

Opinions

The First Amendment

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Let federal workers eat cake

I think the American public should know how poor the pundits Rush Limbaugh and Ann Coulter live. They both live in Palm Beach just a hop skip and jump from the president. I don't think they have to worry about their mortgage, food, utility bills and are not pawning their jewelry to pay bills.
Stanley Cohen, Fairview

Asheville sent a heartwarming message

I am writing to thank Asheville residents for sharing the true meaning of Christmas. There was a generous response to pack shoe box gifts for Operation Christmas Child. Locally we collected 19,000 shoe box gifts.

The shoe boxes gifts filled with fun toys, school supplies and hygiene items will demonstrate God's love to children affected by poverty, disease and disasters. Since 1993, Operation Christmas Child has delivered more than 157 million gift-filled shoe boxes to children in more than 160 countries and territories.

Volunteers at the local drop off locations loved hearing stories from the community about why they love donating to these children. Many families have donated year after year.

Shoe box gifts can be packed any time. Continue the spirit of love in the upcoming Valentine season. Go online and pack a personalized shoe box gift at samaritanspurse.org/buildonline. Select toys and gifts, write a note; sending love to a child in need. For many recipients, it may be the first gift they have ever received. Thank you again to everyone who participated in this project. These gifts, packed with love, send a message to children worldwide that they are loved and not forgotten.

Margaret Thomas, Swannanoa

Where's Mitch, Richard and Thom?

The vast majority of Americans acknowledge that there is a toddler in the White House. He has been a little bully all his life, so he is not going to change his behavior now. However, President Trump, with his many flaws, could be curtailed if the Senate would do its job.

The government shutdown was caused by Trump, as he took guidance from the font of all knowledge, Fox News, but it continues because the Senate, run by McConnell and assisted by the likes of Burr and Tillis, will not perform its constitutional duty as an equal and separate power to the executive branch. McConnell's refusal to bring any legislation to a vote in the Senate that the President isn't guaranteed to sign, is a clear dereliction of duty.

So, we have a toddler in the White House; the babysitter, Mitch, nowhere to be found; and other supposed adults, like Burr and Tillis, who are either looking the other way, or worse yet, encouraging the toddler to rant and rave.

Meanwhile, we have almost a million people not being paid and a countless number of other people and businesses affected by the partial shutdown as these government workers can no longer afford their goods and services. All this, not for national security, but because talk show pundits tell the toddler that he must build a wall. It's time for intelligent leadership in America and the GOP has shown it cannot provide it.
Larry Heyl, Asheville

Trump is only keeping his promise

This government shutdown is not about a border wall. It's not about whether illegals can climb over or tunnel under a wall. It's not about whether a wall should be concrete or steel. It's not about how much it costs. It's nothing but pure politics and a total disregard for the wellbeing of federal employees.

Democrats know that building a wall and securing the Southern border was the centerpiece of Trump's campaign for office. Americans elected him based on that promise. Democrats know if they can prevent him from fulfilling that promise, it will give them something to run on in 2020, especially since they now have nothing.

With all the promises Trump has already kept, Democrats fear that allowing him to keep his signature promise will assuredly guarantee his reelection. This is the real reason they are willing to keep the government shutdown, despite their past support for walls and border security.

Don't be fooled by the Democrat's rhetoric! This is a power struggle over the office of the presidency and nothing more. Democrats are revealing their hypocrisy. Trump is simply doing what he promised to do. Thank God he has Congressman Mark Meadows' with him in this struggle.

Mike Summey, Asheville



Standing up for Aunt Mary Ann's health care



Your Turn
Sen. Terry Van Duyn
Guest columnist

My Aunt Mary Ann lived in Madison County, and suffered with congestive heart failure. A lung cancer survivor, the aggressive treatment that cured her cancer left her with a damaged heart. She was nevertheless always pleasant and upbeat. An avid crafter, she quilted security blankets for sick children, knitted caps for premature babies, and loved her weekly sewing circle at the Beech Glen Community Center (Their group won a 1st place prize one year at the Asheville Quilt Show!). Mary Ann had an enormously generous heart, but keeping it beating required complicated medical tests, monitoring, and an occasional rush to the ER when things got out of balance.

When Mission Health announced they were going to be acquired by for-profit HCA, I thought of people like my aunt. Mission operates five rural hospitals. Would a for-profit hospital system have the same commitment to keeping rural hospitals open that our local, non-profit system had? Rural hospitals struggle to provide healthcare to a population that is disproportionately uninsured. If they couldn't generate a profit, what would happen to the people they served?

A group in Yancey County called SEARCH had similar concerns. They came together after the Labor and Delivery Department closed at Blue Ridge Regional Hospital in Spruce Pine and were already organized when the Mission-HCA acquisition was announced. They viscerally understood what it means to live in rural North Carolina and lose access to healthcare services.

SEARCH closely examined the Mission-HCA sales agreement. When a non-profit is sold to a for-profit entity, the proceeds of the sale remain with a non-profit, in this case, the newly formed Dogwood Foundation. Dogwood would ensure that HCA complied with the provisions of the sale agreement and would establish a process to use the income generated from the proceeds of the sale, \$1.5 billion, to address underlying causes of illness, otherwise known as social determinants of health, throughout the region.

SEARCH members had serious concerns that the HCA-Mission sales agreement did not adequately protect Mission's rural hospitals. Their concerns seemed justified when members of the Dogwood Foundation Board were announced. Although the initial appointees to the board were an impressive group of community-minded civic leaders, they were almost entirely from Buncombe County and nearly all had been former Mission Health board members. To the SEARCH folks in Yancey County, that was a cause for alarm. Without representation from communities

served by Mission's rural hospitals, they felt those hospitals were more vulnerable to closure.

Others in the community had additional concerns. While talented business and legal minds would be necessary to ensure compliance with the sales agreement, many community members were concerned that the Dogwood Board lacked the diversity to adequately reflect the entire region. After all, women and minorities were seriously underrepresented on the board.

The Health Equity Coalition was born of these concerns. Together with REACH, HEC organized town halls, wrote letters-to-the-editor, called their local officials, and got online to make sure Josh Stein knew about their issues. As the Attorney General, he had to approve the sale.

Their advocacy worked! Attorney General Josh Stein took the public input he received seriously, and tasked his staff to address each issue. HCA, Mission Health, and the Dogwood Foundation came to the table, open and willing to negotiate a better deal. As a result, protection for our rural hospitals was extended from five years to ten years. HCA also committed to building a new Angel Medical Center in Franklin, and a much-needed, 120-bed outpatient behavioral health facility in Asheville.

And I'm relieved to say the updated agreement addresses my own concerns about the services people like my Aunt Mary Ann depend on. Providing additional oversight by an independent monitor and the Attorney General makes it more likely rural hospitals will remain open.

Furthermore, the Dogwood Foundation is committed to an open and inclusive process around their grant making. There will be a national search for an executive director, better ethnic, gender and rural representation on the board, and public meetings across the region to gather input about how it can fulfill its mission to improve health.

The revised sales agreement demonstrates how good things happen when public officials listen to their constituents and stakeholders are willing to work together for a common goal. I am so proud to live in a region united in our quest for a vibrant and healthy Western North Carolina.

This is how good governance works.
Sen. Terry Van Duyn (D-Buncombe) is a member of the NC Senate representing District 49.

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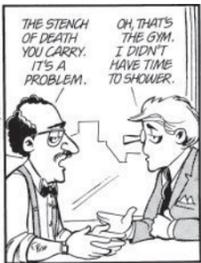
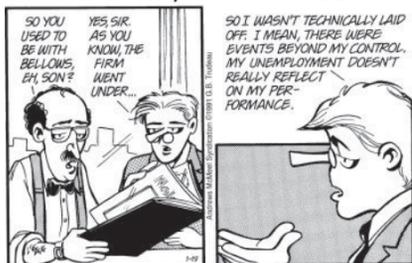
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For information: Call Casey Blake at 828-232-5841 or email cblake@citizen-times.com.

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