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Friday
July 9, 2010

Morning News

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The Voice of the Pee Dee

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Is gas tax next?

By Robert Kittle

Morning News Columbia Bureau
rkittle@florencenews.com

COLUMBIA — South Carolina's cigarette tax just went up July 1 for the first time in more than 30 years. Could the state gasoline tax be next?

The state gasoline tax is 16 cents a gallon, which is lowest in the Southeast and fourth-lowest in the nation.

"Everybody pretty much is familiar with how many increases we've had in the postal rate in the past several years," S.C. Transportation Secretary Buck Limehouse said. "Well, picture that against the DOT's funding of no increases since 1987.

"If we'd had an inflationary factor — and I'm not advocating this much increase — gas tax would've gone up by 50 cents a gallon just on the inflation," he said.

That means the gasoline tax hasn't been able to keep up with the rising cost of the materials needed to repair the state's roads and bridges.

"Our roads are kind of at a tipping point. If we don't do something now, we're going to go down fast," Limehouse said.

See TAX, 5A



FILE/JOHN D. RUSSELL

Willis Construction employee Quincy Lyde mans a road sign in 2007, during a lane closure on West Hoffmyer Road, in Darlington County. The closure is part of a state Department of Transportation Safety Project to widen a 17 mile stretch of the road between Florence and Darlington Counties.

Attorney: Funding request a conflict of interest

By Jim Faile

The (Hartsville) Messenger
jfaile@florencenews.com

DARLINGTON — Darlington County Councilwoman Wilhelmina Johnson's effort to get \$35,000 in public funding from Darlington County Council to help bail the Darlington County Cultural Realism Complex (CRC) Inc., of which she is executive director, out of foreclosure proceedings constitutes a conflict of interest as defined by the State Ethics Reform Act, County Attorney Jim Cox said.

Cox said it's improper for Johnson to even bring up the subject to council or to participate in any discussions about it because of her connection to CRC.

Cox's comments came during Tuesday's council meeting in response to a request from Johnson for clarification on conflict of interest laws after her funding request drew charges of a conflict of interest.

Johnson first made the request for the funding to council during a meeting June 7 but got no response from any other members. When she tried to bring the issue up again during council's June 21 meeting to have it placed on the agenda for the next meeting, Chairman Billy Baldwin ruled her request and comments out of order.

The Ethics Reform Act prohibits public officials from using their office to obtain an economic interest for themselves, immediate family members or any business or organization with which they are associated. It also prohibits public officials from using their office to influence decisions affecting themselves, immediate family members, or any business or organization with which they are associated.

The law requires that in cases where a public official may find himself or herself in a position requiring action on a decision in such a case to prepare a written statement explaining the potential conflict of interest and submit it to the presiding officer of the public body (except for members of the General Assembly who submit their statements to their respective Ethics Committee), in this case Darlington County Council. The presiding officer is then required to make the statement a part of the official minutes of the meeting and to excuse the member from participating in any votes, deliberations or other actions related to the matter.

Cox said under the statute, Johnson's interest in CRC does not have to be only financial. Being closely tied to an organization can constitute an interest that rises to the level of conflict of interest, he said.

"Mrs. Johnson is the

See CONFLICT, 5A

Health care system under new ownership

From staff, local reports

Name: Marion Regional Healthcare System
Established: 1997
Address: U.S. 76 between Marion and Mullins
CEO: Donald H. Lloyd
Employees: More than 600
Specialty: Health care services
Website: www.marioncountymedical.com

MARION — Marion Regional Healthcare System has been acquired by a subsidiary of Community Health Systems Inc., the parent company of Carolinas Hospital System in Florence and four other hospitals in South Carolina, including two in the Pee Dee.

The acquisition includes 124-bed Marion County Medical Center, which, effective Wednesday, will operate as Marion Regional Hospital. The transaction also includes 92-bed Mullins Nursing Center, and nine local physician practices and clinics: Advanced Medical Associates Internal Medicine, Aynor Medical Center, Marion County Surgical Center, Marion Medical Center OB/GYN, Marion Medical Group Internal Medicine, Marion Pediatrics, Mullins Surgical Associates, Pee Dee Pediatrics and Total Family Care.

"Through our new affiliation, we will have access to the management expertise and capital resources necessary to succeed and grow in what has become a challenging environment for stand-alone community hospitals," Marion Regional Healthcare System CEO Don Lloyd said in a press release issued late Wednesday night. "After carefully considering our strategic options, we are very

pleased to complete this transaction and we can now look forward to long-term success and growth."

At the end of March, the Marion Regional Healthcare System Board of Trustees entered into a non-binding agreement with a subsidiary of Community Health Systems Inc. The parties involved in the agreement entered a period of exclusive negotiation for the ownership transfer of all Marion Regional Healthcare System assets.

Marion Regional Healthcare System is a private, nonprofit organization that operates Marion County Medical Center, Aynor Medical Center and the Mullins Nursing Center. It also operates nine hospital-owned practices providing pediatric care, internal medicine, general surgery, family medicine, and obstetrics and gynecology.

Marion Regional Healthcare System is one of the largest employers in Marion County, with more than 600 employees. It has 30 active physicians, 90

See HEALTH CARE, 5A

Breeder accused of cruelty

By Patricia Burkett

Morning News
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TIMMONSVILLE — A Timmonsville magistrate has cited a resident for cruelty to animals.

Judge James Lynch issued the citation to Doc Smith during a hearing Thursday morning.

Animal control officials said Smith had several pit bulls tethered with large chains ordinarily used for towing vehicles and other items.

Smith's neighbors also told animal control officials they saw one of Smith's dogs maul and eat puppies on two separate occasions.

Florence County Environmental Services Officer Herbie Christmas said his office was notified by Smith's neighbors of possible animal neglect May 6. Christmas said one of his officers visited Smith's home and told him to get smaller chains for the animals.

After a subsequent call from Smith's neighbor, Robert L. Stevens, an animal control officer again visited Smith's home May 28 and saw Smith still had large chains on the animals.

Stevens also informed officers of the maulings he said he and his wife had witnessed and wrote a letter to the editor of the Morning News pleading for help from the community in the situation.

"Again we heard something at the back fence, I went back there and exactly the same thing was happening," Stevens said. "I'm posi-



STAFF/PATRICIA BURKETT

Pictured Thursday is the only remaining dog at a Timmonsville residence whose owner was cited for cruelty to animals after investigators said he made them wear heavy chains and kept a dangerous pit bull.

tive it was the same dog that was doing it, chewing on another puppy. At that point, the dog was chewing on the puppy's head, its stomach and I felt so helpless because there was nothing I could do to stop it."

On May 28, animal control officials removed four of the six dogs that were on Smith's property and issued him a citation for animal cruelty.

Several hearings took place leading up to the final hearing on the matter Thursday morning.

In one of the hearings, Stevens testified about what he'd seen in Smith's yard. On Thursday, Florence County Council secretary and retired veterinarian Dr. Morris Anderson testified.

"A chain this large and

heavy will cause permanent and irreparable damage to the neck," Anderson testified.

Anderson told the judge the nature of the actions against the animals was reprehensible and even offered to pay Smith's fine if he agreed to wear one of the chains around his neck for one month.

"The thing that struck me in that hearing in there was that this man said, 'I love my dogs.' If that's an example of love, God help us," Anderson said.

Christmas said he's seen instances like this before and said the large chains are often used to bulk up the dogs before they are sold.

"We think it's to try to

See BREEDER, 5A

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