COMMENTARY

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Tech review

Sussex Tech is the fourth most expensive vocational high school in New Jersey. The school takes 11 percent of the county government's $90 million budget, or almost $10 million.

Whether that's enough or too much is exactly the question the school board and county freeholders are trying to answer.

At least that's the starting point.

The more important question is the purpose of the school, its vision, its mission in educating students, which will determine the curriculum and costs.

It's an ideal time to be asking the question, since the school has a new chief administrator, Superintendent Mark Toback.

A consultant has taken a hard look at the costs, specifically in comparison to the state's other technical schools. The comparison isn't kind, just based on the numbers. The school is expensive.

But part of that can be attributed to the fact that it functions as a full additional high school in the county rather than as a partial program in which students spend some time in their home district high school and some at the technical school.

As Toback said, "Time is money," and the more time students spend at the school, the more expensive it is to operate.

The county and school district have an important set of information about the district in the financial evaluation. Another equally important set would be the insights and opinions of students and recent graduates.

The district is probably best served by building on the strengths that attract students and produce the best results, rather than trying to be all to all.

Another important review will be the possible coordination of programs with the county's community college. It only makes sense, since the county provides substantial funds to both the high school and the college, to find points of efficiency.

In all, the vision must drive the decisions. And the critical part of the vision is to serve the students. That's the direction the examination has started in and is intended to follow.

As Freeholder Steve Oroho said, "This is the beginning. It isn't the end."

Other voices

Excerpts from recent editorials in newspapers around the nation:

North Korea

The Seattle Post-Intelligencer

The United Nations told North Korea that its Fourth of July missile tests was "not a wise thing to do."

But what will the world do about it? ...

We've thought that at some point the United States and North Korea will need to sit down and talk directly. But that opportunity may have fizzled faster than the Taepodong-2 missile (it fell into the sea about 40 seconds after launch). White House spokesman Tony Snow put it this way: "If it was the desire of Kim Jong Il to turn this into two-party talks with the United States, he blew it."

The U.S. response is that North Korea needs economic and energy help from other nations. That sounds like a possible route toward some kind of global sanctions.

We like that idea because getting consensus — and the force of international law — is a way of slowing ballistic missile sales worldwide. North Korea likely is the top exporter of ballistic missiles and technology to developing nations. One recent report linked North Korea's missile program with those in Iran, Pakistan, Syria and possibly Egypt.

North Korea's test wasn't just about seven missiles (that clearly failed). It was also an unintended test about whether the international community can work together to curb catastrophic threats.

FBI computers

Star Tribune, Minneapolis

The FBI should be singing the praises of Joseph Colon, at least internally, and paying him a princely sum for his knowledge and attitude. Instead, the agency hopes he goes to jail for a fair stretch. How come? It's a clash of cultures, and the FBI bureaucracy won. But the agency really lost. Colon is a young computer whiz who worked for a consulting company hired to help the FBI update its computer systems. That project is overdue, over-budget and a big embarrassment for the agency. Its inability to share information regularly gets cited as a key impediment to better focusing its anti-terrorism work.

Colon was assigned to an FBI field office in Illinois. His efforts, however, were so frequently frustrated by the agency bureaucracy that he decided, with the approval and help of the local FBI staff, to go around it. He hacked. Eventually he was able to move so far into the FBI system that he got access to tens of thousands of passwords and information in the agency's witness protection program. Although he intended no harm, it was a major security breach. Colon was charged and pleaded guilty to four counts of exceeding his access authority and obtaining information from a federal department. He could get 18 months in a federal pen when he is sentenced this week. ...

When the world of computers and the world of bureaucracy meet, bureaucracy needs to yield enough freedom to gain the cyber-benefits it wants — and needs. If bureaucracy is exceedingly dominant, you can get a red-tape loving Information technology department that is so bent on maintaining control and making rules that it stifles creativity and efficiency. ...

After Colon, the young cyber-guy, bumped up against the red-tape dog one more time than was wise, he improvised the way any computer nut worth his salt would do. He went way too far, obviously. But it's a good bet he wouldn't have — if only the FBI bureaucracy had sought to work with him, and with his less daring but still frustrated computer-world pals. Colon wouldn't be facing jail, and the FBI might be better equipped to focus on effectively fighting the terrorist threat.

Anti-tobacco settlements

Columbia (Mo.) Daily Tribune

Anti-tobacco zealots tore their hair out over the decision by the Florida Supreme Court to throw out $145 billion in punitive damages against the U.S. tobacco industry awarded by a lower-court jury to

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Freedom, religion co-exist

Consider some recent leads from news stories about the war against terror.

From Fox News: "WASHINGTON — FBI agents monitoring Internet chat rooms smashed an al Qaeda terrorist plot to attack New York City's underground transit link with New Jersey, law enforcement officials said."

From MSNBC: "MIAMI — "Seven people were arrested Thursday in connection with the early stages of a plot to attack Chicago's Sears Tower and other buildings in the U.S., federal law-enforcement sources told NBC News. FBI agents swarmed over a warehouse in Miami's Liberty City area, using a blowtorch to take off its metal door. Neighbors said the suspects said they were Muslim and had tried to recruit young people to join their group, which seemed militaristic."

From the Los Angeles Times: WASHINGTON — "The U.S. government, without the knowledge of many banks and their customers, has engaged for years in a secret effort to track terrorist financing by accessing a vast database of confidential information on transfers of money between banks worldwide. The program, run by the Treasury Department, is considered a potent weapon in the war on terrorism because of its ability to clandestinely monitor financial transactions and map terrorist webs."

There are really two wars in the war against terror.

The first is the real war — the one the Bush administration is waging. It involves an overt effort in Afghanistan and Iraq and a covert intelligence gathering operation meant to keep us safe here at home. To date, it has now successfully thwarted at least two terrorist attacks on American soil.

The second war is being waged by radical liberals — among them the ACLU and editors at The New York Times — against the Bush administration's efforts to succeed in the first war.

Ironically, the root of both wars is religion; the first propelled by the tenets of radical Islam, the second, a hatred of America's Judeo-Christian heritage.

Radical liberals despise the notion that America is good and terrorists are evil.

America's goodness flows from its Judeo-Christian heritage, something radical liberals cannot stomach. Consider that many of these same people who are so set against George Bush are the same ones who clamor for things like bans on Nativity displays, prayers at graduation and displays of the Ten Commandments.

While president Bush is the obvious target of this hatred, so too are the millions of God-fearing Americans who are willing to cut the government slack over media revelations of wiretapping the phone conversations of suspected al Qaeda operatives, monitoring Internet chat rooms and tracing the banking records of people thought to be funding terrorist operations against American interests.

Why the majority of Americans are so forgiving is because most Americans are good people themselves. They realize that, although the government that governs least governs best, it is in their best interest to allow the government to protect them and their way of life even if it means there is the potential for an intrusion into their privacy.

RUMMO

If ever there was a Constitutional role for the government, here it is. What could possibly be more important than insuring domestic tranquility, providing for the common defense, promoting the general welfare and securing the blessings of liberty — four imperatives in the Constitution's preamble that are necessary if the rest of that document is to have any meaning.

The majority of Americans are good people because America was established on a biblical foundation. And whether they know it or not, the reason a majority of Americans are willing to tolerate the government's various surveillance programs has a biblical basis.

In Paul the Apostle's treatise on Christianity, written to the church in Rome, he explained, "For (government) authorities do not frighten people who are doing right, but they frighten those who do wrong … The authorities are established by God … to punish those who do wrong…"

Fritz Ridenour, writing in "How to Be a Christian Without Being Religious," explains that Paul took advantage of the "Pax Romana" (the Roman peace that prevailed during his time) to accomplish his vocation in life — the spreading the Gospel.

The same idea applies in America now. Most Americans want to live in peace, conduct commerce and raise a family in a domestically tranquil environment. These are the good people who realize that in order for such to prevail, they must be wiling to help, not hinder the state. They…"do not see authority as a threat," Ridenour explains, "Nor do they see imperfections or even gross errors in government as reason to riot or demonstrate unlawfully."

The great French political thinker and historian, Alexis de Tocqueville, visited America in its infancy. Writing his observations in Democracy in America, he stated: "Upon my arrival in the United States, the religious aspect of the country was the first thing that struck my attention; and the longer I stayed there, the more did I perceive the great political consequences resulting from this state of things, to which I was unaccustomed. In France I had almost always seen the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom pursuing courses diametrically opposed to each other; but in America I found that they were intimately united, and that they reigned in common over the same country."

That intimate unity between America's "religion" and freedom is essential today for the country's security. The good people of America know it to be so.

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Gregory J. Rummo is a syndicated columnist.

Corzine's inconvenient closures

Editor's Mailbag

Editor:

The budget spectacle in Trenton has been very revealing. If a budget is not passed in time, the governor has wide latitude to decide what are essential services and what are non-essential services.

Corzine's decisions were based totally on power politics. Any service that caused the most disruption in the daily lives and incomes of citizens and businesses was deemed non-essential and closed down. Since the state is desperately short of money, according to Corzine, the most essential services are the ones that make money for the state, the lottery and the casinos.

The lottery was closed down right away and the casinos after a couple of days. Not only does the state lose the money from these items, but income taxes will go down next year as lottery sellers, casinos and their employees all made less money. Sales tax receipts in casinos will also be less. Next Corzine closed state parks and beaches. Since many of these areas have entry fees, the cost to the state is quite low, but the disruption to vacationers and the surrounding businesses is quite high.

It is obvious that all Gov. Corzine cared about was pressuring the Assembly Democrats to get all his tax increases passed and he did not care how much money the state lost and how many people he inconvenienced and how much income he cost local business people and casinos.

These costs will not be limited to this year alone. How many vacationers, travel agents and convention planners will avoid New Jersey in the future, knowing that their vacations and conventions can be totally disrupted and ruined by an arrogant governor trying to get his way at all costs. How many people tried other out-of-state gambling and vacationing experiences and may return to those out-of-state sites in future years?

Politicians are elected to serve the people, not ruin their vacations and their entertainment and hurt many businesses in their childlike power plays.

Robert Heitner
Newton

Regionalizing schools would hurt kids

Editor:

I am a resident of Lafayette and a married father of two little girls. I am writing on my own behalf but have spoken with many agitated neighbors concerning S-1701. The bill is a terrible idea primarily because it proposes to regionalize our K — 8 school system. This bill will ruin the town that we all love because it will destroy the primary reason many of us live there — our small, rural school.

The bill would potentially lead to shipping my little girls to Sussex-Wantage for grade school. No reasonable person could believe that would be a good idea. A preschool or kindergarten student might be on the bus for as long as they were in school. Ridiculous! Even the most frugal among us surely recognize that there is more to life than money. Is it worth saving perhaps a few hundred dollars per family per year if the real cost is our children's education?

Among the other problems with the bill, one stands out as particularly obvious. The creation of a "Super County Superintendent" sounds like a recipe for disaster. Students will inevitably become no more than numbers in a column or sections of a pie chart. New Jersey's proclivity towards corruption also weighs against such a powerful position. How obvious does a bad idea need to be before a leader speaks out against it?

I understand (correctly, I hope) that the regionalization portion of the bill has been attached to other, more popular provisions such as the budget cap provisions. This bill is wildly unpopular in the little town of Lafayette and I will personally take every measure available to prevent these bad ideas from being implemented. Regionalization is a complicated issue; just ask Mountain Lakes and Boonton, two towns involved in protracted litigation over the subject.

I certainly hope that more reasonable minds prevail and S-1701 is either amended or rejected as presently written.

Benjamin D. Light
Lafayette

New rail lines won't cause sprawl

Editor:

In reading a letter in the July 6 issue headed "NJT's Rail Plan Would Increase Risk of Flooding," I was astounded by the convoluted logic expressed by the writer. My first reaction was that it should have appeared in the comics section because it was at best humorous, at worst tragic.

First, New Jersey is not responsible for any perceived intensive development in Pennsylvania. Only local zoning and land use laws can accomplish that.

Second, rail transportation facilities do not cause "sprawl." The presence of roads, sewer and water lines and lax zoning laws do that.

Third, there has not been an interstate highway or rail line added in the last several years, yet we have had major flooding problems in the last three years. Eclipsing rain water caused damage to property not seen since 1955. The change in weather patterns seems to be more responsible for this phenomenon than the puny efforts of man.

Fourth, the letter stated that NJT is planning to reactivate the Cutoff as a passenger rail service. What happened to the bogus threat of freight over the cutoff the writer and other anti-rail proponents were predicting a year ago? Reality setting in — NJT is a passenger agency and will fight any efforts to move slow-moving freight over any and all of its lines.

Norman H. Ressler
Lake Hopatcong

Second-home owners deserve help, too

Editor:

I am writing in response to a letter published on Tuesday. I would love it if my federal tax dollars went to the flood victims, second home or not. At least I would know my money wasn't wasted on some unnecessary government project.

What the letter fails to consider is that the family also pays twice as much in taxes by owning two homes and is not entitled to less just because they have more.

This was the worst flood since 1955 and everyone involved deserves our support, not this criticism. How about a thank you for the volunteer firefighters and Red Cross workers who worked so hard during those hot couple of days?

How about the writer of the letter pay for the next million dollar outhouse and I'll cover the taxes necessary for the flood and we'll see who is more proud of where the government spent their hard earned money?

Tasha DeGeorge
Montague

Maybe Corzine will do some good

Editor:

Crazy out of control taxes! Years ago, robbers wore masks. Today, they wear suits, doing next to no actual work. They rape our wallets and pocketbooks with state tax, property tax and motor vehicles taxed over and over again!

You may not like Gov. Corzine, but maybe this guy will make some changes before he's turned into one of our graft-loving politicians. Does anyone know what 81,000 employees make in one year? Legally, on the books.

Bobby Dunn
Wantage

Questions patriotism of flag desecrators

Editor:

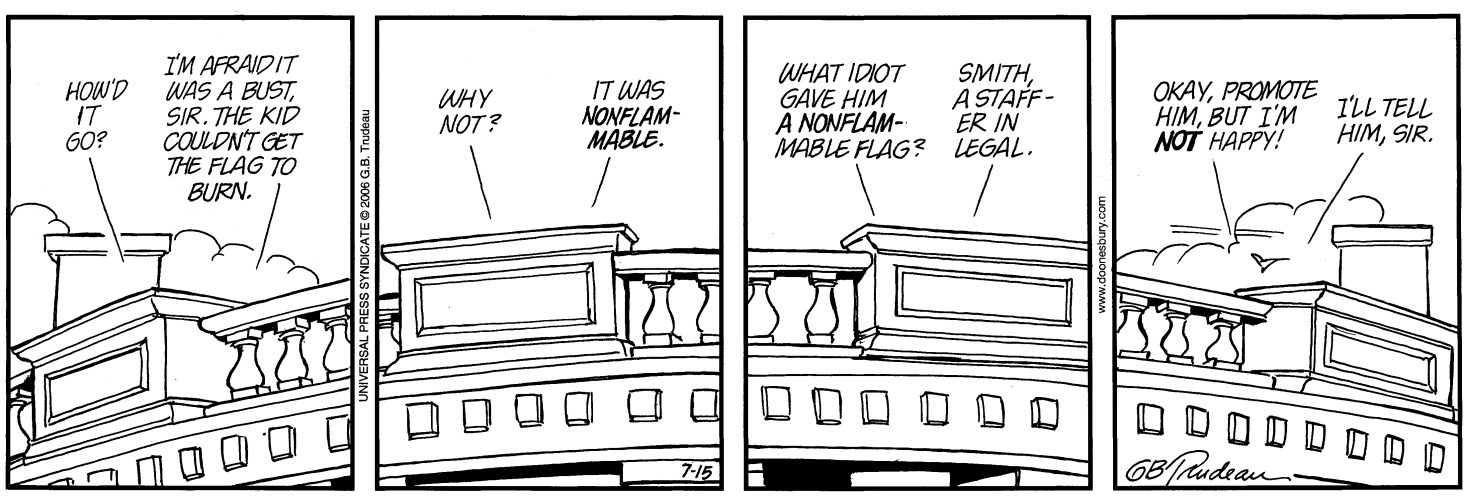
Although the Flag-desecration amendment received a majority vote for approval in both the House and Senate (286-130 in the House and 66-34 in the Senate), it lacked the one vote short of the two-thirds needed in the Senate to pass. Congress, in all its wisdom, has always felt that this is one case where the majority should not rule. Amendments to the Constitution are too important for the people to decide unless two-thirds of Congress agrees to let them vote on the matter.

The failure of Congress to pass the Flag Act makes it perfectly legal for anyone to go ahead and desecrate our flag in any way they wish. They can burn it, spit on it, urinate on it, defecate on it, do anything they wish and it is perfectly legal. It is considered freedom of speech under the first amendment of our constitution which has been supported by 34 patriotic senators and 130 patriotic representatives who seem to feel our flag is merely a piece of cloth or rag that one can malign in any way they wish in order to make their point. The fact that 66 senators and 286 representatives disagreed does not matter.

From as far back as I can remember, I have pledged allegiance to the flag, the flag of the United States of America, in school, in the Boy Scouts, etc. At almost every meeting or event of any kind I now attend, where our flag is on display, the meeting is opened with the Pledge of Allegiance. I was raised to respect our flag, to remove my hat when it passed, to salute when in uniform. In the armed services, that flag represented everything we were fighting for.

When I think of how much blood was spilled by our armed forces who fought for our flag, I question the patriotism of anyone who feels it is perfectly all right to dishonor it in any way or defend those who do.

Leonard R. Peck
Sparta

Doonesbury

BY GARRY TRUDEAU