

COLUMNIST

Fire department dues should be mandatory

The whispers of the last few months are growing louder as crunch time approaches for Warren County government.

It's the annual time of year when the county sets its tax rate. Anyone who follows county government knows the Warren County Commission hasn't raised property taxes in 16 years. Depending on your point of view, this either makes our county great or it suffocates growth.

Will there be a tax increase this year, and if so, how much?

As a resident of the fine city of McMinnville, here's a little tidbit some people may not realize. Since McMinnville is located inside Warren County, city residents pay full county taxes.

City residents then turn around and pay full city property taxes too, which are actually more than county taxes. In short, we're taxed twice. This makes it twice as annoying when tax dollars are misused.

When it comes to supporting McMinnville Fire Department, city residents fulfill this obligation with our city property taxes. However, when it comes to volunteer fire departments located outside the city limits, there is no requirement to pay.

It has been well publicized in this newspaper over the past decade that volunteer fire departments work on a donation system. If you live in the district of North Warren Volunteer Fire Department, you are asked to pay an annual fee to support that department.

The problem when you ask for people to pay and phrase it in the form of a request, you are never going to get full participation. Most volunteer fire departments say they're lucky if about half of the households in their service area pay their annual dues.

To compensate, county government now gives each volunteer fire department an annual contribution of \$8,000. That has climbed over the years from a paltry donation of \$500 to become a respectable amount of



THE SCOOP

JAMES CLARK

\$8,000 or \$56,000 for all seven volunteer fire departments.

The problem I have with this is I pay for my own fire protection in the city. And city taxpayers also have to foot the bill and pay for rural residents to have fire protection.

It's been pointed out the ideal situation would be to have all rural residents to pay their voluntary fire dues. If that were to happen, the fire departments could stay afloat without county tax dollars.

That's why I like a recent county proposal to place fire dues on monthly Caney Fork Electric bills. You know folks are going to pay their light bill -- how could you recharge your cellphone at night otherwise? -- so that would make fire dues approach 100 percent payment.

Since it's been said 100 percent customer payment is what's needed for our rural fire departments to operate, I say it's time to make payments mandatory.

There aren't too many businesses that could stay afloat if customers were allowed to pay voluntarily. There's no reason such an arrangement should be tolerated with Warren County's volunteer fire departments.

If attaching fire dues to monthly electric bills isn't feasible, attach a \$50 surcharge to the annual property tax payments of those who live in a volunteer fire department district.

If that doesn't work, add a one-time annual fee when people get their car tags renewed if their address falls in a volunteer fire department district.

Our county government is composed of the best and brightest. I'm confident our elected officials can figure out a way to make volunteer fire department dues a requirement.

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Gerrymandering hurts

Gerrymandering has always been part of American politics. The term was coined in 1812 after Massachusetts governor and Founding Father Elbridge Gerry endorsed a state senate district that resembled a salamander.

Until recently, federal courts have been highly reluctant to enter the "political thicket" and confront a critical question: When does the legitimate use of political power cross a line into an unfair and illegal abuse of that power?

In coming weeks, the Supreme Court is due to rule on cases from Maryland and North Carolina that could provide some answers.

During oral arguments in April, Justice Brett Kavanaugh bluntly admitted: "Extreme partisan gerrymandering is a real problem for our democracy. I'm not going to dispute that."

It's possible the high court will do what it did in a case from Wisconsin last year and avoid a definitive ruling. But even if that happens, there is clearly a rising demand -- among judges, voters and even some politicians -- to change a system that is doing enormous damage to the country's political climate.

Two governors, Republican Larry Hogan of Maryland and Democrat Roy Cooper of North Carolina, reflected that urgency when they wrote in the *Washington Post* the justices should step in. "Gerrymandering is an overt assault on our representative form of government," they wrote, "and free and fair elections are the foundation of American democracy."

Both parties launch those assaults when they get a chance, but Republicans have been far more determined -- and successful. In Michigan, the GOP won half the

Congressional votes statewide over the last three elections, but distorted districts consistently gave them nine of 14 Congressional seats (65%). The imbalance was even worse in Ohio, where vote totals were roughly equal, but Republicans won three-quarters of the House districts.

This is not just an abstract debate about equity or legality. There are many reasons for the poisonous partisanship polluting Washington, but gerrymandering is a prime culprit.

The problem is getting worse. Vast databases combined with high-speed computers make it possible to draw maps that entrench majority power with almost "surgical precision," said one federal judge.

And declining respect for minority rights breeds ever-more ruthless efforts by the majority to cement their advantage and bury their opponents.

That's why the reaction among federal judges is so important. Increasingly, they are embracing the argument that under the First Amendment, rigged districts deprive voters of their basic rights of political association and free expression.

Last month, a unanimous court ruled against Ohio's districting plan and sent its own message to the high court: Defining the line between fair and unfair, legal and illegal, is not that hard. They embraced a three-part test that other federal judges have used, as well. A gerrymander must be rejected if it's intentional, effective, and lacks "legitimate justification (that) accounts for its extremity."

Justices should listen to the judges who urged them to "vindicate the constitutional rights of those harmed by partisan gerrymandering."

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COLUMNISTS

STEVE & COKIE ROBERTS



THE GROOVE

ATLANTA NORTHCUTT

Surviving addiction

The disease of addiction is one that changes who you are as a person. There's a saying that addiction without recovery ends in one of two ways: jail or death. The lucky ones are those who escape with their lives.

When beginning to experiment with drugs, you don't believe you will become addicted and can't begin to fathom where jumping down this rabbit hole can lead.

With addiction, the parts of a person that radiate and shine, making them unique, slowly begin to lose their luster, and an empty shell is all that's left.

The impact addiction has on family, friends and loved ones is something unimaginable. Those who love the addict are constantly in fear, worried they'll receive a call in the middle of the night that something terrible has happened.

Every time they see the addict's face slowly deteriorating, with eyes sinking in and skin turning off-white, their heart breaks.

Becoming an addict happens in stages. Slowly at first, and then all of a sudden the substances which were being used for fun and pleasure have become the only way to wake up in the morning, take a shower, associate with people, and function.

Those who have never suffered from this disease can't fathom the depths of despair and hopelessness associated with allowing something that fits into the palm of your hand control your entire life.

Over time, the person who was once known and loved by themselves and those around them has disappeared. The hunt for the next "fix" or opportunity to feel normal and not suffer the symptoms of withdrawal takes over. This is when survival mode kicks in.

The addict becomes edgy, anxious, depressed and desperate. The desperation comes from the knowledge of what they're doing and everyone in it, but the deception of the addiction telling their brain they must have the substance to survive is overpowering.

Numbing yourself becomes the only way to escape this hopeless new reality. The enjoyment and gratitude of the beautiful moments in life and the happiness that was once felt becomes trapped in this abyss of nothingness.

If a person's lucky, even if they don't feel that way at the time, something painful or frightening enough will happen, prying their eyes open to how far they've fallen. This is the point where an addict must decide to either climb out of the hole or lie down and be buried.

Survival takes on a whole new meaning and becomes a fight for life, happiness, peace of mind and becoming your true self again.

Recovery is doable. It takes work every day to remain sober, but never forget where you came from and what you suffered through. Allow those memories to be the driving force to never go back.

Standard reporter Atlanta Northcutt can be reached at 473-2191.



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Southern Baptists, red ink

It was the rare Billy Graham Evangelistic Association event in which Graham was in the audience -- incognito in a hat and dark glasses -- and his brother-in-law Leighton Ford was in the pulpit.

Graham was set to preach the next day, noted Ford, who told this story many times. At the altar call, Graham saw that the man seated in front of him was struggling. Leaning forward, but remaining anonymous, Graham asked if he wanted to go forward and accept Jesus as his Savior.

No, the man replied, "I'll just wait till the big gun preaches tomorrow."

There was a time when Baptists and other evangelicals could count on ordinary people showing up at crusades and local "revivals" for a variety of reasons. Some were worried about heaven, hell and the state of their souls. Some were impressed by strong local churches and figured it was a gain to get baptized.

That was then. Anyone who has studied Southern Baptist Convention statistics knows that times have changed. That will be a big subject looming in the background when America's largest Protestant flock gathers June 11-12 in Birmingham, Ala., for its national convention.

For decades, Southern Baptists have "relied on revivalism" as an evangelistic engine that would deliver church growth, noted the Rev. Albert Mohler Jr., president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.

"The problem is that revivalism only works when Christianity is tri-

umphant or on the rise," he said.

Southern Baptist membership hit 14.8 million last year, down from 16.3 million in 2006 -- falling 8% in that era. That reality cannot be ignored, even if it isn't as stunning as the 30%-50% declines seen in mainline Protestant churches since the 1960s.

Thus, Mohler recently published an essay, entitled "The Future of the Southern Baptist Convention: The Numbers Don't Add Up," covering several sobering trends:

- Southern Baptist Sunday school students used to complete forms indicating if they had arrived on time, brought their Bibles, studied the day's lesson, stayed for worship, etc. Today, many churches struggle to maintain Sunday schools and youth programs.

- Rising numbers of Americans feel lonely, and even desperate. However, few fret about what will happen when they die. Embracing a vague faith that researchers have called "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism," many Americans believe the goal of life is to "be happy," "be nice" and "be fair" while trusting God lets "good people" go to heaven.

- Parents face tough choices about how to control smartphones and other devices that -- hour after hour, day after day -- dominate daily life. Parents and church leaders, Mohler said, may fear what will happen if they ask children to be truly counter-cultural on many media issues.

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