



IN MY OPINION



Tommy Tomlinson

Lifestyles of the rich and outrageous

If you just arrived in Charlotte and checked out the news, we should probably add this disclaimer as a service to newcomers:

Not everyone around here is crazy. It's just that money makes people do crazy things.

On Thursday alone our paper had a story on the 10th anniversary of the Loomis Fargo heist, where an IQ-challenged band of crooks stole \$17.3 million and proceeded to spend it on high-end items such as breast implants.

We also had an update on the continuing saga of the guy who lost his leg and the other guy who found it inside a barbecue smoker. They are now in negotiations over whether to charge admission for people to see it.

And finally we had the latest word from Bruton Smith, our hometown version of Donald Trump, perfect in the role of Outrageous Rich Guy.

Bruton is - and I mean this in the best possible way - a character out of the comics. You can imagine steam blowing out of his ears when he gets mad and birds falling from trees when he yells.

He's worth \$1.5 billion, he owns Lowe's Motor Speedway, and he's not fond of asking for permission.

So he decided to start grading land for a drag strip near the speedway without telling anybody - not the Concord city planners and not the people who live in the neighborhood next door.

Now the neighborhood is fighting it, and the Concord City Council voted against it, and all this makes Smith so angry he's threatening to build a whole new speedway somewhere else.

Which leads to this question: When you're worth \$1.5 billion, why would you ever be angry?

If he gave away all his money at the rate of a million dollars a day - every single day - it would be more than four years before he went broke.

Maybe money can't buy happiness. But with that much money you ought to be able to rent it.

Let's play a game. Pretend you're on the Concord City Council and Bruton Smith asks permission to build a drag strip. Is there any chance you'd turn him down? He's done so much for the city that he could get approval for a nuclear test site.

Boys, we'll only be setting off three or four bombs a year. We'll make sure the wind is blowing away from Concord Mills.

But when Smith started clearing land without asking first, it became a matter of pride. The City Council couldn't let it go without looking like sheep. So they bared their teeth.

My guess is, this is exactly what Smith wanted. Not because he wants to move the speedway. Because he's bored. You know how a ballplayer will blow the tiniest slight all out of proportion to get motivated for a game?

This is the same thing. Bruton Smith meets thousands of people who do nothing but tell him yes. To get fired up, he needed somebody to tell him no.

So now he's good and mad. He'll get his drag strip. He'll get more money rolling in.

And he'll get to pretend that he won a fair fight.

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Transit Vote | CATS at a Crossroads

Tax-repeal debate accelerates

Both sides step up calls for support with advertising in final month before referendum

BY STEVE HARRISON
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With the Nov. 6 election one month away, both sides of the transit tax debate are stepping up their efforts to woo voters.

The Vote Against Repeal Committee, which ran its first television advertisement in early September, is planning to target dif-

ferent areas of Mecklenburg with different messages about why the transit tax should be kept. It recently distributed a flier in the African American community that focused on cuts to bus service if the tax is repealed.

Predominantly African American precincts west and northwest of uptown supported the tax in

1998, but a Charlotte Observer/WCNC News poll in August found that 51 percent of African American voters said they would vote to repeal. Some African Americans are upset that light rail isn't planned for minority areas in east and west Charlotte, and that the first phase of streetcar service in the areas won't begin until

2018.

Tax supporters have been trying to steer the debate towards the bus system. About 65 percent of the transit tax funds buses.

A group pushing repeal has been bolstered by a recent 30-second television advertisement by State Sen. Robert Pittenger, a Mecklenburg Republi-

can. Pittenger wants the General Assembly to allow Mecklenburg to use all or some of the transit tax for road projects. The money today is restricted to public trans-

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AD WATCH

6B | Get the facts about the ads.

Vance vs. Mallard Creek



DIEDRA LAIRD - dlaird@charlotteobserver.com

Vance cheerleaders Jenese Hendricks, Lauryn Collier and Taryn Bristol work on a sign for homecoming weekend Thursday afternoon at the school. Vance High's homecoming game starts at 7 p.m. today, when the Cougars face off against the Mallard Creek Mavericks.

Brother against brother

Start of football rivalry pits new school against old school

BY LINDSAY POLLARD
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Mallard Creek High freshman Brent Spisak has been preparing all season for tonight's football game. It's Vance High's homecoming, and the Cougars will face the Mallard Creek Mavericks.

Brent would've had the chance to play alongside his brother Daniel, a Vance senior. Instead, Daniel is now the opposition.

Tonight's contest is the first between Vance and the new school that took hundreds of its students. When Mallard Creek opened in northeast Charlotte this fall, seniors were allowed to stay at Vance, but about 250 sophomores and juniors had to transfer.

For many former Cougars - now Mallard Creek Mavericks - this was the game they circled first on their calendars.

Trash-talking started weeks ago, with Vance players taunting their old teammates. Mallard Creek, they say, will be crushed.

"It makes me want it more," said Mallard Creek sophomore Taylor Beamon, 15. He can't wait to beat Vance on his old turf, and

warned his former school: "Be prepared."

Brent Spisak, who'll turn 15 on Sunday, is part of Mallard Creek's first freshman class. It would be an early birthday present, he said, if the Mavericks win.

His brother, 17-year-old Daniel said that's a gift he won't hand over easily. "We're brothers at home," Daniel said, "but when we step on the field, it's business. Because I'm out there to win."

Vance Principal Phil Cauthen and Mallard Creek Principal Kit Rea said it's fun to watch the beginning stages of a new rivalry. They say the students will make it a clean fight.

Still, it didn't stop them from ribbing each other.

SEE RIVALRY | 6B

Game Time

The game starts at 7 tonight at Vance High's stadium (at IBM Drive and Neal Road). Vance Principal Phil Cauthen advises that fans arrive around 6:15 p.m. to get a ticket. Seating will be first come, first served.

Decision 2007 | Charlotte City Council At-large

Lassiter prides himself on consensus-building

BY VICTORIA CHERRIE
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Republican John Lassiter is a serious businessman who speaks bluntly about city issues.

Beneath the surface, his colleagues say, he's a witty man and an effective problem-solver.

Lassiter, 52, has served on the City Council since 2003 and said he's eager to continue another two years in his at-large seat. He chairs the economic development committee and said he's proud of its accomplishments.

Among them are the public and private partnerships that have led to construction of the Wachovia Cultural Arts Facilities campus in uptown. Lassiter also is working with the city's economic development staff and residents on a plan to revive Eastland Mall.

An attorney and small busi-



Lassiter

Meet the Candidates

This week, the Observer will profile the eight at-large City Council candidates. The stories will be archived throughout the campaign on www.charlotte.com/politics.

- Monday: Raphael Basisa
- Tuesday: Susan Burgess
- Wednesday: Jack Flynn
- Thursday: Anthony Foxx
- Today: John Lassiter
- Saturday: Edwin Peacock
- Sunday: Dan Ramirez
- Monday: David Romero

ness owner, Lassiter is known for his patience. He is not easily rattled and prides himself on working with all political camps to get things done.

SEE AT-LARGE | 2B

LEARN MORE ABOUT HIM
2B | John Lassiter's biography.

Look ... Up in the Sky



DAVIE HINSHAW - dhinshaw@charlotteobserver.com

A raindrop in the bucket

Pedestrians along College Street in uptown Charlotte shield themselves from afternoon rain showers Thursday.

About 0.45 inches of rain fell at Charlotte/Douglas International Airport Thursday afternoon, a welcome relief to parched lawns across the region.

"We had a decent show, but it is really a drop in the bucket," said National Weather Service meteorologist Bryan McAvoy.

Normally, the region would have seen about 33.8 inches by this time in the year. Only 21.8 inches had fallen as of Thursday. That means we'd need another 26 days of Thursday's half-inch of rain to catch up. — APRIL BETHEA

1A | MORE DROUGHT COVERAGE

MECKLENBURG

James urges: Declare saggy pants indecent

A Mecklenburg County commissioner wants Charlotte, home to conservative bankers' ties and pearl-wearing women, to become the latest community banning saggy pants.

You know the pants: Slung so low on the thigh that they're about to fall off - and yes, they're still considered "on" when they're exposing several inches of underwear.

Talk about outlawing the fashion rose in recent weeks when some citizens complained and cited a handful of other communities that have banned them. Critics say those laws unfairly target young African American men who favor the style.

Calling it the "Pull Em Up" ordinance, commissioner Bill James said he will suggest at the board's Oct. 16 that the county and city health and safety committees recommend making "saggy pants" part of what's defined as indecent exposure.

Those committees would then report back to the city and county in four weeks. — EMILY S. ACHENBAUM