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Catastrophe at the courthouse

By Julian Sereno

The Chatham County Courthouse – for 129 years the center of Chatham’s civic life and the most recognizable building in the county – was destroyed by fire on March 25. The fire was caused by a worker using soldering iron to repair gutters. It began in the soffit area of the roof and spread quickly to the clock tower, according to Fire Marshall Tom Bender. The wind stoked the old heart pine timbers, which were highly flammable, Bender explained.



The remains of the Chatham County Courthouse five days after the fire.

PHOTO BY ANTONIA SERENO

Other questions cannot be answered until the State Bureau of Investigation releases its report, which might take a few weeks. One mystery is why it took so long to contact the

fire department. Dewayne Godfrey said he saw smoke coming out the top of the Courthouse at

4:15 p.m. At 4:30 the building was evacuated. Chris Pratt of Virlie’s Restaurant said he saw fire trucks arrive about 4:45.

“I was there, along with about 100 other people who watched it, and nobody called 911,” he said. “I didn’t call 911. I wish I had.”

Workmen at the source of the fire apparently tried to find a fire extinguisher and tried to put it out themselves, instead of calling 911, County Manager Charlie Horne told the Durham Herald-Sun.

The Courthouse was undergoing \$410,000 in exterior renovations, and was surrounded by scaffolding and draped in

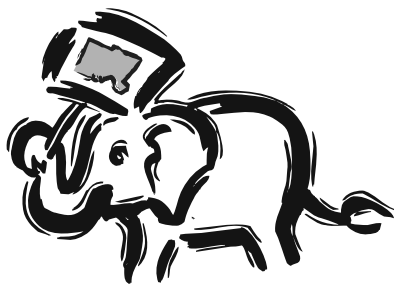
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TWO PERSPECTIVES ON THE STATE OF COUNTY POLITICS

You can't be heard if you can't speak

By Brian Bock

Many are suffering a figurative hangover from the celebration that elected our current leadership. A growing majority realize that a mistake was made. The previous administration had been so vilified that voters overlooked flaws and swept the current leaders in. Even one-time supporters are seriously worried about the path we are on. Neither supporters nor detractors imagined that we would make such a dramatic shift to the left in such a short time.



In the blink of an eye, we have been put on a path to a future where government controls every aspect of our lives. There seems to be no area safe from governmental control.

Those who work hard and succeed are portrayed as greedy and quickly denounced. Rather than listen to citizens, the administration works to change the rules to ensure passage of its agenda. Our debt has skyrocketed; taxes are increasing to pay for policies supported by special interest groups, spending is completely out of control, unelected and unaccountable individuals (Tzars) have been hired with tremendous influence over policy decisions, and use of private property is subject to the whims of government officials.

As unemployment rates increase to unimaginable levels, the administration

focuses on the affects of global warming. Rather than increase opportunities for all workers, our government has chosen a select group of industries to support at the expense of all others. The only area showing increased employment is the government. Buzz words such as “sustainable” and “green” are attached to every new and costly program in the hope that we will overlook the result. Dissenting or opposing viewpoints are dismissed.

The most worrisome aspect of the above description is that I’m not talking about the last presidential election. I’m talking about Chatham County.

The land transfer tax (LTT) was voted down by a 3 to 1 majority when put to the voters. Our BOC didn’t get the message. During their January 19 planning session they decided to seek permission from the state legislature to change the rules so the LTT could be imposed without voter input.

Since 2003 revenue to the county has increased three times faster than our population. Unfortunately spending has increased by nearly six times

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Progress – the new measure of Chatham

By Larry Hicks

I first wrote an article for Chatham County Line in the summer of 2003 on the county’s incessant years of planning for the future with no real action. In that article <chatham-countyline.org/pdfs/SMMR03.pdf>, I referred to continuously stalled planning efforts dating back as far as 1978. I am writing this piece to proudly claim that we are finally showing progress.

The elections which brought Patrick Barnes and Mike Cross on the Chatham County Board of Commissioners in 2004, George

Lucier, Carl Thompson, and Tom Vanderbeck in 2006, and Sally Kost in 2008 has set in motion an aggressive and progressive plan that puts real action to words. Chatham County is now proactively engaged in positive, planful, forward thinking, and creative endeavors that have already had a major impact on the County.

The board’s focus on fiscal responsibility is evidenced by the manner in which it has managed the Great Recession. The Board reduced the overall budget by

3 percent this past year, while at the same time increasing funding for schools by 4 percent. Chatham’s employee per capita ratio is one of the lowest in the State, supported by many engaged and involved non-profit and volunteer groups in the county. Chatham’s taxes are about average in the State, but the leveraging of county employee talent, volunteer groups and committees, and creative management makes us one of the most efficient counties in the state.

Chatham now ranks fifth in the State in per student school funding. In the midst of the economic crunch, the Virginia Cross Elementary School in Siler City has been completed; the Margaret B. Pollard Middle School is being built; and Community College is expanding; and renovations in all 17 county school facilities have been funded. This past November, the Chatham County Board of Commissioners received the 2009 County Commissioners Award from the N.C. School Boards Association (NCSBA), in recognition of their outstanding support of public education.

Thanks to the Board, new life was breathed into the stalled Chatham County Economic Development Corporation, <http://www.chathamcdc.org/>. With the restructuring of the EDC, the appointment of a new Board of

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