

## COMMENTARY

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## Farmland fight

Farms may be close to sacred ground in New Jersey. Farm programs are not.

Last week, a New Jersey assemblyman sparked a quick reaction when he proposed a bill that would create a panel to investigate the farmland tax abatement program. Just as quickly as it came up in committee, it disappeared.

The reaction was rapid and fierce: "A gang of political opportunists who couldn't tell one end of a cow from the other propose to wreck the agricultural economy of northwestern New Jersey and attack our way of life in Sussex County," said state Sen. Bob Littell.

Assemblyman Guy Gregg weighed in: "It appears that some elected officials in urban districts really have it in for our farmers."

All that may be true, but farm programs need to face the same tough standard that any government program does.

Following the bill's introduction, Sen. Littell turned the tables and called for an investigation of Urban Enterprise Zones, 32 areas in the state that are allowed to charge a reduced, 3 percent sales tax to help create private-business jobs.

That's a good idea.

"Is every program worth looking at? Of course. Is every one worth a commission? Of course not," concluded Assemblyman Gregg.

Rather than protect one region's pet programs that provide income or benefit to our areas, New Jersey needs to open up all programs to a good, close examination. Not a commission, but an audit. That's called protecting the public trust. That's another reason New Jersey needs an elected, independent auditor general—to conduct just such audits.

In the farm program, at issue is whether some landowners do minimal farming to qualify for the reduced tax assessment. Sell a couple dozen Christmas trees and get a nice tax break on everything but your house.

But the ones who suffer, said Gregg, are their neighbors. Because the tax relief affects only school and municipal taxes, the ones who should complain are neighbors and elected officials, not Hudson County bureaucrats.

Gregg said he favors the program for saving open space, even if it's not used for farming.

"We need to be consistent in policy. We've been saying that we want to preserve farmland for 20 years. If that's the goal, this program is a wonderful idea.

"In my 13 years in the Legislature, I've never had a mayor call me and say we need to take a look at farmland assessment."

The bill is hibernating for another budget battle. That leaves the point with Sussex and Warren county residents and boards: In a time of rising school taxes and a widely felt tax squeeze, do you want the program to continue? That's really the only vote that should count.

## Other voices

Excerpts from recent editorials in newspapers in the United States and abroad:

## The Enron verdict

The Press and Sun-Bulletin, Binghamton, N.Y.

All Americans owe a salute to the jury in Houston that held the chief executives of the disgraced Enron corporation accountable for the damage to so many lives caused when that corrupted company imploded.

And if their verdict serves as a warning to other executives and leads to genuine reforms in corporate behavior and oversight, future generations of Americans will owe the jury a debt of gratitude as well.

The eight women and four men deliberated for five days and then pronounced Kenneth L. Lay guilty on six counts of fraud and conspiracy and four counts of bank fraud and Jeffrey K. Skilling guilty on 18 counts of fraud and conspiracy and one count of insider trading (he was acquitted on nine counts of insider trading). The jury saw through the sham in which the pair attempted to have it both ways — extravagantly paid top executives who had no idea what was going on in their company.

The verdicts will be appealed, of course, but if justice is consistent they will be upheld and the two men will be off to prison for what could be the rest of their lives. How much of their ill-gotten wealth can be recovered from wherever they've hidden it is unknown, but it would be nice if some of it could be returned to the thousands of Enron workers whose jobs and pensions were wiped out.

Enron's collapse in October 2001 followed what another former executive, Sherron Watkins, described as "an elaborate accounting hoax." She alerted Lay to that in an Aug. 15 memo when Skilling resigned as Chief Executive Officer; but five days later, Lay was quoted in Business Week as saying, "There are absolutely no problems that had anything to do with Jeff's departure. There are no accounting issues, no trading issues, no reserve issues, no previously unknown problem issues. The company is probably in the strongest and best shape that it has ever been in."

Five years later, he took the witness stand and tried to blame the media, staff accountants and others for the Enron debacle. Everyone but himself.

The jury knew better. They put the burden of responsibility right where it belongs.

## Rising gas prices

The Jackson (Tenn.) Sun

As motorists, both locally and statewide, continue to feel the pinch of rising gas prices, Tennessee has a chance to become a leader in the production of alternative fuels and reduce our nation's dependency on oil. Sen. Lamar Alexander has shown an interest in promoting clean energy, and we encourage his efforts.

Alexander recently led a round-table discussion on biodiesel — a hybrid fuel consisting of regular petroleum diesel and organic crops like soybeans. He rightly pointed out that Tennessee is poised to become a major biodiesel hub.

Tennessee enjoys many natural advantages when it comes to biodiesel. Soybeans are our third-leading agricultural commodity. Tennessee also enjoys access to many major interstates. And Tennessee is centrally located.

Currently, there are 50 locations in Tennessee where biodiesel can be purchased. So why hasn't biodiesel consumption become more widespread? One major reason is that even with 50 sale locations, there are

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## If you don't fly, don't criticize

A reader of my column "Getting Out of New Jersey" in which I praised the security force at Newark's Liberty Airport for its efficiency in getting travelers on their way told me, "I disagree with everything you wrote."

What was there to disagree about? Much of the column was mere journalism—reporting an event exactly the way it happened.

It turns out this reader never travels through the nation's airports. He told me he was planning to travel from New Jersey to California by train. So maybe that explains why there are so many complainers about the non-existent hassles at airports. They are merely repeating what they heard from others, not telling what they actually experienced.

The number of people traveling through the nation's airports is up. I am writing this in the departure terminal at Denver International waiting to catch a flight to Phoenix. The 777 that

took me here yesterday from Chicago was packed. I had a standby ticket and I was the second to the last person to board the plane. (My partner who happened to be traveling with me got the last seat.)

On this trip I've gone through security at Newark terminal A, Chicago O'Hare and Denver International. At no time did it take longer than 10 minutes to go from one side of security to the other. And since all of my baggage was carry-on, and I had booked my itinerary online, I was able to use United Airlines' self-ticketing kiosks in every airport.

You want to travel by train, fine. I don't — at least not across the country. But you'll never read me criticizing the nation's rail system.

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My column "The Rich Are Paying Their Fair Share" ticked off a number of people. The general theme running through their e-mails was that capitalism was

"unfair." Unfair compared to what? — Socialism? — the economic system that has failed every place it has been attempted. Capitalism only appears to be unfair to those who are not satisfied that America offers equal opportunity.

They insist equal outcome must be the goal, which is impossible simply because of human nature. Some people are industrious and some are lazy slobs. Each has consequences.

But setting the fairness argument aside for the moment, the Wall Street Journal recently reported in a page one article on the surprise results of the Bush tax cuts. "As America's rich get richer, the taxes they pay on their increasing income is yielding a windfall for the U.S. Treasury."

There has been a recent and

unexpected surge in tax receipts flooding into the Treasury. The Bush administration points to this as a "vindication of the 2001 and 2003 tax cuts that critics say favored the wealthy. And even opponents of the tax cuts acknowledge that the surge in unanticipated revenue is coming from the rich."

Tax receipts jumped in April by 13.5 percent from a year ago, "much of that increase coming from taxes on investments and other sources of income more important to the wealthy." In other words, people sold stock they might have otherwise held on to in order to lock in gains and take advantage of the favorable 15 percent rate on long-term capital gains.

So if the rich actually paid more tax due to the Bush tax cuts, what's not fair about that?

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Gregory J. Rummo is a syndicated columnist and businessman in Bergen County.



RUMMO

## Littell's tax 'fixes' won't do the job

## Editor's Mailbag

Editor:

Senator Littell is an honorable man who has generally served the state and his constituency with distinction. Nevertheless, I take exception to his article published in The Herald, which explained his "fixes" to the state's financial crisis and to the even larger problem regarding our obscenely unfair system of funding our schools primarily through property taxes.

His first proposal, to base school funding on performance, sounds horribly like another rendition of No Child Left Behind, in which a narrow system of assessment brings a narrowing of the curriculum, with the consequence that no student is served well. Schools have highly professional personnel who can assess student progress by multiple measures. The feds and the state should stay out of assessment and stay away from state-measured merit pay or merit funding in any form because they cannot manage it fairly and in the true interest of our kids.

Regarding his second proposal, I agree that Abbott funding should be based on more current information. Some state money could be saved by reducing the number of Abbott districts, but you can bet that property taxes would rise in those districts that are dropped from the list. It really isn't a solution at all.

I'm not sure about proposal three, to move school elections to November. Considering Mr. Littell's political leanings, he might think that this would somehow cause more budget defeats. I hope that, if we do this, it increases turnout among the parents of public school children.

Regarding proposition four, to remove the commissioner's right to invalidate school referendums: The Commissioner of Education is responsible for seeing that all districts meet state requirements for a thorough and efficient education. Too many politicians like Littell are more interested in "efficient" than they are in "thorough."

On proposal five, Littell and I are on the same page, provided he extends his idea about group purchasing to consolidating districts. One of the reasons our state education costs are so high is because we have duplicated services in over 600 districts. We'd be better off with 250 or 300.

Finally, as a New Jersey property tax payer who pays more than the state average, I take exception to his statement that a "tax shift is not the solution." A property tax as a primary source of funding is patently unfair, since it asks only a portion of our citizens to pay it.

State income, sales and possibly county income and sales taxes ask everyone to pay, so that the burden is shared. This kind of shift is long overdue. Property taxpayers carry an unfair portion of the burden. This is the largest problem, not school spending which, and though it is higher than in most states, it buys quality teachers and quality schools in a competitive part of this country. Littell's statement that tax shifting was tried before and failed is false. When Gov. Florio, in response to a court mandate, began to shift the tax burden from property taxes to state taxes, Whitman called him a tax raiser and on that basis became our governor. She promptly

cut taxes and state aid, ran up an illegal state deficit, and property taxes continued to rise to this day.

We could use some truth, not spin, and some courage, not political exploitation.

William R. Donald Jr., Ph.D.  
Glenwood

## Newton needs more than recreation

Editor:

This is in response to the letter from Helen Heckman titled "Newton group has impact."

I respect Mrs. Heckman's opinion but disagree with the assessment concerning development in Newton, lack of planning and especially the comment that it would be "silly" to assume that taxes would increase if funds are allocated to recreation in the form of land acquisition.

Over the past 14 years, I have seen significant and positive changes in Newton, including streetscape improvements, lighting and fields for recreation, road paving and growth in the commercial and residential sectors. Overall, it was balanced growth, some of which evolved, but much of it, including the improvements to our core business district, was certainly planned and mainly funded with state grants. Over the past year, the council has hired a planner to create a new master plan and employed the services of a visionary planner who will identify areas for new housing and commercial development and assess needs for additional recreation, parks, public facilities and more.

Mrs. Heckman criticizes the Newton Town Council concerning recreation, and is a member of a group whose sole purpose is for a better Newton. Their concern is commendable, but why is this group only focused on two specific properties and only one need — recreation? There are other equally important issues facing Newton: the need for a senior citizens/community center, affordable housing for seniors, additional parking in the downtown area, historic preservation, improved public transportation, new roadways for better traffic flow. If this group is truly concerned about Newton, why is their focus so limited?

Civic improvements are costly. Sometimes grants offset project costs, but there are always some costs that are assumed by the taxpayer. To state that it would be silly for taxpayers to think that there would be a significant increase in their taxes, or that there would be minimal cost associated with land acquisition for fields, is to make irresponsible and misleading statements to the taxpayers.

Let's consider the industrial site on Paterson Avenue, a prime focus of this group. As much as we all prefer parks, the real cost, including purchase, cleanup, demolition, creation of a parking lot, infrastructure improvements, possibly a restroom facility, etc., would be significant. The approximate cost of this project to a taxpayer with a house assessed at \$200,000 would be between \$300 and \$600 per year.

(The range allows for variations in the final purchase price, possible cleanup costs, interest rate for bonding, etc.) Over a payback period of 15 years, this taxpayer would pay \$4,500 to \$9,000 for this project alone — and that's assuming \$3 million is received in grants. Grants are highly competitive and not guaranteed, so the final costs could be higher. Maybe to someone who has a secure, high-paying job with full benefits paid for by the taxpayers, this amount seems silly; but to many others on fixed incomes, who can barely make ends meet, this could be a severe hardship, and I doubt they would consider a tax increase of this magnitude a silly matter.

The community at large wants to believe that this group is sincere, but the constant focus on one issue and a particular site have led many people to be more inclined to think that the issue of recreation is a political football in a game where the real goal is to stop a development. The development in question is also in my neighborhood, so I would be impacted as well.

Mrs. Heckman said that the group is squarely against this development, yet claims that the group wants a better Newton. I need to point out that the site is home to an under-utilized, run-down warehousing facility with peeling paint. Several years ago this facility was approved for an expanded industrial use, which would mean additional warehousing, parking lots, lighting and heavy commercial traffic. Presently it is not an aesthetically appealing site, and I would think that an upscale residential development with landscaping would be more pleasing to the surrounding residential community than an industrial expansion. Both developments would generate increased local traffic, but I tend to think the neighbors would prefer additional automobile traffic over increased heavy commercial trucking.

Finally, a conversion to a properly planned upscale residential use should improve the overall character of the neighborhood; it would be more consistent with the surrounding residential developments. The key for successful development to enhance a community is proper planning and working with developers. Our boards, commissions and this council will always listen to the concerns of our citizens and endeavor to do what is right for Newton.

Philip J. Diglio  
Mayor and Councilman  
Newton

## Rubber-stamping Bush agenda

Editor:

In the past few months, Sussex County — and, frankly, most of America — has begun to see the damage this nation has sustained at the hands of George W. Bush's theocratic regime. Now concerned citizens must band together to re-establish sound fiscal responsibility, get back to realistic domestic and foreign policy and, most of all,

repair the damage to this nation's image and reputation abroad.

The first step Sussex County can do is replace Scott Garrett as our congressman. This right wing fanatic has completely endorsed the same distorted vision of America that George W. Bush has perpetrated. Mr. Garrett complies with Bush's Christian-empowered governance by endorsing the torture of human beings in Guantanamo and inside CIA-run secret prisons, the illegal invasion of a sovereign country (Iraq), the illegal logging of citizen's calls without a court order, the illegal promulgation of a CIA agent's name, the flagrant disregard for established environmental regulations, etc. The list goes on and on.

The bottom line is Scott Garrett is a "rubber stamp" for these and other hack conservative policies.

James Ankrum  
Newton

## Seat-belt program waste of money

Editor:

Someone should explain basic facts about economics and public safety to the Newton Police Department. I am referring to the town's "Click It or Ticket" seat belt compliance initiative, a "show program" if ever there was one.

The maximum fine for a first-time seat belt offense is \$20, while speeding tickets start at \$85. Economics aside, it is obvious that seat belt use is a matter of personal, not public, safety. Newton residents pay the police to maintain order and uphold public safety, not to protect us from ourselves.

Under the right circumstances, feel-good programs like posting police officers at schools and "Click It or Ticket" may have some value. But these symbolic gestures do not absolve the police from performing their primary, statutory duties. I probably speak for a majority of Newton residents when I say that the cops should concentrate on enforcement directly related to crime and public safety. I am willing to take the chance that this may mean fewer resources to deal with incorrigible seat belt offenders and international terrorists.

Angelo DePalma  
Newton

## Woman thanks Fredon squad

Editor:

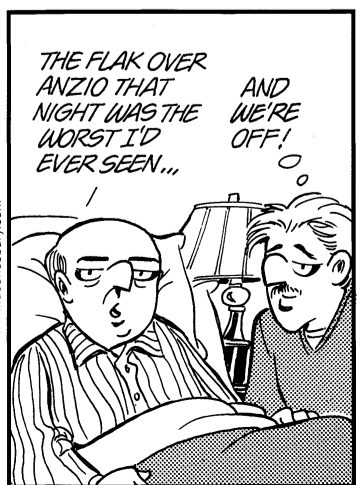
I would like to thank everyone who helped me on May 17. I fell in front of the Fredon School, while picking up my grandson. I fractured my right arm.

The mother and daughter coming out of the school went for help and called my daughter for me. My biggest concern was my grandson Nicholas. The Fredon Rescue Squad had to take me to the hospital. They took over my care and put Nick to work by letting him do the siren on the way to the hospital. That took his mind off me and we both felt much better.

Everyone at the school was very concerned and caring toward me. The squad members were the best.

Thanks again to everyone.  
Leslie A. Rintz  
Newton

## Doonesbury Flashbacks



BY GARRY TRUDEAU