

DRIVETIME MAHATMA



FRANK FELLONE

Upgrading U.S. 67/167 on horizon

Dear Mahatma: Have you driven U.S. 67/167 from Jacksonville to Cabot and beyond? It's filled with potholes, cracks, patches and rough places. I heard they were going to widen it, but right now I would be satisfied if they would just fill the potholes and resurface. Any plans to do anything at all? — Merle

Dear Merle: The Mahatma recently went this way on a drive to Batesville. There is plenty of work around Bald Knob, which is welcome, but your observation on the stretch from Jacksonville to Cabot is well taken.

When you refer to "they," surely you mean the people at the Arkansas Highway and Transportation Department. We pitched this to them (*Them*, title of a 1950s sci-fi movie about giant nuclear ants) and must now advise you to hold onto your hat.

Because, yes, there is work on the horizon. And the horizon is way out there. Call it a 10-year construction sentence.

Here's what they — Danny Straessle of the Highway Department — tell us.

Work will begin in the spring just north of the Main Street overpass in Jacksonville. It will end at the Arkansas 5 exit in Cabot. This is not "a simple asphalt overlay." The highway is concrete. Where needed, the pavement will be replaced in sections 6 feet long and 12 feet wide, the latter being an entire lane width. Each of these sections will have a full depth replacement. Expect the project to be done by the end of summer. Work will normally be done from 7 p.m. to 5 a.m. to lessen the effect on traffic.

There's more.

Bids will be let in the summer to replace the Main Street and Redmond Road overpasses in Jacksonville. This work will be part of the widening of the highway to three lanes on each side. The project will start where the current three lanes narrow to two and will widen the stretch between the bridges. This bridge-to-bridge extravaganza could take up to two years.

There's more.

As the years go by, U.S. 67/167 will be widened from Main Street to Vandenberg Boulevard. As more years go by, the highway will be widened from Vandenberg Boulevard to Arkansas 5.

Straessle respectfully asks for a shameless plug for IDrive Arkansas, the website that tells people about construction projects and road conditions. We respectfully agree to the plug, and wish all the best to those who commute from Cabot to Jacksonville to Little Rock over the next decade.

That last sentence sounded smug. All of us who live north of the river and work in downtown Little Rock will get our comeuppance when the Broadway Bridge is replaced. At last look, bids will be opened in about a month. Replacement will take from 18 months to two years.

Three highway bridges now span the river in Our Town. When that number turns into two bridges, and there is an accident on either one, we are toast.

Where does a guy buy a reliable used boat?

Mahatma@arkansasonline.com

State flu toll topping 50 seen possible

CLAUDIA LAUER
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE
Arkansas Department of Health officials Friday discussed proposed changes to immunization requirements for children and gave an update on the state's ongoing flu season.

Dirk Haselow, state epidemiologist with the Health Department, told the House and Senate Public Health, Welfare

and Labor committees that he wouldn't be surprised if the number of flu deaths this year exceeds 50 by the time flu season ends.

"We believe we have hit the peak, and we are starting on the downside of the flu season," Haselow said. "Typically, when we see deaths from the flu, we see the majority in the latter half of the season because it takes time

for flu to cause some damage to the lining of the lungs and for people to develop a second bacterial infection, which brings about their death."

He said the state had its worst flu season in 35 years last year, with 61 recorded deaths.

"I don't have a crystal ball, but I would not be surprised if our death count is over 50, even though we are at 25

now," he said. Haselow said the flu has killed two children, one only 2 months old. The oldest to die was 77 years old. He said the department is investigating a number of additional deaths to determine whether they were flu-related.

Senate committee Chairman Sen. Cecile Bledsoe, R-Rogers, asked why this year's flu outbreak was proving to

be more fatal among people between the ages of 25 and 50. The average age of people who died from the illness last year was 69, while the average so far this year is 49, Haselow said.

"The 2009 H1N1 pandemic virus, which we are seeing now, has a predilection for people in the younger age groups," he said. "Clearly it's

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Out-of-this-world exhibit



Richard Theilig, an employee of the William F. Laman Public Library System, hangs photographs taken from outer space while preparing "The Evolving Universe" exhibit. The Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History exhibit opens today at the North Little Rock library's main branch at 2801 Orange St.

Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/BENJAMIN KRAIN

LR scoutmaster given rare honor

Valor cited in guiding wrong-way motorist to stop in 2012

NOEL OMAN
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE
A Boy Scouts leader was honored Friday with the organization's highest valor award for single-handedly guiding to safety a confused motorist who was barreling down the wrong way on Interstate 40 almost two years ago.

Barry Bray, 55, the scoutmaster of Troop 12 at Pulaske Heights United Methodist Church in Little Rock, is



Bray credited with maneuvering ahead of the other motorist and forcing him to stop, likely saving the motorist and fellow travelers from serious injury or death.

Bray was formally presented with the Honor Medal

With Crossed Palms on Friday night at the Quapaw Area Council's annual awards banquet at the First Pentecostal Church of North Little Rock. The council serves more than 10,000 Cub Scouts, Boy Scouts and Venturers in 39 counties in Arkansas.

The award "may be awarded in exceptional cases to a youth member or adult leader who has demonstrated unusual heroism and extraordi-

nary skill or resourcefulness in saving or attempting to save a life at extreme risk to self," according to the Boy Scouts of America's national website.

The medal is rarely conferred, with fewer than 300 recipients nationwide since the medals recognition program was redesigned and renamed in 1923.

Bill Price, who is program

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PB policeman shot in arm by colleague

Officer said unaware of team in shop

JOHN WORTHEN
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE
PINE BLUFF — The Pine Bluff Police Department is investigating a Friday morning shooting involving two of its officers in which one shot the other.

Pine Bluff Police Lt. David Price said an officer shot another officer in the arm at a Watson Chapel shopping area tobacco store during a surveillance operation. Their names are not being released.

Price said a graveyard-shift patrol unit was conducting regular business checks when it found an unsecured door at the Tobacco Outlet at 3800 S. Camden Road. The patrol officer was

unaware that other officers were inside the business, Price said.

"When the patrol officer entered the business to check it, he came into contact with a dark figure, which was one of the surveillance officers, holding a weapon," Price said in a news release.

"A shot was fired and the surveillance officer was struck in the arm. The wound was not life threatening, and the officer was treated and released from the Jefferson Regional Medical Center."

Price said the surveillance team was at the business because of recent burglaries there.

The officer who fired the

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Agency offers amnesty for parole absconders

CATHY FRYE
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE
Parolees often stop reporting to their officers because they don't have transportation or the money to pay their fines and fees.

In an effort to get such absconders back under supervision, the Department of Community Correction is offering amnesty from now until the end of March.

As long as parolees haven't garnered new felony

charges, they can report to their officers without fear of being jailed or punished, said Dina Tyler, a deputy director for the Community Correction Department.

If money is an issue, officers will work out a payment plan for those who have fallen behind, she added.

At this time, 2,200 parolees are considered to be evading supervision, which means at least 30 days have

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Brand-new officer



Lillian Smith pins a badge on her husband, Nicholas Smith, shortly after he and 32 other recruits were sworn in Friday as Little Rock police officers at The Church at Rock Creek in Little Rock.

Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/STEPHEN B. THORNTON

LR anti-obesity program gets \$25,000

SARAH D. WIRE
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE
WASHINGTON — Little Rock received a \$25,000 grant this week that will go toward expanding the city's child obesity prevention program, Mayor Mark Stodola said. Stodola received the sec-

ond-place award from the American Beverage Association while at the United States Conference of Mayors' winter meeting in Washington, D.C.

Little Rock received second place in the medium-city category for its "Love Your

School" Childhood Obesity Intervention and Prevention Initiative.

The program is in place in seven high-poverty elementary schools in the Little Rock School District. Students learn about healthy

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County in peril of grant default

Animal shelter's opening at issue

JOHN WORTHEN
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Phillips County is in danger of defaulting on a \$100,000 federal grant agreement if it can't open and operate a newly constructed animal shelter there, county officials said Friday.

According to the guidelines of the U.S. Agriculture Department's Rural Grant Program, any project that uses its federal funds must be completed and operational or a default will occur. If that happens, the county would no longer receive USDA grants, which often involve rural development programs and are used to purchase patrol cars and other county equipment, USDA officials said.

Phillips County Judge Don Gentry said the county finished construction of the animal shelter in July, but an additional \$25,000 is needed before it can open. Those funds would go toward hiring cleaning crews and purchasing supplies such as dog food and medicine.

In addition to the federal grant, \$50,000 in state money and \$33,000 in county money were used to complete the project, Gentry said.

Gentry said the Quorum Court has declined six times to pass a measure appropriating the additional expenditure. A count of who has cast votes for and against the funding was not available at the Phillips County clerk's office Friday.

The issue will again be up for a vote when the body meets Feb. 11.

Justice of the Peace Lenora Marshall said she has voted against the funding with the understanding the county couldn't afford to let go of the money without compromising its workers and public services.

Marshall said she is an animal lover, has several dogs and is "all for an animal shelter in Phillips County. But we have to prioritize. I voted no because we had the understanding that we were in dire need financially."

Marshall said she was unaware the county would default on a federal grant if the shelter doesn't open.

"If that's the case, then we need to take a long look at this again, because we certainly don't want to be in a situation where we default on anything," she said.

Gentry said the county isn't "rolling in money" but could afford to appropriate the \$25,000 needed to open the shelter.

Gloria Higginbotham,

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