

OPINION

LOCAL COLUMN

Toe River Health District: Fact vs. Fiction

What do we all want in Mitchell County? Do we want tourism? A strong economy? Do we want businesses to move here and bring jobs? Do we want quality, affordable housing? Do we want healthy residents with adequate resources to live a good life? I believe we all want those things for the good of every-



Diane CREEK

one in Mitchell County. Your health department is a significant part of that goal. The Mitchell

County Health Department has been part of a three-county district with Avery and Yancey counties since 1980. The health department has 14 employees who are dedicated to providing excellent healthcare, health education, family support services and environmental health services. Although most of the time the public doesn't know it, your health department touches every person in this county, whether it's providing medical care, health education or inspecting the restaurants in which you eat.

The Wednesday, May

29, article in the Mitchell News-Journal had some inaccuracies I'd like to address.

Claim: Toe River Health District, or TRHD, requested \$462,000 from Mitchell County for the fiscal year 2019-20.

Fact: TRHD requested \$434,910 plus \$17,269, which will give an average 3 percent pay increase for Mitchell County Health Department employees, for a total request of \$452,179.

Claim: The budget request is a 30 percent increase.

Fact: This is the first year the commissioners have seen the actual cost of the Mitchell County Health Department. Before 2018, TRHD had one budget with the three counties combined. It was impossible to know what an individual county's budget was. The budget requests were based on a formula using each county's population, but those requests were never accurate.

In spring of 2018, the county manager from each county, along with the commissioners who represent each of the counties on our board of health, met and decided our finance officer needed to develop a separate budget for each county, and that is what the commissioners see now. I would argue these budgets are much lower than they

would have been in prior years. Since 2016, we have cut or lowered many of our expenses. We have moved our administration offices, changed various contracts for services to cheaper companies and we've left positions vacant.

Claim: The increase in requested funding comes with no increase in services offered.

Fact: The services offered at all three county health departments are virtually identical. TRHD is increasing services by increasing our primary care services, providing Commercial Driver's License physicals, providing Commercial Driver's license drug tests (coming soon), providing Medicine Assisted Treatment (coming soon), providing pre-employment drug screens and we're starting a mobile clinic in all three counties.

Avery County has given us a retired transportation van we are making into a mobile clinic, and we have requested from Mitchell and Yancey counties to provide us retired transportation vans so we can start service in those counties as well.

Claim: It doesn't make a difference for Mitchell County to take its budget allocation out of its portion of the reserves from the sale of Home Health.

Fact: This will make a

difference. Mitchell County's share of the reserve is currently \$712,945.

The request for the current year (2018-19) was \$319,554, but the commissioners cut that amount by \$59,023 so the actual budget for the current year is \$260,531, which will result in a deficit for this current year. Potentially they could spend all of their \$712,945 reserve by June 30, 2020. Our concern is by spending all of their reserves there won't be any funding in case of a rainy day.

Claim: All three counties should pay the same share each year and should receive consistent services across the board.

Fact: Yancey County's budget request this year was \$504,832, and Avery's was \$460,565 compared to Mitchell's \$452,179. Services are the same except Yancey has School Health Centers that stay within their funding, and Yancey and Mitchell have Healthy Families, which also stay within their funding.

We have heard the complaint that Mitchell County has paid more than its fair share over the years. Since the TRHD was formed 39 years ago, Avery County has allocated \$6,738,421; Yancey \$6,619,378; and Mitchell has allocated \$6,395,172.

Claim: When everyone comes to the table, we'll talk.

Fact: We would love to have a meeting to talk.

Claim: Mitchell County taxpayers shouldn't have to suffer.

Fact: Mitchell County is investigating the option of taking the Mitchell County Health Department out of the TRHD. This has severe consequences for the people of Mitchell County.

There are services only a Public Health Department can provide by state law. If Mitchell County is absorbed by another health district that doesn't share county borders, services will decrease.

If the Mitchell County Board of Commissioners manages the health district, they will need to make arrangements for a health director or consolidate the health department with other county services under one director.

The district model makes sense from economic and service delivery standpoints. The district model affords administrative costs to be divided between the counties involved, which lowers the cost for individual counties.

The district model allows the health departments to run with a lower number of staff since staff can be moved from county to county as needed and in an emergency (communicable disease outbreak or natural disaster) staff from all

counties can provide extra manpower and support.

Mitchell County Health Department provided the following services for residents in 2018: medical services for approximately 2,000 residents who visited the health department more than 3,000 times, investigated 133 communicable diseases, 577 immunizations, 1,603 WIC visits, and our nurses and environmental health staff investigated 17 animal bites environmental health had 1,272 activities in its onsite program performed 372 well-water activities, 116 water samples were taken for the public to make sure their water is safe, and 385 food and lodging activities took place.

We provide health education and other services at all schools in Mitchell County along with various health fairs, business health fairs and other events.

We love our county, we're dedicated to serving all residents of Mitchell County and we want to continue doing so.

Please don't hesitate to call or email if you have questions.

Diane Creek is Director of the Toe River Health District. She can be reached by calling 828-688-2371 or by email at diane.creek@toeriverhealth.org.

COLUMN

Memorial Day education

I spent Memorial Day at a pool with my family.

Just a few days later, I had a lengthy, fascinating discussion with close family friend and United States Military Veteran Michael Davis.

Now that's quite a contrast.

Davis, who lives in Spruce Pine with his wife, Cheryl, and three dogs, talked with me for nearly three hours about the state of local veterans affairs. He also broke down the history of the Mitchell County Veterans Memorial in front of the Mitchell County Courthouse in Bakersville.

The memorial, which features a bench and a podium dedicated to local veterans, just turned six years old.

I was fascinated as I listened to Davis recount the history of the memorial.

As Davis recalls, he walked out of the courthouse one day and realized the open area in front of the courthouse was far too bare. He thought an area dedicated to remembering military service members as well as emergency first responders would be a perfect use of the space.



Cory SPIERS

Not long after, Davis talked about the idea with then-Mitchell

County Commissioner Joe Street.

Street loved the idea and asked Davis to create a rough draft and bring it to then-Mitchell County Manager and current Bakersville Mayor Chuck Vines.

Vines was also intrigued by the idea and supported it entirely, but he warned Davis similar monuments had been planned before in that location and each ran into roadblocks.

Davis was persistent.

Vines suggested taking the idea to James Henline. The two sat down and created a formal proposal complete with a blueprint and cost estimates.

Davis brought the updated plans back to Vines, who told Davis to take it to the Mitchell County Commissioners.

Davis said he also brought the idea before the Disabled American Veterans of Mitchell County, but the group's leadership shied away from the idea, telling Davis it was too expensive and money was an issue.

Davis assured them he could get the money.

Shortly after, he found himself in the regular January meeting of the Mitchell County Commissioners and got the funding.

The Commissioners moved to fund the project using county money and the rest, as they say, is history.

Davis says the Mitchell County Disabled American Veterans group was excited to hear of his success after the fact. In fact, to this day, there is a brick at the monument with their organization's name chiseled on it.

Davis was quick to remind me, however, the monument doesn't belong to one veterans organization, and it certainly doesn't belong to any one person.

If you're a Mitchell County taxpayer, it belongs to you.

The monument is a constant reminder of the sacrifices of many local veterans and was erected because of the hard work and persistence of those mentioned in this column, as well as many others.

Davis and his wife wanted to help give back to a community they love and to other local veterans. With plenty of patience, cooperation and teamwork, that goal was realized.

There's no plaque at the memorial for any individual other than the veterans and Davis says that's the way it was always intended.

As we reflect this time of year for those who paid the ultimate cost fighting for our country, I'd like to say thank you to Davis, Vines, Street, Henline and the rest of the people who helped make the Mitchell County monument possible.

Most importantly, however, I'd also say thank you to those who have served or are serving our great nation in any capacity.

Cory Spiers is a reporter for the Mitchell News-Journal. He can be reached by email at reporter1@mitchellnews.com.

ASK DENISE

Family member makes racist comments

Editor's note: Writer's answers do not reflect those of the Mitchell News-Journal and are not meant to replace medical or mental health care.

DEAR DENISE: I have a family member that uses racial remarks and often is mean-spirited against groups of people. I cringe at some of the comments he makes. He



Denise HARRISON

knows we don't like it, but he does it anyway. How can I make him stop?

DEAR READER: You can't. I know that's not the answer you were hoping for, but the sad reality is we cannot control other people's behaviors, we can only control our reactions to these behaviors.

I am sure you have made it clear to this person you do not approve of his comments, but apparently, he chooses to continue with talking this way. What you can control is what you do next. Perhaps,

if the next time he started talking that way, you got up and walked away (and kept this a consistent response), he would get the message you are no longer going to tolerate this. But, maybe he won't care what anyone thinks.

Either way, by leaving and not subjecting yourself to his tirade any longer, you will feel better.

Good luck.

DEAR DENISE: I live with my boyfriend, and we have a baby together. We both have decent-paying jobs, and both of us have strong work ethics and seldom take sick time. Our pay is pretty even, with him sometimes getting some overtime and making a little more.

I love this man and want to spend my life with him. It seems, however, as if all the household responsibilities fall on me. I am tired, too, when I get home from work. On weekends he likes to go hang out with his family. They cook for him and pet and pamper him – he is an only child. This leaves me with all the childcare and chores. He will come home from them in the evening, wanting to be romantic and carefree. I am worn out by then and ill as can be. Is he ever going to change? What

can I do?

DEAR READER: As I told the person who wrote in before you, we cannot make others change. You can only control you. From what I gather by what you have written, he has been taken care of most of his life, and deep inside, he expects it now as well. The action you can take is to stop enabling him. If he expects a nice dinner at night, tell him certain nights of the week are his nights to cook. Whatever he wants to eat, it will be up to him to cook it. Do not give in and cook it yourself – he won't starve.

Tell him he has to begin doing his laundry, you don't have time to do it all. When he runs out of clothes, he will start doing it. Will he be happy about it?

Probably not, and will whine and complain, hoping to wear you down, so you resume the chore. Don't.

Be persistent and consistent, and hopefully, he will see the light.

Best wishes.

Denise Harrison is a Licensed Counselor in Spruce Pine. Send questions to questionsandlettersmn@gmail.com or call and leave a message at 828-467-0037. Submissions are anonymous.

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