richard Long, the two bills "would effectively kill" the possibility of Jackson breaking away from the Clarke County school system and creating its own education board.

"We are very much interested in them (the bills)," Long said. "They take power away from cities like Jackson, Ala. and other smaller cities without 7,000 or 20,000 people in them. These two bills keep cities from doing what they want to do."

House Bill 140 by Rep. Becky Nordgren, R-Gadsden, would increase the minimum population requirement for establishing a city board of education to 20,000 from 5,000.

Rep. Jeremy H. Oden, R-Vinemont, is also sponsoring a bill that would increase the minimum population for new school boards.

In House Bill 183, Oden proposes that municipalities must have a minimum population of 7,500 instead of 5,000.

Oden's bill would also require the State Department of Education to determine the financial capability of a city to sustain a school system.

If passed, House Bill 183 would not affect cities that had submitted a resolution to create a new school system to the state superintendent of education and had met existing requirements prior to the passing of the bill.

On April 6, Nordgren's bill was read for the second time in the House and substitutions and amendments were added that would require "the State Department of Education to determine the financial capability of a municipality to sustain a school system before the municipality could establish a city school system."

House Bill 140 was also altered to lower the population threshold for Nordgren's originally proposed 20,000 residents to 7,500.

According to Rep. Elaine Beech, D-

## Satsuma latest city to vote to start municipal schools

Some Alabama municipalities are forming, or considering forming, their own school systems.

In Mobile County, the largest county system in the state, Saraland's break away a few years ago has prompted Satsuma to do the same, voting April 12 by 60 percent to enact a new 7.5 mil property tax to fund a municipal system that will be up and running by 2012.

Chickasaw is also contemplating a municipal system and possibly other Mobile County municipalities as well.

In Baldwin County, Fairhope citizens had looked at forming their own system but decided not to do so earlier this year. However, the issue isn't dead and is still being debated and discussed.

Jackson has looked into the possibility of forming a city system.

Chatom, there are currently 132 school systems in the state's 67 counties.

"Our education system is broke financially," Beech said. "We cannot continue to fund systems as the statutes are now."

"I'm not sure which bill will pass the House and Senate. If the bill saves the state money and still advances education, I am all for it."

Long said the city of Jackson has been considering a breakaway school system for nine months now and has asked for input from Ira Harvey. Harvey is a paid consultant who has worked with other cities interested in creating their own school boards, including Chickasaw, Saraland and Fairhope.

"He (Harvey) told us there were a few things we needed to do before we could consider hiring him, and that's what we've been working on since then," Long said.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the estimated population of Jackson in 2009 was 5,096 and Clarke

County's estimated population was 26,042.

"We just want to have the best schools for our kids in Jackson," Long said. "With the money we've got, we should be able to do that."

According to Ken Roberts, chief operating officer and director of research for the Alabama Association of School Boards, House Bill 183 has a great deal of support.

"It's the version that appears to have momentum and is moving forward," Roberts said.

"The association does support this piece of legislation, the main reason being that it strives to ensure the fiscal sustainability of both the new system being formed and the remaining county system," Roberts added. "It requires the State Department of Education to provide financial parameters in the evaluation of the proposed school system formation."

Roberts said one of the considerations the Department of Education would use to evaluate a new school system is the city system's ability to spend as much per pupil in local money as the existing system.

"The goal is to make sure that the kids in the new system will be served as well as they were in the old system. The SDE will also wants to be sure that there will be enough money so that a new system doesn't negatively impact the system they are pulling away from."

The School Superintendents of Alabama also supports Oden's and Nordgren's bills, according to the bill-tracking page of the SSA website.

SSA initially opposed Nordgren's bill on the basis that it had no requirement for a new system to demonstrate financial responsibility but now supports House Bill 140 substitution and amendments, according to SSA's website on April 14.

Both Nordgren and Oden were unavailable for interviews.

*Troy University journalism student Jennifer Harrison of Mobile wrote this story as part of a project partly funded by the Alabama Press Association Journalism Foundation.*

## Year after BP oil spill, impact lingers in flawed claims process

### Congress Reports



Jo Bonner

famous seafood took major hits as our waters were closed to fishing and our shrimp, oysters, red snapper and a host of other Gulf culinary delights were shunned.

But all storms pass, and twelve months after the explosion of the BP-Deepwater Horizon, Alabama's seacoast is once again open for business. Our seafood is better than ever and our beaches are in pristine condition. If the hard work of Alabama's post oil spill tourism campaign is successful, summer sun seekers will be back, concerned more with tanning oil than spilled petroleum.

While we all should be optimistic about the prospects of putting the nightmare of 2010 behind us, the progress made towards the clean-up is a hollow victory for thousands of local businesses, which were dealt crippling blows during a tourism season that never materialized. Whole communities are still reeling from business losses while the presidentially-appointed administrator of the BP claims fund slow-walks approval of claims payments.

Louisiana suffered most of the environmental damage from the April 20, 2010 spill, but Baldwin and Mobile counties were arguably economic ground zero. It has been reported that as many as one million tourists bypassed Coastal Alabama in the wake of this man-made storm, taking their valuable tourist dollars elsewhere. For a region that generates up to one third of the state's annual tourist dollars, the oil spill's scuttling of Southwest Alabama's 2010 tourism season is no doubt also contributing to this year's budget shortfall in Montgomery.

Last June, fresh from a visit to Theodore, Fort Morgan and Orange Beach, President Obama promised to get the region back on its feet. He pledged the creation of a claims fund from which damages would be paid. "This \$20 billion [fund] will provide substantial assurance that the claims people and businesses have will be honored. It's also important to emphasize this is not a cap. The people of the Gulf have my commitment that BP will meet its ob-

ligations to them."

To date, the GCCF has only paid approximately \$3.8 billion out of a total \$20 billion fund. Only 233 out of a total of 6,912 full and interim business claims have been paid by the Gulf Coast Claims Facility, overseen by presidentially-appointed administrator, Ken Feinberg. For individuals seeking damage payments, only 1,007 out of 10,813 full claims have been paid, while Mr. Feinberg has paid just 403 of 7,037 interim claims.

Mr. Feinberg dismisses accusations that his claims system is a failure. However, since he refuses to open up his claims payment process for review, he is able to operate with impunity. For this reason, I am calling for an independent audit of the GCCF and its claims process.

Our communities were promised restitution for damages from the BP oil spill and we will continue to hold the government, BP and Mr. Feinberg accountable.

### House passes \$38.5 billion in spending cuts

History was made in Washington last week as the House passed record-setting federal spending cuts. More importantly, these cuts - combined with a new budget blueprint also passed by the House - dramatically change the direction of federal spending.

While it's true that the amount of cuts passed last week - \$38.5 billion - is the largest non-defense federal spending reduction in U.S. history, the really big news is we've put an end to overall annual federal spending increases. The trend of year-after-year increased federal spending - something Washington simply took for granted for as long as any of us can remember - has been halted under the Republican budget plan.

We all realize that our nation's spending addiction has led to a \$14.2 trillion debt crisis that will take decades to dig out of. As with any addiction recovery, the first step is to acknowledge the problem and stop doing it. House Republicans paved a path to recovery that involves more significant cuts and long-term reform.

Also last week, President Obama seemed to finally bow to pressure to reduce spending, but his actions don't match his rhetoric. I'll comment next week in more detail about the Republican budget plan and the president's response.

The work of conservatives in Congress to end government overspending and move us toward a balanced budget is only beginning.

My staff and I work for you. If we can ever be of service, do not hesitate to call my office toll free at 1-800-288-8721 or visit my website at <http://bonner.house.gov>.

## Letter to the Editor

# Cemetery needs attention

Dear Editor,

An on-line search reveals 92 named cemeteries in Alabama. Looking along the sides of the highway as I ride the backroads, I suspect that number is very low if you count the three to four grave plots I frequently see languishing from neglect. The families there have moved away or died out; now there is no one to tend the graves, no one to care.

I thought that having my family members in Ulcanush Cemetery in northern Clarke County would be safe. I wrote the checks to the Alabama Baptist Foundation, and was assured that perpetual care would be provided. Not flowers—that's for the family, but the grass would be mown, leaves raked, and trash picked up. It is difficult to check on graves from half a state away, thus the need for perpetual care.

Last Sunday—Palm Sunday—my wife and I went to Ulcanush to put flowers on our family graves; four generations or more are interred there. The weeds were above the copings and flat headstones. Trash littered the area, including old artificial flowers possibly from the overflowing trash can. Beside the gate, latched with a used plastic Wal-Mart bag, was a sign explaining the cemetery rules, the last of which said active church members are exempt.

A phone call to the Alabama Baptist Foundation yielded two names of people

who received Foundation money for maintaining the cemetery and who were responsible for using the funds to keep the grounds respectable. The Foundation denied knowing any phone numbers, and both directory assistance calls and Internet searches yielded no current phone in either name.

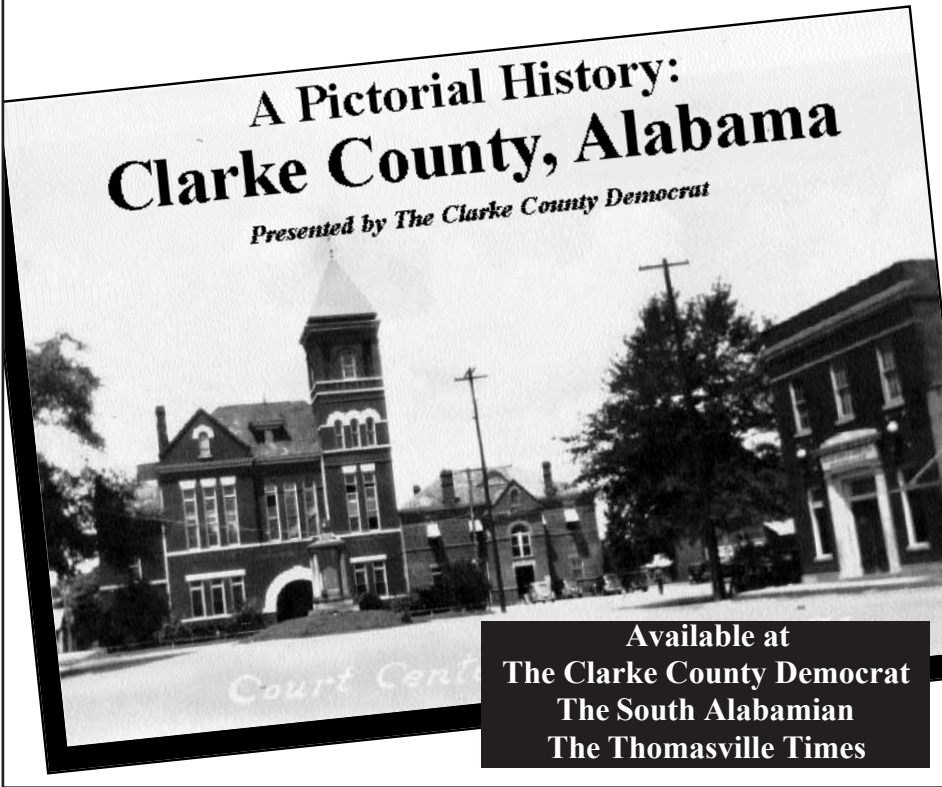
Two things bother me here. First, the cemetery is in disrepair, and that is a shame on the church, the Alabama Baptist Association, and on those of us family members naïve enough to believe the perpetual care promise. Second, it appears to me that someone is taking money for maintaining the cemetery with little to show for it. The total lack of accountability by the Foundation for use of the funds appears at best irresponsible.

I call on all families to check on the cemeteries where their loved ones are interred; to investigate and determine who is responsible for maintaining the grounds; and to hold those persons' feet to the fire to ensure they are doing their job.

Personally, I am considering cremation—I have no faith that the maintainers of our cemeteries will do any better in the future. But we all must try, we owe it to the generations who went before us.

Rick Horne,  
Lt Col USAF (Retired)  
Opelika

# Need A Special Gift? This will please them!



Need a laugh? Read the comics, Page 8B