



Special to the Democrat-Gazette/ BURTON MOORE

The White River Bridge at Clarendon could be the highlight of a cycling route through the Delta if it's allowed to be repurposed.

Can we save it? Still life in Clarendon Bridge

PORTER BRIGGS
SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Guest writer

A years-long effort to save the 2¼-mile 1931 Clarendon Bridge is coming to an end. A judge has given us until May 29 to save it, and if we fail, it will be torn down.

A few years ago, we formed a citizens group to save the bridge from destruction and “repurpose” it as a hiking and biking trail. Thousands of citizens have supported our effort. But our government wants it demolished. And our government has the power and the money. We know the men and women in these agencies of government, and all of them are honorable adversaries.

We want to save the bridge to build tourism in the Delta. The bridge would be the highlight of the cycling route through the Delta between Little Rock and the Mississippi River Trail that is being built along the Mississippi between St. Louis and New Orleans. In Arkansas, we have seen the impact of bicycling with the Razorback Trail, the new Delta Heritage Trail, the Big Dam Bridge and other trails being planned.

All 2¼ miles of the bridge go right through the wilds of the 550,000-acre Big Woods that envelop the Cache and White rivers. And the beauty of this bridge is sublime.

The picture accompanying this column was made this week by Burton Moore, a resident of Clarendon. His family has lived around Clarendon for generations, and Burt, his wife and two sons have led our efforts to save the bridge. They know what its destruction would mean—a huge, ugly gash in our beloved Delta.

Here are the facts of the bridge: An \$11.3 million contract to demolish it has been let to a company in Mississippi but has been suspended until the May 29 court-ordered suspension is lifted. To prepare for our alternative plan of repurposing the bridge for tourism, we retained Kimley-Horn, a nationwide engineering design firm with 2,800 employees in 75 U.S. offices. The estimate for a complete renovation of the bridge is \$5,376,000, \$5 million of which we would have automatic access to from the same source as the demolition funds—and our repurposing plan would be \$6 million less federal spending than demolition. The maintenance cost would be \$60,000 annually, which our group has ensured will be paid. No city, county, state or federal funds would be used to maintain the bridge.

Parts of the bridge that obstructed the flow of water when the rivers have one of their frequent floods have been removed. The bridge now minimally obstructs the flow of water. The bridge will not have any negative impact on farming, hunting or fishing. Those are the basic facts.

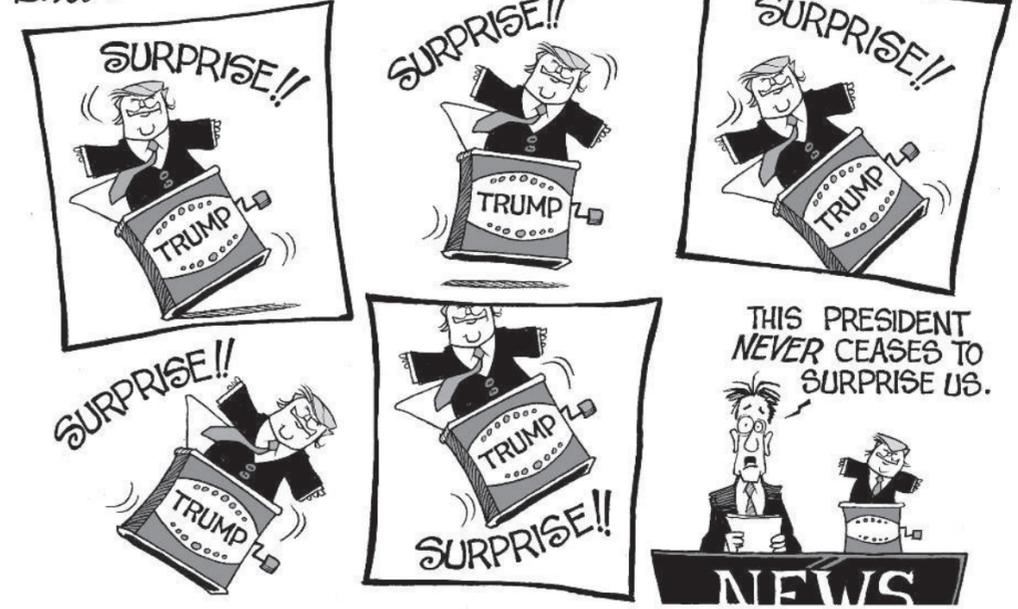
We are at the end of our effort. We have about 65 days before the court-ordered suspension of the demolition is lifted. Unless there is a change from the government, demolition will begin the day after the court order is lifted. As this great paper said in an editorial on Feb. 17, “... we don't understand why the government needs to tear down the Old White River Bridge in Clarendon. It seems that maybe the paperwork was in order and somebody signed it in the right place and the government went into motion. And like a battleship, government doesn't often turn on a dime. Call it momentum.” Amen.

Our group, Friends of the Historic White River Bridge at Clarendon, is asking Arkansas' members of Congress to help us change the demolition decision so we can repurpose the bridge. We will be talking with each of them. We are particularly hopeful that Sen. John Boozman will help us. He serves as chairman of the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works Subcommittee on Fisheries, Water, and Wildlife that has oversight of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the agency that is leading the effort to demolish the Clarendon Bridge. Jim Stinson, the mayor of Clarendon, has asked Senator Boozman to meet with him.

That we could see this bridge demolished by our government spending \$11.3 million is an aesthetic insult. All that we value in its beauty and permanence would be ripped from our heritage. Arkansas citizens want this bridge saved. If you can help or have questions, please email me at porter@porterbriggs.com. You can contribute to our effort at bit.ly/whiteriverbridge.

Porter Briggs is a resident of Little Rock and vice president of the Board of the Friends of the Historic White River Bridge at Clarendon, a 501(c)3 nonprofit.

LEADER 3-21 Dist by Wash. Post/Writers Group



The GIF conundrum

Notice flashed of an email from state Democratic Party Chairman Michael John Gray. The email, it was said, would contain a statement that Gray was releasing about the resignation of Jefferson County Judge Hank Wilkins, a Democrat.

I thought: Why? Then I clicked on the email and read the statement.

More intensely, I thought: Why? Wilkins, of Pine Bluff, is formerly a state legislator. Prosecutor-released information in a federal courtroom in Missouri had revealed that indicted lobbyist Rusty Cranford, operating in both Arkansas and Missouri, had—by the admission of the unindicted and previously un-implicated Wilkins—provided Wilkins, when he was a legislator, with \$100,000 in what were called bribes. The payments were made through a church Wilkins pastored.

As a legislator authorized to direct state General Improvement Funds from the state surplus—an authority extended equally to all legislators at the time—Wilkins had steered \$50,000 to a behavioral health center in Monticello with which Cranford was associated. Was there some compelling moral reason or political consideration that required Gray, in presumed behalf of the state Democratic Party, to provide two cents on one man's alleged corruption through the lamentably absurd practice of legislators divvying up state surplus funds equally among themselves to distribute by their arbitrary authority in a process brazenly inviting corruption?

There wasn't. But, all the stranger, Gray's statement didn't denounce Wilkins or deplore the GIF.

Instead it essentially asked ... isn't it sad what's happened because of a few bad actors—Republicans, mainly, by the way—to this program by which rural legislators could take money home to their small, poor districts that stood no chance of getting nice



John Brummett

things otherwise?

Here's the statement Gray put out: “What we have seen come out about Hank Wilkins is unfortunate and frustrating. It gets to the heart of the issue of corruption in the political scene. For instance, take the General Improvement Fund, which was intended for lawmakers—especially those in rural communities who know their areas best—to provide necessary funds to their schools, fire departments and vital community services. From the Ecclesia scandal to Sen. [Jake] Files' kickback scheme, we've seen these funds misused, which I think does a real disservice to those actually out there trying to better their communities.”

Gray is a farmer and legislator who represents a small rural House district in eastern Arkansas. One of his primary goals as state chairman is to try to reconnect state Democrats with his rural neighbors. He has told me before that he thinks the GIF is a perfectly acceptable vehicle for that.

I got him on the phone and asked him what the heck. I contended that his statement, unnecessary and ill-advised though I deemed it to be, should have begun with a personal denunciation of Wilkins' admitted behavior—not a lamentation—and followed immediately with a call for either elimination or, as I have suggested, reform of the GIF process.

He said “why” was a fair question and that the statement could have been “cleaned up.”

But he said the GIF is not the problem. He said the abusers are the problem. I'd heard something like that about guns and shooters.

I've acknowledged in this space that small rural communities need

help from the state for worthy local projects such as volunteer fire departments or community centers. I've contended we should set up a system by which legislators would appropriate general sums for such purposes to state agencies that would then set up strict, objective and transparent application processes for awarding grants perhaps that would require small matches from the local communities.

Gray told me he didn't like that so much. He said he understood and accepted that we need reform; the courts have ruled to that effect. But he said losing local legislator input in a process run entirely by the governor was not the answer.

He said equalizing the distribution of available money geographically—in the way it was equalized by giving legislators authority over equal shares—remained a worthy idea.

He said a better way to go might be setting up special decision-making panels for different kinds of grants that would include legislative and public members and award grants publicly based at least in part on arguments advanced in open hearings by the affected local legislators.

We were getting away from the principle and into the details.

Could Gray agree that his statement should have deplored Wilkins' action and called at least for transparency and accountability in a reformed GIF rather than focusing on a defense of it?

Sure, yes, he said. It is true that these small communities need state-government help for fire protection or facilities that cities and larger towns can more easily provide for themselves.

But it's also true that making it easy for legislators to steal is something Democrats ought to find simple enough to oppose unambiguously.

John Brummett, whose column appears regularly in the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, is a member of the Arkansas Writers' Hall of Fame. Email him at jbrummett@arkansasonline.com. Read his @johnbrummett Twitter feed.

LETTERS

What, Trump worry?

If President Trump is innocent, why is he seemingly so worried?

As one who devotes too much time to politics, I have to ask: If President Trump is innocent, why has he done all the things he has to detract from the investigation—and why does it seem he and his minions are doing everything they can to torpedo it?

Again, as one who has watched too much TV (network and cable) and read too many articles (and several of the books-a-week that are coming out), I am aware of the reasons most of President Trump's lawyers and many of his supporters reportedly are afraid to have him questioned under oath. They (and I) know what will happen. When asked a straightforward question about something the prosecutors already have irrefutable information about, he will undoubtedly lie.

Since becoming president, Trump has been proven to have lied over 2,000 times (latest count). I don't know about you, but I would not buy a used car from him—but would from Robert Mueller or Rod Rosenstein.

JIM HAMMONS
Fayetteville

was there getting his driver's license for the first time. My observation was that it was likely a “Restricted License,” as his mother was with him. Applications were made, the correct pages of paper were exchanged and his photo was taken. While waiting for the photo to process, he had to read and sign a form. He turned to his mother and said he did not know how to sign his name. After struggling, he had to ask her, “How do I make a cursive F?”

A few days later, I observed a young man trying to read a handwritten note that was composed in cursive. He absolutely could not read it!

Have we regressed to the point where young people will revert to “making their mark,” as did the poorly educated people early in the last century? Have we devolved to the point that we cannot communicate with the handwritten word and proper grammar? Are we going to be reduced to communicate with universal signs and emojis, poor spelling and worse grammar?

My, my, my, how far we've progressed. I guess as long as we're teaching computer coding we'll be OK.

R.T. REYNOLDS
Hot Springs

The state of education

Remember a few years back, the educated “eggheads” with all the letters behind their names, who run the current debacle called the education system in America and who have not spent time in the classroom, decided there was no need to teach cursive writing to students?

Well, as my Grandma would have said, “the chickens have come home to roost.”

Last month, I was at the Revenue Office to buy the license and pay sales tax on a vehicle. A young man

Well-expressed letter

After reading part of Mike Masterson's recent give-Trump-a-chance column (couldn't read all of it without getting too upset), I knew I wanted to write a comment, but didn't quite know where to start or how to word it so that it wouldn't be too ugly.

Then my agonizing over it ended when I read Alex Mironoff's letter. My heartfelt thanks, Mr. Mironoff. Well done!

ROSE GOVAR
Maumelle

LETTERS

Good solutions seen

Russ Melton's March 11 guest column provided good solutions to the gun control issue. To get the needed changes, we must attack the gun issue from the Second Amendment down. I remind you that the Constitution is a living document, and thankfully so—the founders didn't address slavery, didn't give the vote to non-property owners, nor did they franchise women.

On guns: Let's drop the “assault weapons” terminology. The primary reason for gun slaughter (not gun death, a serious but separate issue) is the ability of the shooter—no, the slaughterer—to use multi-round magazines and clips that can be preloaded and carried as “spares,” giving the slaughterer a nearly unlimited number of rounds to fire into the innocent flesh of his human targets.

So, put all of the fixes to gun slaughter into law. Train teachers, retired cops, veterans? You bet, but that doesn't protect crowds from the slaughter of military-style weapons. Outlaw all weapons in the “assault weapon” and the “semiautomatic” cat-

egories? Sure, but before the ink has dried the arms industry will come up with new multi-round innovations. Enhanced background checks? Of course, but make the buyer pay the added cost for the local, state, and national agency checks required. And legislate and enforce longer wait times while the enhanced background checks are run—agencies don't have the resources to meet a “get-it-quick” deadline.

Meanwhile, plan to march with and protect these great kids as they work for the changes we want and the country needs. A multifaceted approach, including a “repair and replace” fix to the Second Amendment itself, will force the NRA to burn money while we use the renewable energy of our resolution to fix this, and let's start now. This old Republican can't again endure the heartbreak of semiautomatic slaughter. Can you?

CLIFF HARRISON
Hot Springs Village

Problem of violence

I applaud the young people who are trying to address the problem of

violence in our schools, although I'm not sure it should be done on school time. However, there are questions they should ask themselves, namely: Have you ever bullied anyone; have you witnessed someone being bullied; if so, what did you do about it; have you ever seen someone who you thought was friendless or in emotional distress and did you do anything to help them?

To counselors, psychiatrists, school resource officers: If something or someone has been called to your attention, what did you do about it?

To our legislators: Assault weapons are just that—for assault. Get rid of them. Change the age to 21 for buying guns of any kind. Tighten up regulations and background checks.

Our world is becoming a scary place. Be kind to one another.

JUDY JONES
Hot Springs Village



Where to send your letters

The Democrat-Gazette welcomes your opinions. Not all letters received can be published or acknowledged. Clarity, brevity and originality are particularly valued, and letters must be suitable for publication in a family newspaper. Handwritten letters must be legible. Statements of fact are checked for accuracy; letters will be edited and may be republished in all media.

Letters and guest columns become the property of the Democrat-Gazette and cannot be returned. Letters from nonresidents, copyrighted material, poetry, form letters, and anonymous letters cannot be used.

Submit letters of fewer than 300 words to Voices, Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, P.O. Box 2221, Little Rock, Ark., 72203; by fax at (501) 372-4765; by email at voices@arkansasonline.com; or via our website, www.arkansasonline.com/contact/voicesform. Please sign your letter and include your home address and daytime telephone number for verification. Writers are limited to one letter per 30 days.

The contents of the Voices page, including columns and cartoons, do not reflect the opinions of the Democrat-Gazette, which are found only in the editorial column of the editorial page. The views expressed by columnists are their own.