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Dealing with the local 'speedway'

"Welcome, ladies and gents, boys and girls! Welcome, racing fans to the Yoknapatawpha Speedway! Sit back, stay off the track, and enjoy the thrills and spills and dizzy speeds of our cars!" The PA system blared out the words, even stopped some folks at a Stop sign.

The real Yoknapatawpha Speedway is a 6.9 mile stretch of Mississippi Highway 6 that reaches from just west of the intersection with East University Avenue all the way west past the Thacker Road exit. Though there is no banner wafting over either end of the racetrack, there is a prominent 55 mph sign alerting motorists of a speed change - 65 mph down to 55 mph. Included in the speedway are five (count them: five) overpasses with on and off ramps, and two other entrances/exits.

None of those is as thrilling as the junction of the highway and West Jackson Avenue. Though accidents occur at other points along the track and one death occurred a few years ago between intersections, the junction of West Jackson with the Speedway produces the most spectacular thrills. According to MDOT, between 2005 and 2006 a grand total of 145 accidents occurred, resulting in 326 serious injuries but no fatalities. Between 2007-2008 there were 57 injuries and one death.

While there was a time when a \$32 million overpass at this exciting junction was on the table, thus far nothing has come of it. And no one has seen the wisdom of stopping all traffic in all directions briefly before unleashing the racers in one or the other direction. And no one has entertained the notion of making the turn from West Jackson onto Highway 6 West a 90 degree right turn, which would likely reduce merger fender benders.

Thus, we are left with a wonderful raceway, where little attention is paid to the speed limit, even by vehicles with official logos on their doors. What is lacking is a vendor to sell seating along the race course.

Oh, yes, perhaps from time to time a contest might be held to honor the fastest Yoknapatawpha driver. In the meantime, get a stopwatch, rev up that engine and see what your best time on the track might be.

(T.J. Ray, a retired professor of English at the University of Mississippi, can be reached at tjmaryjo@bellsouth.net.)

Editorial Submission Guidelines

Letters should be typed and limited to approximately 425 words. All letters must include a current phone number and full address. Unsigned letters will not be published. Submissions are limited to one guest column or letter per month. Publication will be withheld pending verification of authorship. Please turn in letters at least three days in advance of desired publication. Letters and columns printed do not necessarily represent the editorial views of The Oxford EAGLE or its staff.

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T.J. RAY

Columnist

More folks to hear about name change at the 'W'

Someone asked me the other day what I thought about Mississippi University for Women President Claudia Limbert's recent announcement that included her recommendation that MUW change its name to Reneau University.

My first response was simple, and should be telling to several dozen appointed and elected officials around the state: the vocal proponents of keeping "W" in the name of the Columbus school will become even more vocal.

Newspapers are a natural and fitting venue for folks to express their feelings on issues, and that's certainly been the case over the past few months in regard to Limbert's plan to change the name of the "W." Rarely does a day go by that we don't get someone submitting a letter urging alumni and friends of the school to unite in opposition to a name change or to suggest a more suitable option than the two finalists, Reneau University and Waverly University.

I'm sure now that we have a proposal from Limbert that we'll have several trains of thought

in future letters and calls: (1) the wrong name was picked, (2) consider other options and (3) leave the name as it is.

One difference now is that those options will also be going to the people who'll actually be deciding on Limbert's recommendation. If they weren't already getting notes, I can assure the folks on the state College Board and those in the state Legislature that they will be getting as many or more on this issue than most issues they deal with.

Decision for more folks

It's no longer just an issue for alumni and friends of MUW to hash out. Now, it's one for educational leaders and lawmakers to weigh in on. Get ready, ladies and gentlemen.

It's a question I suspect many will treat as most of us who have only a passing connection with MUW - by asking another question or two. How much dif-



DON WHITTEN

Editor

ference will the name change make? Is this really a pro-Limbert, con-Limbert issue?

One thing I've learned the last few weeks since Limbert announced her recommendation is how much Ms. Reneau was involved in trying to get a college for women going in our state and, in particular, in our area. Thanks to local historian and Oxford EAGLE columnist Jack Mayfield, I'm much more tuned into who Reneau was and why that name was a frontrunner. But I'm not convinced that it's the answer for the W. Just as Waverly University didn't make me jump up and down.

The option I've heard favored by many "on the outside" is something along the lines of Mississippi University for Women and Men. It keeps the state's name there, it keeps the significant W from Women and it makes it clear that the university includes both male and female students. So how about MUWM? Is that really a change, or enough change?

Maybe no change?

Then again, I can see the point of wondering about any change at all. Being Mississippi University for Women hasn't

kept males from applying to, and attending, the school. Letters and comments from many male graduates of MUW have been very supportive of the name the school has featured since switching from Mississippi State College for Women (MSCW) many years ago. But would there be more male students with a name change?

There's no question that these tough economic times make enrollment figures and fundraising an important part of the overall picture for colleges and universities everywhere, and it's one of the major reasons behind even considering a name change for MUW. It's a tough call, too, weighing the value of alumni opinions and tradition with thoughts of change and the future. In the end, the key for the W is not to have this issue become any more divisive than necessary.

For now, the decision-making process moves on to others outside the MUW president's office. It's now in the hands of ladies and gentlemen across the state who are, no doubt, getting lots more reading material these days.

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Mississippi's roads, bridges demand our immediate attention

If you are one of the 1.8 million drivers in Mississippi, you probably don't think much about the road you travel each day. That is until you hit a pothole, the most common sign of a poor road.

The bad news: Mississippi's roads and bridges today pose far more serious problems than potholes. According to TRIP (The Road Information Program), a nonprofit research organization which gathers technical data on America's transportation system, a growing number of Mississippi's roads and bridges are in dire need of repairs or improvements. Not only are bad roads uncomfortable to drive on, they can cause damage to vehicles or even accidents.

Bridges are crossed each day by motorists who don't give them a second thought. Motorists cross Mississippi's 17,000 bridges every day - and each time they bet their lives that the bridge will do its job.

TRIP reports that 25 percent of the state's bridges are structurally deficient or functionally obsolete. This translates to 4,201 bridges, the eighth highest in the nation. Bridges must be maintained, upgraded or even replaced when they become outdated or damaged. Allowing any bridge to deteriorate below safety limits can have catastrophic results. Likewise, many suburban-area bridges carry more loads than

a decade ago due to population shifts. These bridges need upgrades to handle increased load and vehicle capacity.

Lots of issues

Safety and comfort are not the only issues. Poor roads and bridges affect commercial, business and economic interests. Companies looking to locate their operations here look closely to make sure roads are efficient, reliable and safe. At the beginning of last year, 17 percent of Mississippi roads were rated in poor condition and 23 percent rated in mediocre condition.

The goal for most states is to have 75 percent of major roads in good condition. Unfortunately, only 42 percent of Mississippi's roads are in good condition, and the prospects are poor for improving on that statistic.

Mississippi currently has a \$6 billion funding shortfall for maintaining or rebuilding our roads and bridges. This means the Mississippi Department of Transportation (MDOT) cannot meet the enormous need. Meanwhile, MDOT is fighting to keep the funds it has, as state legislators have diverted millions in fuel tax revenues to other programs from an already insufficient road and bridge budget.

Looking ahead, MDOT estimates that \$12.5 billion will be needed between 2007 and 2016 to improve road and bridge conditions, relieve congestion,

and make safety improvements. Unfortunately, only \$6.5 billion will be available and some improvements must be indefinitely postponed. A one-time \$320 million stimulus funding will help, but that represents merely a fraction of what is needed to complete upgrades and enhancements.

Delayed upgrades?

Among the current needs that may have to wait:

- Expand Mississippi Highway 15 from two to four lanes, from Interstate 20 to Tennessee state line.
- Hattiesburg and Jackson beltways to reduce congestion.
- Four lanes along Mississippi Highway 601 from Interstate 10 to Wiggins (connectivity to Gulf Coast, aiding hurricane evacuation).
- Interstate 69/269 from the Arkansas state line to the Tennessee state line.
- 10 miles of U.S. Highway 49 from Star to Interstate 20, east of Jackson.
- Several sections of U.S. Highway 15, including 20 miles from Shady Grove to Bay



MIKE PEPPER

Guest Columnist

Springs.

- Eight miles of SR 603 from Town Road to Hancock
- Highway 6 North, from Batesville to Pontotoc and Tupelo.
- Sixteen miles of U.S. Highway 82, from Mississippi River bridge to Highway 61.

These are just a few of the many road and bridge needs in Mississippi. Meanwhile, traffic on these roads continues to increase. Mississippi's population has increased 14 percent since 1990, and expected to increase another 105,000 residents by the year 2020, and most of those will bring additional traffic to our roads and bridges.

As our state's leaders struggle with this and other budgetary issues facing our state, we should make the state's roads and bridges one of our highest priorities. Supplemental funding mechanisms, such as general obligation bonds and other income sources, should be closely examined as a way to shore up shortfalls in road and bridge budgets.

We cannot afford to neglect our roads and bridges. We can improve the current situation, but we must recognize the growing need and look to new and creative solutions.

(Mike Pepper is executive director of the Mississippi Road Builders Association.)