

Superintendent recommends getting insurance coverage locally

By Dee Ann Campbell
The Choctaw Sun

BUTLER – A recommendation to bring the insurance held by the Choctaw Co. Board of Education back to an agency located within the county was a subject of much discussion during the April meeting of the BOE on Tuesday.

Supt. of Education Sue Moore recommended to the Board that the insurance policy currently being held by the school system be transferred back to the Dansby and Evans agency in Butler once the policy

comes up for renewal in October. The move, stated Moore, would be an effort to keep the school system's business within the county whenever possible.

The policy is currently being held by Deas Insurance Agency in Grove Hill.

"Are we not taking bids?" Ronald Hampton wanted to know.

"We checked, and Dansby and Evans are the only ones in the county who will insure buses," Moore said.

"There are a lot of agencies that insure buses," BOE member Wayne Taylor responded.

"Are they at a less price than what we have?" asked Turk Phillips.

"Dansby and Evans carries the same insurance that we have now," Moore explained. "It would be the same policy. We would just be using an agency in the county."

Taylor responded by giving background information about the decision to transfer the policy to the Grove Hill agency. Taylor, who is an insurance agent with Insurance Express in Gilbertown, had held the BOE's policy until shortly after he was elected to the school board. At that time, he gave up

the policy and recommended to the board that they employ the services of insurance agent Don Wright, who works with the Deas agency.

"I gave it up to a person who could best service it," he stated. "It's the same company. They are online, have a fully-computerized office, and they do a great job."

"Dansby and Evans is owned by the Skippers out of Jackson," Taylor added. "They are not in the county."

Taylor added that the agency's office in Butler only employs two local residents and that they are the only connec-

tion the agency has to the county.

With the policy up for renewal on October 1, BOE Chairman Isaac Johnson asked for more time to research the issue.

"I wanted to make sure that we did business in Choctaw County," Moore responded. "None of the others here will carry bus insurance. We called 5 major companies in Choctaw County. They are the only ones with a business in the county that carries bus insurance."

No motion was made on Moore's recommendation, and the issue was tabled.

Davis holds Town Hall meeting

By Tommy Campbell
The Choctaw Sun

BUTLER – U.S. Congressman Artur Davis said at a Town Hall meeting Monday evening that he is working hard trying to get an obscure federal rule waived so that a new Critical Access Hospital can be built in Butler.

He also said that federal money will hopefully be available this year for four sewer-related projects in Choctaw County, and that he and his staff are doing what they can to meet with U.S. Postal Service officials in an effort to keep the Needham Post Office open.

Davis spoke to a crowd of about 50 at the Choctaw County Courthouse.

Lisman Mayor Thomas Jackson asked Davis about the war in Iraq.

"It seems that the Bush administration has failed to hear the outcry of the American people, and I would like to know what is Congress doing to stop funding for the war?" Jackson asked.

Davis admitted that he sees the war on a different plane than President Bush and U.S. Senators Richard Shelby and Jeff Sessions.

"I think we have done our business in Iraq and its time to get out," Davis said. "We've been there for four years and one month, longer than America was involved in World War Two, and longer than we were involved in our own Civil War."

Davis said the war in Iraq is now the federal government's third largest expenditure.

"We have spent money building more Iraqi roads, fixing sewage problems, and building hospitals and schools than we have here in the Black Belt," Davis said. "He said he has four pending requests right now for funding for sewer systems in Choctaw County. "When I see us spending \$750 billion in Iraq, I have to ask, what are we fighting for?" he said. "People on both sides of that fight are Islamic, the Shiites and Sunnis, and they have had disputes among themselves for centuries and they have hated Americans for years."

Davis said he voted for a House resolution calling for American troops to be brought home in 2008 because he feels there is no other option.

"I think it's wrong to say that we are aiding and abetting the enemy because we passed the resolution that we did," he said.

Moving on to infrastructure issues, Davis said that the four-laning

of U.S. Hwy. 84, which runs through the south part of Choctaw County, is in the hands of the State Dept. of Transportation.

"Interestingly, there have not been a lot of requests at the federal level for us to get involved," he said. "The state came to us about four-laning U.S. 80 several years ago, but has not pressed as hard for 84."

Davis said he has never seen a request for an appropriation for four-laning U.S. 84.

In the last federal highway budget, Davis said, Congress looked at which road projects were the closest to completion and which would serve the most people.

"U.S. 80 fit that description so that's where we put our money," he said. "The next time we get a federal highway bill, in 2009, we will look at other priorities."

But, he said, the decision on how and where federal highway dollars are spent largely lies with the Transportation Director in Montgomery.

Davis said he also supports extending I-85 from Montgomery to Meridian, Miss., but admitted that the \$1.2 billion project is years away from being fully funded, much less completed.

"We will keep trying, but don't you for one second think that the answer to all of our economic problems is getting I-85 extended," he cautioned. "If we can't squeeze out the money for sewer treatment facilities, we can't adequately make use of a four-lane highway."

Davis said that health care, schools, clean drinking water, and other issues may be far more important to a community than access to a super-highway.

"Same thing goes for health care," he said. "We are trying to change the rules to get a critical access hospital built here, and you can bet that if people can't get medical care, they won't locate in a community."

If you add all of those Black Belt needs together — sewage, hospitals, water, and schools — it would be less expensive than extending I-85 he said.

"We sometimes we get really caught up in wanting to change this 'big thing' when changing a lot of 'little things' would have more of an impact that would improve the overall quality of life here," he said.

Responding to a question about illegal immigrants from Gilbertown resident Paul McDougal, Davis said that there are currently an estimated 12-

13 million people who are here without legal documentation.

"Here's the catch ... what do you do about it?" he asked. "You can't go door to door in Hispanic neighborhoods without warrants and due process of law, so how do you find them?"

Davis said the flow of illegal immigrants needs to be stopped, but other than building the proposed 750-mile long wall along the Rio Grande Valley — which Davis says he supports — no one in Washington, of either party, has yet come up with a workable plan to do anything about the problem.

"We need to get tougher on employers who hire these people, and on the people who pay thousands of dollars to go and illegally smuggle these people into America," he said.

However, once those illegal immigrants are here, get jobs, and have families, Davis said he does not favor sending them back.

"They ought to have a shot at being 'guest workers,'" he said. "If you don't agree with that, then tell me what your plan would be to find these 12-14 million folks and what you would do about it?"

Butler Senior Center Director Jessie Wright asked Davis about the future of Medicaid and Medicare.

"We are not spending enough on Medicaid to keep it afloat in Alabama, that's a fact," Davis said. "There is a \$70 million shortfall."

The life expectancy among all age groups is rising, which was not foreseen when Medicare was established in 1965.

"People are living longer, but it costs money," he said. "Medicare was built for people who weren't expected to live past their mid 70's."

Neither of those programs are about to go bankrupt, Davis said, but as people live longer it will be more difficult to fund the programs.

In regard to the proposed Critical Access Hospital that Rush Hospital wants to build in Choctaw County, Davis said that an obscure federal regulation requires that the facility not be located within 35 miles of another hospital.

"What we are trying to do is change that rule to make it 15 miles, to make it possible to build a hospital here," he said.

The rules changed last year to make it easier for some states to get a waiver, but Alabama wasn't one of them, he said.

"We are trying to identify the folks who are still

hurting like we are, and I believe this is something we can get done," he said.

Being on the powerful Ways and Means Committee gives him an advantage, he said. "Interestingly, none of the eight counties in Alabama that are currently without a hospital would qualify under this '35-mile rule' because all of them are closer than 35 miles to the next closest hospital."

While he would not commit to a time frame, Davis said he has made getting that rule waived — so that construction can proceed on Choctaw County's hospital — a legislative priority.

Brenda Tucker, case manager and clinic coordinator with the West Alabama Mental Health Center asked Davis for help in getting funding for a mobile unit so that psychiatrists could visit in the Black Belt counties.

Davis agreed that undiagnosed mental problems are a huge problem among Alabama's youth.

"Many of the disciplinary problems in schools are caused by children who have serious, undiagnosed mental issues, and we just deal with it by kicking them out," Davis said.

When it comes to getting better infrastructure in Choctaw County's rural towns, Gilbertown Mayor Bobby Graham said he just needed to hear from Davis' own lips a promise that he is committed to helping get that infrastructure.

Davis said Graham has his assurance that he is committed.

"One of the main problems in getting federal dollars for a sewage treatment plant, is that these grants all require a local matching amount," he said. "Most are turned down because the applicant can't name the match and specify the amount of the money."

All four of the pending grant requests for sewer-related projects in Choctaw County have acceptable matches, he said, and Davis said he hopes to be able to get federal money for all four within the year.

But, he added, the State of Alabama has to do a better job of stepping up to the plate to help local communities.

"We spend big bucks to get the big plants to come to our state, and I am for all of that, but if we can afford billions in incentives for big multinational companies, why can't we afford \$300,000 for the folks in Forkland to get sewer?" he said.

Members of a local Boy Scout troop posted the American and Alabama flags, and Rev. O.L. Sealey gave the opening prayer.

Commissioners, Congressman get involved to help save Needham's Post Office

By Tommy Campbell
The Choctaw Sun

BUTLER – Probate Judge D'Wayne May and members of the Choctaw County Commission on Monday threw their support behind the citizens of the Town of Needham in trying to keep the Needham Post Office from being closed.

U.S. Rep. Artur Davis, who represents Choctaw County in the Seventh Congressional District of Alabama, was in Butler for a Town Hall Meeting on Monday evening and also pledged to do everything in his power to try to convince the U.S. Postal Service to keep the facility in service.

The matter came to light a few weeks ago when Mayor Quinnie Donald was told by a USPS employee that plans were being made to close the Post Office, which has been in operation since 1910.

"They're trying to close our post office, and we want to ask you for help," he said to the Congressman.

Petitions containing the signatures of several hundred Needham-area residents who depend on the Post Office for their mail delivery were presented to the Congressman.

"I first learned about this last week," Davis said. "My staff has been working on it and we are going to set up a meeting with the postal service office that regulates this area and try to get to the bottom of it. I can't promise you that we can make them do anything but we will certainly do what we can."

The Choctaw Sun last week contacted the offices of Davis, and U.S. Senators Richard Shelby and Jeff Sessions for help in the matter.

On Monday, the Sun received a reply from Shelby's office containing a letter from Elizabeth A. Johnson, District Manager for Mississippi Customer Service and Sales with the U.S. Postal Service, who said that it is the agency's policy to evaluate all facilities whenever a postmaster retires to determine if the Post Office is providing services that are commensurate with the needs of the community.

"We are in the process of the evaluation, therefore, no decision of any type has been made at this time," Johnson said.

When former postmaster Arthur Broadhead retired last fall, Melinda Covington was named Officer In Charge by the Jackson, Mississippi-based regional office which oversees this district of Alabama.

Currently, the Post Office serves more than 40 customers with post office boxes, and more than 270 families on a rural route.

In the County Commission's proclamation, May noted that the Post Office has stood the test of time and performs a vital function within the community.

Dedication for Toxey's new Walking Trail this Sunday

TOXEY – A grand opening celebration and ribbon cutting for the new Toxey Walking Trail will be held on Sunday, April 15, 2007 at 2 p.m. with a reception to follow at the historic, renovated Toxey Masonic Lodge.

"We are really proud of our park and glad to have this park and walking trail completed for all to enjoy", said current Mayor Jeanette Carney.

"We welcome everyone to join us for the grand opening of the Toxey Walking Trail at the Toxey Town Park", said current Council Member and former Mayor Rodney Oglesby.

The Park includes not only the quarter-mile walking trail, but picnic tables and the restored Toxey Masonic Lodge as well. This setting will be used this year for the Toxey Reunion that is scheduled for the following week (Saturday, April 21st.)

ED. NOTE: Due to a sudden deluge of news items, several articles and photos had to be held until next week's issue. We apologize ... sometimes there are just more news events than we have pages for! The *Sun* thanks you for your patience and we thank you, too, for making us Choctaw County's #1 newspaper (and your only home-owned newspaper!)

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