

letters

to the Editor



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Musicians impress at all-county fest

This was an amazing weekend. Being a novice to the annual All-County Music Festival, I must take a moment and not only thank those who asked me to help out, but those who share their gifts.

When I arrived at Amherst Middle School this snowy Friday afternoon and settled into my post, I had little idea of the treat that was in store. I watched as approximately 700 seventh-, eighth-, and ninth-graders tumbled in from schools all over Erie County. They met, most for

the first time, around 4:15 p.m. for the beginning of many hours of practice in anticipation of their Saturday performance. Young adults, who could be anywhere on this Friday and Saturday, were joined by their love of music, talent and dedication to their craft. Little did I know.

A short time later, as they picked up their instruments and opened their mouths to sing, I was rendered speechless, not an easy task for anyone who knows me. The hallways swelled with the most beautiful sound of the orchestras, bands and choruses, filling my ears, bringing tears to my eyes.

(Please turn to page six)

Strategic planning process needed in picking GOP vice president

Political junkies from both sides of the aisle who are closely following the Clinton versus Obama race for the Democratic presidential nomination will likely be spending some time in the near future pondering who will serve as the vice presidential candidates for both parties.

While it's unknown whether Hillary or Barack will be the Democratic hopeful for the highest office in the land, Republican strategists are listing the qualifications they want in who will be running on the GOP ticket with John McCain.

Chatter in many Republican circles is carrying the theory that the people calling the shots for the GOP want someone who can be groomed as McCain's successor as part of a long-range plan to keep control of the White House if McCain is successful in November. Someone who is significantly younger and has more conservative viewpoints is probably the best bet to run alongside McCain.

The name-dropping has already begun. Among the more notable potential VP candidates being mentioned are Fred Thompson and Mitt Romney, two of McCain's former primary rivals. Other names include Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Texas Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison, South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford and Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour.

Personally, the first three names mentioned in the previous paragraph just don't make sense to me. Thompson ran a pretty uninspired campaign, and I just think McCain and Romney's well-documented spats would not be forgotten, no matter how hard both men could try to mend a rocky personal relationship.

Rice would provide great balance for McCain in terms of her race and gender, but she has continuously said she doesn't want to run, and her still-fuzzy stance on such key issues as abortion rights would hurt the GOP ticket when it gets to crunch time in the weeks leading up to the election.

Hutchison appears to have a similar approach to service as an elected official, but the fact that she will turn 65 this summer probably forces her name to be crossed off the list since there's no age balance with McCain.

Sanford and Barbour, relatively unknown to the

general voting public outside their home states, provide a certain appeal for those who believe one of McCain's downfalls is the hostility he has conveyed to religious conservatives.

The one sticking point I can see with Sanford is his decision last year to turn down the requests of a contingent of conservatives to run for president, causing some party leaders to frown upon his outright "no thank you" response to their initial inquiries.

Barbour's biggest problem is his previous work as a lobbyist and chairman of the Republican National Committee, two positions that provided him experience that would likely be viewed by many as a sort of undermining of McCain's plans to challenge the status quo in Washington.

Here are a couple of more names to scribble down in the margins of your notebook as possible VP material: Florida Gov. Charlie Crist, Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty and Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin.

Crist has sky-high approval ratings in the Sunshine State, while Pawlenty provides the desirable "fresh face" who is relatively young at age 47. Offering that type of balance to McCain for both age and experience could be major factors that would play in the party's favor when talking about campaigning for electoral votes in swing states such as Wisconsin and Minnesota.

Who is Palin? She's my dark horse for the race, although certain media outlets are starting to tout her as the quiet frontrunner to serve as McCain's running mate.

The first female governor of Alaska, the mother of four is a National Rifle Association member and an active outdoorswoman. A marathon runner, she once served as the chair of the Alaska Oil and Gas Conservation Commission. Substantially younger than McCain, she is pro-life, against gay marriage, favors capital punishment and supports the right to bear arms. Her stance on family values could sway conservative voters, which might be just what McCain is looking for.

(Daniel Meyer is a columnist for the Weekly Independent Newspapers of Western New York. Comments on this column can be sent via e-mail to: meyersmusings@gmail.com. Opinions expressed here are those of the author.)



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Preliminary budget reflects investment in student success

In Williamsville, we know that in order for our students to succeed, we need to be efficient, responsive, and accountable to the people we serve. Our schools represent a vital community investment, and the district's annual budget development process focuses on maximizing the return on investment for both students and taxpayers.

The 2008-09 preliminary budget plan continues all instructional and support programs and maintains current class sizes. It also addresses the growth in the district's English as a Second Language program, the increased enrollment of high school students in occupational education programs offered by BO-CES, an additional self-contained class for students with disabilities, and instructional technology improvements at all schools.

Increases in certain fixed costs, such as health care, utilities and transportation, have placed a major burden on the budget. The cost of diesel fuel, for example, is anticipated to increase a staggering 37 percent while health care premiums will rise an estimated 10 percent. The increase in utilities would have been much greater if the district's ongoing energy-saving efforts and proactive partnership with the New York Power Authority had not mitigated the increase in this area.

While the budget proposal for the coming year continues to be a work in progress, the draft \$152 million budget represents an increase of 4.69 percent over the current year. This plan is driven by the Board of Education goal that calls for developing a fiscally responsible budget that reflects the values of the community, sustains and enhances the educational program, and is sup-

ported by the community. As we continue to scrutinize our plan and look to reduce expenses even further, there are still several unknown revenues that will affect the tax impact for property owners. The governor's proposed state budget provides a significant increase in aid to Williamsville, but the looming state deficit may affect the actual amount allocated for education.

Also, property assessment data from the towns will not be finalized until the summer. This information is necessary to determine the school tax rate. Until then, we can only estimate the tax impact of the spending proposal using a conservative analysis of known tax rate variables, including the 92 percent equalization rate for properties in Amherst resulting from the Town Board's decision last year to suspend its full value assessment program. At this point in time, I am projecting an estimated 3 percent increase in the tax rate. Our current work is designed to lower that projection prior to the community vote.

As the budget development process continues, it is important to emphasize the remarkable value of a Williamsville education. The most recent data available from the state Education Department affirms the fact that Williamsville delivers high academic results at a competitive per student cost that is below the state average for all public school districts and well below the per pupil rate for similar high performing school districts across the state.

The board will hold another work session on the preliminary spending plan on Tuesday, March 25. Information is available on the district Web site at www.williamsvillek12.org.



HOWARD S. SMITH

Williamsville School Superintendent