

# The Ledger editorial page

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## COLUMNIST OPINIONS



**Dana Milbank**

THE WASHINGTON POST

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## Washington at Its Best — and At Its Worst

This last weekend of April displays the very best and the very worst of Washington. Most of the country sees the worst part: the triumph of money and power.

For the annual White House Correspondents' Association dinner Saturday and its related soirees, media companies and lobbyists spend many millions of dollars to fete Hollywood celebrities and politicians. The dinner's charitable origins were long ago lost, replaced by a desire of journalists to be players — to flatter the powerful and the famous, and to feel as if they are powerful and famous themselves, at least for one night.

Lost in this cozy celebration of wealth and fame is the journalistic notion of holding the powerful to account without fear or favor. Less noticed by the rest of the country, Washington also has its best on display.

In Meadowbrook Park in Chevy Chase, Md., just a few hundred feet from the D.C. line, about 500 people signed up for Saturday's Race to End Poverty. Sponsored by a local nonprofit, A Wider Circle, the race is a 4K — a nod to the group's hope of furnishing 4,000 homes this year for people living in poverty in the Washington area. The organizers are motivated by the same thing that drives so many young people who come to the capital with youthful optimism, believing their actions can change the world.

### It's a sign of hope that people such as Bergel still exist in the capital.

In financial terms, the battle between cynicism and idealism is no contest. The nonprofit hopes to raise \$25,000. Media companies and lobbying outfits spend that much on party favors alone during the weekend.

I've volunteered at A Wider Circle on and off for the past several years through my daughter's school. She and I have spent Sunday afternoons sorting food donations, assembling gift baskets for new mothers and examining furniture donations to see whether the pieces are in "dignity condition" — of a high enough quality that the recipients won't feel as if they are being given others' refuse.

Before long, any volunteer at A Wider Circle, in Silver Spring, Md., learns the lore of its founder, Mark Bergel. Bergel, with a Ph.D. in sociology, was teaching at American University a dozen years ago when he decided to launch A Wider Circle, named after Einstein's admonition to free ourselves from self-centeredness by "widening our circle of compassion."

A few years in, Bergel plopped down on his bed after one of his 15-hour days. "I thought, this feels great," he told me. "And then, I thought, I have to get rid of this. The people we serve don't get this moment. I don't want this moment."

So Bergel, now 50, donated his bed and instead alternates between the couch and the floor of his small apartment in Bethesda. He drives to work in his Honda Fit subcompact and pays himself a salary of \$48,000 (overhead at his charity is kept to an exemplary 3 percent of its \$1.5 million in revenues). His ascetic existence, he says, helps "keep in mind what it feels like not to have something so basic as a bed."

Bergel has expanded his operation from furniture, linens and baby items to training and professional clothes for job seekers. Now he's attempting to match poor families with volunteers who will assist the families over the long term. Bergel has furnished housing for 63,000 people with an average household annual income of \$12,000.

Does it work? Bergel admits that in follow-up calls to those whose homes A Wider Circle has furnished, fewer than half have working telephones after six months. But that means nearly half of them still do.

What's extraordinary is that Bergel has done all this without help from any church (A Wider Circle has no religious affiliation) and precious little from the government (Montgomery County, Md., gives him less than 10 percent of his revenues, and the District of Columbia, whose residents are half of Bergel's clients, gives nothing).

It's a sign of hope that people such as Bergel still exist in the capital. It's a sign of shame that Bergel goes begging while fat cats, politicians, media heavyweights and Hollywood celebrities toast each other at the White House Correspondents Association dinner.

## EDITORIALS

### LEDGER OPINIONS

#### [ LANDINGS SETTLEMENT TALKS ]

# City Of Secrecy

Last Monday, the Winter Haven City Commission, and residents attending the

board's meeting, hoped to hear a solution to one of the city's most divisive issues of recent years, The Landings.

City Manager Deric Feacher gave a report, the details of which he had kept secret, and the commission discussed Feacher's findings — for a total of 1 hour, 8 minutes.

The comment time allotted to residents in the audience to talk about the report: zero.

Not only has the city government made a mess of a project meant to improve its best tract of land, which overlooks Lake Lulu and holds great memories for many in Winter Haven, it has allowed the also revered statewide process of government in the sunshine to collapse within City Hall.

As Feacher told the commission Monday, "I work for five commissioners, not 35,000 employees" — which is to say not for the city's 35,000 residents.

Feacher is deeply in error about his responsibilities to the residents of Winter Haven.

He, the city commissioners and every staff member of the city work for the people. The residents elect the commissioners. The residents pay the taxes that in turn pay the salaries of city employees. The residents, indeed, are the employers of the city's workers, even if indirectly.

#### LANDINGS RIFT

This failure of this government to understand its relationship with its constituents is reflected in the failure of The Landings as well.

The commission cut off the project Jan. 28 by terminating the contract of Taylor Pursell, financier and owner of The Landings' development company, Winter Haven Landings Partners.

In return, Pursell threatened a lawsuit and called for \$3.75 million in compensation.

For the project, the city had agreed to sell its land on which the Chain O' Lakes Complex sits. Pursell and his company were to redevelop the land for hotels, restaurants and retail stores.

A series of disagreements over how the project should proceed, and how and when the many city facilities at the complex would be replaced, preceded the contract termination.

Five candidates ran for election to fill a vacated commission seat April 2. Brad Dantzler won.

#### SETTLEMENT TALKS

Upon his swearing in April 8, Dantzler pressed one of his campaign priorities: one-on-one settlement talks with Pursell. The commission agreed and appointed Feacher to seek a meeting.

Feacher and Pursell agreed to meet in the financier's home city of Birmingham, Ala., and did so April 11 and April 12.

At this point, Feacher slid into secrecy.

The city manager took no notes. He sent no emails. He prepared no documents or reports.

He kept the commissioners and residents in the dark until his oral report Monday night, doing a disservice to both by allowing neither group to absorb or reflect on his findings, or to prepare comments.

There was no need for secrecy. Dantzler, who proposed the meetings, made no recommendation for secrecy nor did the commissioners who concurred with Dantzler.

Feacher's secrecy approach compounded the city of Winter Haven's deserved reputation for putting internal operations first and its constituents last.

The commission has repeatedly taken up controversial issues and voted on them without placing them on the agenda for that meeting.

Residents have a right under Florida's Government-in-the-Sunshine Law to expect that the meeting notice — the agenda — will accurately reflect the business expected to be taken up by the commission.

May an occasional lesser issue be brought up spontaneously and be acted upon right away? Sure.

Should the most important issues be left off the agenda repeatedly and be voted on immediately? No. In such cases, the vote should be deferred to a subsequent meeting, allowing constituent comments and further discussion among the commissioners.

Avoiding the appearance of trickery and secrecy, and building trust with the residents is vital. That way, the needs and desires of all city residents — not just those working in City Hall — can be met.

Backward situations such as occurred Monday when the public-comment period was near the beginning of the meeting, before Feacher's report on The Landings, and no information had been presented beforehand, must be avoided.



\* ACTUAL QUOTE.

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## VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

### READER OPINIONS

## Punishment for Texting And Driving Should Be More Severe

The legislation banning texting and driving is a complete joke.

Making texting and driving a secondary offense subject to a \$30 fine is no legislation at all. At a minimum, it should be a primary offense, subject to fines and related punishment equal to drunk driving.

How does this even get discussed? What is there to talk about?

This reminds me of several years ago watching the Montana Legislature argued over whether or not to pass a law banning open alcohol containers in vehicles. Again, what was there to talk about?

What a shame. We will probably have to wait until someone related to an influential legislator is harmed in an accident, resulting from this activity, before we get a real ban on texting and driving.

Take a drive along Interstate 4, either way, and you will see dozens of people texting and driving — old and young. This is a problem.

Come on, Florida legislators. Do your job and protect our citizens.

**PAUL FORKNER**  
Lakeland

## LGBTQ Students Need Support

Kudos to Rory Teal and Brenna Pelland for their bravery and hard work in working to start a gay-straight alliance at Kathleen High School.

I graduated from Bartow High School in 2005. During my senior year, a friend and I tried to start a gay-straight alliance to support lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning students after our experiences with homophobia at the high school.

While some teachers were supportive, they encouraged us to focus more generally on diversity in order to avoid controversy, which we did.

Coming out in a small, conservative town is an incredibly difficult act that can pit you against friends, family and acquaintances. Young people in that position deserve to have a safe space where they can support each other, as well as educate others about their community and help fight homophobic bullying in a productive manner.

I am incredibly proud to see young people in Polk County today continuing to fight for their rights and those of others.

Keep up the good work, Rory and Brenna, and know that many past LGBTQ students and straight allies from Polk County are cheering you on and are here to offer you support.

**JESSICA ANNE WHEELER**  
Lakeland

## No London Coverage

After the tragedy of Boston, I was eagerly anticipating watching the London Marathon. Even with the time difference, I got up early for a run, but wanted to watch the beginning as all 37,000 runners were to stand in silence to remember those who lost their lives and all who are injured.

I found nothing on TV. Nothing live on the Internet, except for one website that you had to subscribe to before viewing.

There was no coverage all day, not even highlights. None of the major networks covered the event. No sports channels either. I couldn't believe it.

I finally found a four-minute segment on YouTube that evening, and it showed the poignant moment — a mass sea of athletes, in total silence under a brilliant blue sky all wearing black ribbons to show their respect.

What a fantastic spectacle it was,

from overseas, showing their support for all runners and civilians alike.

It was such a shame that none of the broadcasting stations or media alike wanted to share this with all those grieving and U.S. citizens.

I look in the morning at The Ledger and there was not one article about the London Marathon and what took place, to share with us in the U.S.

Shame on all.

**NEAL TURNER**  
Lakeland

## Lakeland's Well-Kept Secret

What wonderful talent has been exhibited at the recent Florida Southern College band, choral and drama productions. The students have performed at really high levels of achievement thanks to the expert guidance of their professors.

For those who attended, they were really thrilled with what they experienced.

It is too bad the community does not support these fine young artists as they develop their crafts.

Lakeland has a wealth of talent in its schools and colleges that seems to be a well-kept secret.

**VIOLA JANE SPENCER**  
Lakeland

## Red-Light Cameras

I am a snowbird. I have been coming to Florida for 13 years.

Red-light cameras are all about making money for budgets. Many people have made suggestions about how to handle this situation.

In Amherst, Mass., and Warrenton, Va., this is what I have witnessed: As you are approaching the traffic light, there is a slit in the lens of the red light.

The slit flickers for about four seconds. This is telling you the light is about to change to amber and then red.

It gets your attention, and you automatically move your foot to the brake pedal. It would work, but, of course, there is no money to be made.

Since Lakeland started using the traffic lights to make money, I have not shopped there in two years now. The merchants were getting between \$1,400 to \$2,000 a year from us.

**FRANK PROVENCAL**  
Winter Haven

## Cellphones and Driving

I sat on my front porch in Lakeland and watched as a city worker had his cellphone glued to his ear. He was driving a recycling truck during school hours.

He never paid attention to what or who was in front of him.

He was driving and dumping the blue containers, never hanging up once.

**LINDA FUSSELL**  
Lakeland

## WRITE TO US

The Ledger welcomes letters for publication in the Voice of the People Column. Only original letters written directly to The Ledger will be considered, and preference is given to discussion of contemporary issues. Volume precludes acknowledgment or return of unpublished letters. All letters are subject to editing for clarity, length, taste and libel. Letters should be signed and contain the writer's full name, address and telephone number. Anonymity is granted only under unusual circumstances. Letters should be kept to 300 words or less, and brevity is encouraged.

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