

The Ouachita CITIZEN

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INSIDE...

Thursday, April 19, 2012

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Councilmen sentenced to prison

Former Monroe councilmen Red Stevens and Arthur Gilmore were sentenced to prison Monday. Last year, a jury convicted the men on two counts each of bribery and racketeering.

Government prosecutors said the men attempted to extort Monroe businessman Eddie Hakim of cash, services and special considerations in a real estate deal.

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City Schools weigh retirements

Monroe City Schools could offer incentives to some employees in hopes of enticing them to retire. Superintendent Kathleen Harris said the move was just one possible way to help the system address deficits in coming years.

Mickey Traweek called it "a creative idea" and said it warranted further examination.

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Tech lifter tops nation



A LaTech powerlifter scored tops in the country at a national weight lifting competition.

Meanwhile, Tech placed second overall in the competition.

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PARISH OFFICIALS discuss the finer points of the Ouachita Parish Police Jury's 9.2-mill property tax for operations at OCC. District Attorney Jerry Jones (right), Sheriff-Elect Jay Russell, and Police Jury president Shane Smiley were among the leaders instrumental in the push for the jail tax.

MONROE MAYOR'S RACE

Candidates make final push

As the race for Monroe mayor enters the final stretch, incumbent Jamie Mayo and challenger Ray Armstrong will spend the last hours shaking hands and visiting with voters before they head to the polls Saturday.

Face time with voters could mean the difference in what ULM political scientist John Sutherlin says is a historically close contest.

"It literally is one of those races where it is too close to call," said Sutherlin. "Everything is going to turn on who can get their people to the polls. Organization is, literally, everything."

Sutherlin said both Mayo and Armstrong faced a unique set of challenges with voters.

Armstrong's challenge is to convince voters that he can translate his experience

'Vote Yes'

Officials urge voters to support OCC

By Michael DeVault
The Citizen

Shane Smiley is cautiously optimistic voters understand the importance of passing a millage to fund Ouachita Correctional Center.

"I believe that the citizens of

this parish recognize the importance of OCC to law enforcement efforts throughout Ouachita Parish," said Smiley, who is president of the Ouachita Parish Police Jury.

The Police Jury placed the 5-year, 9.2-mill property tax on the April 21 ballot. By law, the Police

Jury funds the jail. The Ouachita Parish Sheriff's Office staffs it and runs it.

Sheriff-elect Jay Russell also said he is optimistic that voters understand the importance of

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Committee weighs budget cuts

By Sunny Meriwether
The Citizen

LOUISIANA LEGISLATURE

With preliminary hearings out of the way on the proposed state budget for the 2012-2013 fiscal year, members of the House

Appropriations Committee can now begin the hard work: deciding where spending cuts be made to balance the

budget.

Rep. Bubba Chaney said public testimony Monday and Tuesday was grueling.

"Anytime you have that public testimony, you're going to hear the real nuts and bolts, where the rubber meets the road," said Cheney, R-Rayville.

A member of the Appropriations Committee,

Chaney represents part of Ouachita Parish.

"It is absolutely heart-rending at times, when you hear how these pro-

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Partnership targets at-risk students

By Michael DeVault
The Citizen

Some at risk students at one Ouachita Parish school will get much needed assistance this summer to improve their reading and math skills.

About 120 Riverbend Elementary School students in West Monroe will benefit from a summer educational program, thanks to \$45,000 in grants from the Randy and Rosemary Ewing Foundation, Entergy and the City of West Monroe.

The summer literacy program will be conducted at Riverbend Community Center in partnership with the Ouachita Parish Schools.

School Board spokesman Aline Smead said the parish school system was excited to take part in the program because it is geared toward helping improve the reading and math skills of students in a community where students are most

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Citizen photo

DAVE NORRIS talks about the benefits of a summer literacy program at Riverbend Community Center as stakeholders in the program listen. From left: OPSB president Jerry Hicks, Superintendent of Schools Bob Webber, Randy Ewing, and Entergy's Bill Mohl.

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Early voting points to brisk turnout

Early voting ahead of this Saturday's general election was brisk last week, according to complete but unofficial results on file at the Ouachita Parish Registrar of Voter's Office.

Registrar of Voters Christa Medaries said almost 3,500 voters cast ballots at the Registrar of Voters office, Chennault Military Museum or via mail-in ballot. Early voting was held April 7

through April 14.

Medaries said early voting turnout seemed to be driven by the run-off election in the Monroe mayor's race.

Of 3,496 total early votes cast, more than three-quarters of that total came from voters in the city of Monroe, where some 2,867 voters cast early ballots.

Overall early voting for the April 21 general elec-

tion was up significantly over the March 24 primary election, in which just 2,300 early voters cast ballots.

Only 629 parish voters — those who reside outside the city of Monroe — cast early ballots. Parish voters will entertain a single issue in Saturday's election.

Parish voters — as well as Monroe voters — will decide the fate of 5-year, 9.2-mill property tax to fund

operations at Ouachita Correctional Center. The proposed property tax would generate some \$7.5 million to \$8 million per year for OCC.

The high number of early votes cast by Monroe voters could point to a much higher turnout than expected in a race that pits Mayor Jamie Mayo against retired physician Ray Armstrong.

The Armstrong and

Mayo campaigns expressed optimism earlier this week ahead of the Saturday election.

Early voting totals also presented another surprising trend.

Of the total early votes cast by Monroe voters, 1,444 were white while some 1,377 were cast by black voters.

That represents an almost even racial split in early voting, which is a sig-

nificant departure from previous elections in Monroe, where whites outnumbered blacks by significant margins in early voting.

Polls open throughout Ouachita Parish Saturday at 6 a.m. and will remain open until 8 p.m.

For complete coverage, including up-to-the-minute election returns, visit *The Ouachita Citizen* online at www.ouachitacitizen.com.

OCC

passing the jail tax.

"Without the jail tax, we won't have a place to put criminals," said Russell. "And I don't want law enforcement officers at any time doubting that there is a secure facility in which to place individuals who might be a threat to themselves or to other people."

The proposed 9.2-mill levy would generate roughly \$7.9 million of OCC's \$10.5 million annual budget. The Sheriff's Office covers the remaining costs of operating the jail through a combination of funds, including money earned from a prisoner work-release program and payments the jail receives from the Louisiana Department of Corrections to house state inmates.

The proposed millage on this Saturday's ballot replaces an 8.6-mill levy that funded operations at the parish jail, and a separate 0.6-mill levy that paid for maintenance at the facility.

The OCC maintenance fund has accrued a balance of more than \$1.8 million, which Russell and the Police Jury have assured will be sufficient to provide for

the maintenance needs at OCC for years to come.

Both Russell and Smiley have noted repeatedly that the tax voters are being asked to approve is neither a new tax nor is it a tax increase.

The millage request comes at a critical crossroads for OCC.

Last year, two national prisons studies indicated the parish jail was an efficiently run facility.

However, both an overall facilities study and a separate personnel study reflected concerns that the jail was critically understaffed.

Due to budget constraints, the Sheriff's Office has trimmed more than 30 positions from the jail in recent years as part of an effort to offset years of deficit spending at OCC.

Russell noted that one of those studies said the parish jail was short-handed.

"The studies show that it is a dangerously understaffed facility at OCC," said Russell. "I fear for the deputies and I fear for those that we incarcerate."

In its report on staffing

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at OCC, Crout and Sida Criminal Justice Consultants wrote that the parish jail was "one of the most dangerous facilities" the consultants had ever visited.

The report cited a number of positives at OCC, though, and said overall the facility was a well-run correctional institution.

"The organization is merely trying to operate with the number of staff that was approved by the funding authority," the assessment stated.

Meanwhile, Smiley said the Police Jury would have to take a hard look at the next steps if voters turn down the request for the 9.2-mill property tax.

If the millage fails, Smiley said he would meet with Russell, 4th Judicial District Attorney Jerry Jones, other members of the Police Jury and the OCC citizen's advisory committee to determine what comes next.

"If that did happen, more than likely, we would seek to have a special election in the fall to attempt to pass the millage to meet the needs at OCC," Smiley said.

FINAL

in medicine and business into effective government, Sutherlin said.

For Mayo, the challenge is convincing the electorate that he can continue to be an agent of change and progress in a city that he has led for more than 10 years, according to Sutherlin.

The overall race, Sutherlin said, comes down to two competing visions for the future of Monroe.

Speaking with *The Ouachita Citizen* Wednesday, each candidate laid out those visions.

Mayo said his vision is, in essence, to continue pursuing economic development opportunities at every turn while never losing sight of the need for efficient government and effective finances.

Mayo believes that message is getting out to voters.

Voters have brought to him a number of concerns about the tone of the election in recent weeks, according to Mayo.

"The first thing is that voters wanted to know why there wasn't a debate between me and my oppo-

nent," Mayo said. "As I told them, he refused to debate."

Armstrong declined an invitation from one local media outlet to take part in a mayoral debate. He said he declined the invitation because both campaigns had already staked out their messages. Also, Armstrong noted that the proposed debate benefited only one local media outlet and other media outlets were not invited to participate.

For Armstrong's part, he says his message has been well received by voters.

"We've told people we're going to fight the crime and fight corruption," Armstrong said. "We're going to help business."

Armstrong said voters he's spoken with all have similar overarching concerns.

"They want crime addressed, they want flooding addressed," Armstrong said. "All the issues we brought out, they want addressed, and they're excited about change."

Mayo offered a different take.

In his interactions with

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voters, Mayo said they've all expressed optimism for the city's future.

"They appreciate my experience and the energy I've shown and the abilities we've demonstrated to work with a broad cross-section of the community as well as different parts of government," Mayo said. "They appreciate where we are now as opposed to where we were when I started, especially as it relates to the budget and to economic development."

Both Armstrong and Mayo said they felt good about their chances when polls close Saturday night.

"I feel really good about it," Mayo said. "Our early voting was, I thought, very good in terms of turnout. I think we have good momentum from the primary going into the runoff."

Armstrong was optimistic, too.

"I feel absolutely great about this," Armstrong said.

Polls open throughout the city at 6 a.m. and close at 8 p.m. Visit www.ouachitacitizen.com for up-to-the-minute elections returns.

STUDENTS

at risk for falling behind in reading and math.

"Anytime we have the businesses and community leaders helping us to level the playing field for students, it is an awesome thing," Smead said. "That's exactly what they are doing for these students."

The summer literacy program will be staffed by eight teachers and a librarian hand-picked by parish school officials. They were chosen from a field of more than 50 highly qualified applicants.

Each of the teachers chosen to provide instruction were selected because of proven records of performance in the classroom and success with students, according to community center director Julia Harris.

"We wanted people who are really efficient and successful teachers," Harris said.

A former educator herself, Harris pointed out

that students chosen to take part in the program have been identified by teachers at Riverbend.

"They are children who have been most highly at-risk in their performance," Harris said.

The program will help bolster reading and math skills so students don't fall behind their classmates. Harris said the ultimate goal is to provide children with the foundation they'll need to succeed in school and, hopefully, avoid dropping out.

Students were selected from the 2012-2013 first, second, third and fourth grade classes at Riverbend.

During the summer months, they will take part in intensive, workshop-style classes with low teacher-to-student ratios.

The structure of the reading and math program is such that each student will receive a great deal of individual attention, according to Harris.

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"The program will be very concentrated and very specific to their skill levels for math and reading," Harris said.

In addition to the nine parish staffers, a librarian's assistant and 17 Ameri-Corp volunteers will provide supplemental support to the summer literacy effort.

Smead said the program wouldn't have been possible without the support and efforts of all of the community players involved.

The Ewing Foundation donated \$15,000 to the effort, which Entergy matched. West Monroe Mayor Dave Norris committed another \$10,000 to the program on behalf of the city.

The \$40,000 will pay for the morning portion of the program. The city of West Monroe will assume the cost of the afternoon portion of the program through the Community Center's budget, Smead said.

CUTS

posed changes in funding affect their lives," Chaney said.

The concerns expressed were not trivial, either, said Chaney. "Almost everyone had a legitimate reason to be there," he said. "A lot of them came from long distances, and every one of them came with specific needs."

"Everything they brought to us was very important," Chaney added.

Chaney noted, though, that the state's financial position is dire, and there's a finite amount of resources to deal with it.

"Overall, for the state, we're going to have to make cuts," Chaney said. "No question about that."

Chaney said he expects the Appropriations Committee won't send the proposed budget to the House floor for another two to three weeks. In the meantime, he's hoping the Revenue

Estimating Conference will turn up a more optimistic picture of state finances.

The Revenue Estimating

Conference determines the official projections for the state's income, upon which lawmakers must base the budget. State income taxes are due May 15, and Chaney expressed hope that they'll show at least a modest increase over last year. If they're down, he said state agencies could face end-of-year budget cuts before the current fiscal year comes to a close on June 30. Those cuts would follow cuts state agencies already absorbed this year.

Once the House has dealt with the budget and amended it, a process that often is contentious, it moves to the Senate. Sen. Neil Riser, R-Columbia, said the budget is heard in two committees.

The Senate Finance Committee considers the cash portion of the budget, while the Revenue and Fiscal Affairs Committee that he chairs handles the bond portion.

Riser said the question is always whether a budget item is something the state can do with or do without

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in any given year.

"Is this truly a priority to us, because we're going to be about \$943 million short for 2012-13," Riser said. "That's a significant dollar amount."

Like the House, the Senate committees will hold hearings to listen to agency heads and then receive input from the general public.

Those committees may make amendments before the budget goes to the Senate floor.

Riser said it'll definitely be amended once it reaches the Senate floor.

Following debate and passage in the Senate, the budget goes back to the House for concurrence, which rarely occurs.

If the House does not agree with changes made in the Senate, the budget heads to a conference committee, which hashes out differences between the budget the House approved and the one the Senate passed.

The 2012-2013 fiscal year begins July 1.

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Ouachita Council on Aging Area Agency on Aging

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