

I-295

Our View: Holding up the loop's construction should be out of the question.

That annoying failure to communicate has struck again. But it's more than annoying. It could inflict decades of damage to people who live and work here, and to the national defense mission of the Army's most important base. State highway officials and politicians need to talk about and understand that.

We're talking about Fort Bragg, and the snarl that at least temporarily derailed construction of the road that is the keystone of the post's transportation plan.

Declining state revenue and political squabbling have halted progress on Fayetteville's Outer Loop, Interstate 295. That is unfortunate and intolerable.

The next segment of the loop is the most essential, the one that ties together the transportation changes that will avert gridlock around Fort Bragg when 40,000 new residents come to town.

In less than three years, the Army's Forces and Reserve commands will relocate here. Daily traffic through Fort Bragg's gates will increase from the present 120,000 a day to as many as 180,000 a day. Because of security concerns, Bragg Boulevard on-post will be closed to civilian traffic and rerouted onto an expanded Murchison Road. The key to smooth traffic flow is the extension of I-295 from its present termination at Ramsey Street, to its proposed connection to Murchison Road, Bragg Boulevard and the All American Freeway.

But that's only half the story. Here's the other:

Fort Bragg's commanding generals have pushed for the Outer Loop since it first appeared on the state's transportation plan, in 1978. Bragg has become the Army's biggest, most important domestic post, but unlike its peers, it's the only one without direct connection to the interstate highway system. That means convoys of soldiers and equipment must pass through cities and towns on secondary roads to reach Interstate 95.

Col. David Fox, Bragg's garrison commander, says that, "Since 9/11, we've moved over 700 million tons of equipment on I-95 ... to ports all over the East Coast." That will only increase when new commands, and many more soldiers, arrive.

There's more. Fort Bragg also is a major FEMA staging area for responses to natural disasters. Disaster-bound convoys are similarly stymied. So are North Carolina-based Coast Guard personnel, who ride out coastal hurricanes at Bragg before rushing back to the coast for rescue and cleanup.

The Army and Department of Defense have already committed more than \$50 million for transportation changes around Fort Bragg, and have even begun clearing the land for the I-295 extension.

Forces Command alone will add an estimated \$2.9 billion to the state's gross domestic product. Who, at any level of government, wants to disrupt that by holding up a \$270 million highway project? No one, we hope.

DOCTOR REVIEWS

Our View: Restaurant rating service turns its critical eye on N.C. doctors.

Restaurateurs and merchants alike have long understood that the best way to build a thriving business is word of mouth. It's a lesson physicians are about to learn as well. Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina plans to use a rating guide to help its members choose a doctor.

Zagat — the same folks who do the restaurant guide — will produce an online health care survey that will equip consumers with useful information.

Doctors will be graded on the level of trust they instill in their patients, the effectiveness of their communication skills, their availability and office atmosphere. Zagat will not assign a rating on the quality of care. That can be too subjective a matter. Some people want to be coddled. Others want a doctor who's a straight-shooter.

In this age of blogging and online spewing, opinions about doctors and quality of care already abound. What Zagat offers is an objective model of evaluation.

North Carolina is one of the fastest-growing states. Zagat will offer newcomers relocating to our communities an efficient way to wind through the medical maze. The information should be useful whether you are looking for a pediatrician who can handle a child with special needs or a cardiologist

who doesn't golf on Fridays.

Americans have been reluctant to consider health care a product — in part because doctors have resisted being lumped together with hairdressers, chefs or other service-oriented professionals.

They make a good argument. If a surgeon botches things up, it's usually far more serious than if the chef does. A bad meal is rarely life-threatening.

But with the rising cost of health care comes a heightened awareness of the quality of services provided. Doctors and their staff are unaccustomed to being held accountable for things such as the wait time a patient spends flipping through old magazines in the waiting room.

Restaurant service has been held to a higher standard. People who won't wait 30 minutes for a meal at their favorite eatery don't think twice about waiting an hour at their doctor's office.

Nobody wants a doctor to rush carelessly through an appointment in order to up his or her standing, but having the Zagat Health Survey online will add an accountability that the system lacks.

As doctors are so often fond of saying, the better informed you are, the better decisions you can make about your own health care.

OPINION



2009's story is renewal

LOS ANGELES — It was the worst of years. It was the best of years. For Americans, both beaten down and hopeful at the same time, this should be, has to be, a time for renewal. New problems, new challenges, a new president, a new generation.

The Associated Press' annual list of the top news stories gives a bare-bones account of where we are as 2008 ends. The No. 2 through No. 10 stories include seven depressing or frightening events:

"2. Economic Meltdown; 3. Oil Prices; 4. Iraq; 5. Beijing Olympics; 6. Chinese Earthquake; 8. Mumbai Terrorism; 10. Russia-Georgia War."

No. 1, of course, was the best news — about a man preaching hope: the election of Barack Obama.

The AP list was compiled by interviewing 150 newspaper editors and news directors. One of them, Linda Grist Cunningham of the Rockford (Ill.) Register Star, said: "As far as I am concerned, there were only two stories this year. Global economy collapses (sending every country into financial, political and personal chaos) and Obama elected U.S. president, changing the way America does business — financial, political and personal."

The AP lead emphasizes that Obama is the first African-American elected to the country's highest office. But that is already yesterday's news — so 2008. What is more important now is that Obama represents a new generation. It was only as the presidential campaign was ending that the nation realized the depth of its chaos and crisis. The housing bubble — people, including one of my children, losing their



RICHARD REEVES

homes morphed into the revelation that Wall Street had underestimated risk in a greedy race that threatened free-market capitalism itself. And the collapse finally discredited the myth that government actually was regulating the dangers of uncontrolled markets and financial manipulators like characters in an updated, hyper version of the gamblers in "Guys and Dolls."

Getting out of the way

Now, some of us, part of what history will almost certainly call a failed generation, will have to get out of the way: Many of us turned out to be more the problem than the solution. We are all in this together, but, like immigrants on the Lower East Side a hundred years ago, we are dependent on our children because they speak the new language and many of us cannot.

Newt Gingrich, who was certainly part of the problem as a savage and ignorant partisan politician, said as much recently:

"I think the country is so tired right now of a style of Republican attack politics that has become a caricature of itself. ... It's ineffective against Barack Obama right now. The country is faced with serious problems and is about to have a brand-new president. You'd have to be irrational not to want the new

president to succeed."

But Barack Obama, a gifted politician and persuasive speaker, cannot do much alone. He has to govern in the style of Franklin D. Roosevelt, calling out that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself. His job, after Jan. 20, is to bring out the best in the American people — and that is pretty good stuff.

Twenty years ago, I was in Singapore at a conference on the world economy. The founder of that prosperous little canton, Lee Kuan Yew, rose to give the United States as harsh a tongue-lashing as I've ever heard, essentially attacking us for having no real economic plan for the future, calling us a soft people who would inevitably lose the war against the planning and work ethic of advanced Asian systems, which then did not include China and its ability to organize both Olympics and cheap manufacturing based on new electronic technologies and cheap labor.

Lee was, of course, right about some of that. But the next day, William Safire, then a New York Times columnist, rebutted the Singapore argument, saying that millions of American kids working in garages and basements and libraries would overwhelm the best of planned economies.

Safire was right. Those kids are now taking over, and we will be better for it. America was always about hope and renewal. If I am right about that, 2009 will end as a Happy New Year.

Richard Reeves is a syndicated columnist. Readers may write to him at Universal Press Syndicate, 4520 Main St., Kansas City, MO 64111.

LETTERS TO THE OBSERVER

Unions are about power and money

This ex-Yankee can tell you from experience what the Smithfield union vote will mean for the region.

Sweat shops spawned unions to improve workers' lives. It got out of hand when some realized how much power and money could be had by controlling unions.

Politicians and unions are bedfellows. Barney Frank has publicly announced the auto bailout is not for industry, but for the automakers' union.

Durabuilt Manufacturing Co. invented school wall lockers. Nearly every school in the country had them. World War II and the union moved in, plus competition from nonunion companies. Dad and I worked there. I was in charge of loading freight cars to ship products, loading two per day. Realizing we could do more, we loaded four cars per day. We got the product out; the company got paid.

The union made us go back to the old way of loading, cutting production and profit. Durabuilt went bankrupt. Dad's pension went down the drain.

Union bricklayers in Connecticut lay 600 bricks and go home with a full day's pay. Union construction workers report to work, one drop of rain falls, they go home with a full

day's pay. Union bosses steer workers' votes to favorable politicians. Guess who benefits?

If a union worker loses favor with the union boss, he loses his job and can't find another in the union world.

When our politicians realize what a pot of gold and power unions hold for them, you will see more unions in North Carolina.

Fred Raber
Spring Lake

Media gave Obama and Biden the election

During my 40 years as an active observer in the political arena I've witnessed many presidential elections that leave a lot to be desired.

In 1972, there were the dirty tricks and the burglary at the Watergate Hotel approved by President Nixon and his cronies to spy on his opponents, former Sen. George McGovern and Sen. Edward Kennedy.

In the 2000 election, we observed the theft of the election

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by George Bush; his brother, former Florida governor Jeb Bush; former Florida secretary of state Kathleen Harris; and, ultimately, Bush's cronies on the U.S. Supreme Court.

In 2004, we witnessed the inexcusable use of Sept. 11, 2001, by George Bush and the smear tactics of Karl Rove to diminish the military service record of Sen. John Kerry.

Now, in 2008, we observed the mass media, led by MSNBC and CNN among many others, succeed in dehumanizing the public service records of Sen. John McCain and Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin. Even the counter-culture publications joined in the fray.

The media's love affair with Sen. Barack Obama resulted in biased reporting and soft questioning of the records of Obama and his running mate, Joe Biden. They placed Obama on a pedestal without any thought given to his stand on major issues facing America and the free world. They only wanted a page one story with history-making headlines. The media achieved this by destroying McCain and Palin.

Obama and Biden were given a free ride to the White House.

Michael John Kelly
Harrells

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Charles Broadwell
President & Publisher
cbwell@fayobserver.com 486-3501

Tim White/Editorial Page Editor
twhite@fayobserver.com 486-3504

Mike Arnholt/Managing Editor
arnholtm@fayobserver.com 486-3558

Jeff Green/Chief Marketing Officer
greenj@fayobserver.com 609-0642

Bob Murphy/Chief Operating Officer
murphyb@fayobserver.com 609-0676

Jim Adkins/Circulation
adkinsj@fayobserver.com 486-3506

Linda Baez/Human Resources
baezl@fayobserver.com 609-0635

Fred Benson/Sales & Marketing
bensonf@fayobserver.com 486-2726

Jon Bius/Online
biusj@fayobserver.com 486-3575

Ron Cartledge/Production
cartledge@fayobserver.com 609-0656



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