

FROM READERS



Iraqi soldiers stand next to a collapsed bridge Thursday in Baghdad. A suicide truck bomb exploded on a major bridge in Baghdad, collapsing the steel structure and sending cars toppling into the Tigris river below, police and witnesses said. At least 10 people were killed and 26 injured, according to hospital officials. - AP

New security measures needed to stabilize Syria-Iraq border

Re: "Suicide bombers continue to infiltrate Iraq," April 11

Since 2003, we have known that Syria has consistently assisted extremists in undermining our objective of stabilizing Iraq. The country's corrupt government and other opportunistic Syrians profit from it economically, politically and socially.

I witnessed this during two tours in Iraq, having responsibility both times for border operations along the Syrian-Iraq frontier. Those of us in the 3d Armored Cavalry Regiment combated it vigorously, given the resources we had.

But transnational movement of smugglers, foreign fighters and other criminals will continue along the porous borders of Iraq until a biometric ID card system is established on the national level and the Iraqi customs and border departments seriously address the pandemic of corruption promulgated by Iraqi leaders at the national level.

Suicide bombings will decrease and our chances of stabilizing the situation with increase if the measures above are taken promptly.

Capt. Luis Carlos Montalvan
FORT BENNING, GA.

Don't blame Planned Parenthood for unstable families

Re: "Only stable families can eliminate achievement gap," From Readers, April 10

John Naughton's letter blaming Planned Parenthood for unstable and/or single-parent families has it exactly backward. Planned Parenthood exists to promote responsible, nonexploitive sex and reproductive health. It does not promote extramarital sex.

Without Planned Parenthood, we would see far more unwanted children, unstable families, poverty and social disorganization.

Our country and the world need more Planned Parenthood activity, not less.

Edd Doerr
President,
Americans for Religious Liberty
SILVER SPRING

Brown's knee-jerk reaction to development doesn't bode well for the District

Re: "Friendship Heights struggles with project," April 9

TO ADD YOUR VOICE

 We will consider publishing letters with fewer than 150 words.

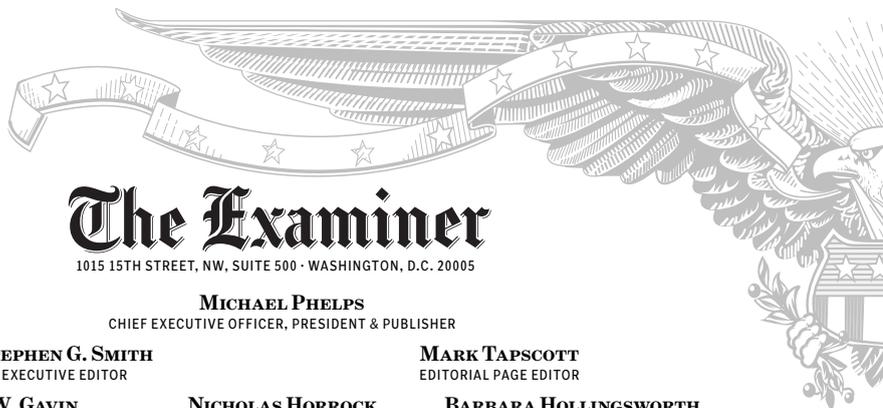
By e-mail:
threads@dceaminer.com

Just when we were about to get a long-awaited replacement for the used-car-lot eyesore on Wisconsin Avenue, in steps Council Member Kwame Brown in a last-minute attempt to derail a needed neighborhood improvement in Friendship Heights.

I called Mr. Brown's office to ask if he had a better alternative lined up if he is so unhappy with the Akridge development plan. His chief of staff didn't know, so I asked that Mr. Brown contact me himself to tell me his plans for the site. I am still awaiting his call or e-mail.

If knee-jerk reactions are what we can expect from the new head of the Council's Economic Development Committee, the District is in trouble.

Robert Burchard
WASHINGTON



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EDITORIAL

Bloated payroll behind Metro's budgetary woes

Now we know why the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority always seems to be out of money.

Examiner reporter Joe Rogalsky examined Metro payroll records (available online at www.examiner.com/wecan) and found that the transit agency paid out a staggering \$70 million in overtime last year. More than half of the top 200 hourly employees who racked up the most overtime in 2006 took home six-figure paychecks that equaled or exceeded the already generous salaries of Metro's top managers.

There's something wrong when a bus driver makes more than an assistant general manager, or a Metro police officer is paid more than the director of emergency management. This is especially true when Metro managers themselves are more than amply compensated. According to the Bureau of Economic Analysis, average per-capita income in the Washington region in 2005 was \$49,530 — the fourth-highest in the U.S. But the total pay for many Metro employees is three times that amount.

General Manager John Catoe Jr. says he won't ask for a fare increase this year. Instead, he plans to cut spending and eliminate 100 positions in an attempt to make up a \$116 million budget shortfall. But if Metro is really stretched so thin that it had to spend an extra \$70 million in overtime to keep the trains and buses running, Catoe should be hiring people, not downsizing.

The answer to this apparent contradiction is that Metro's bloated payroll has long been padded by politically sensitive management with no interest in keeping down costs for passengers or relieving the taxpayers who have been bailing them out for decades. Metro's latest bailout scheme is the controversial \$1.5 billion federal earmark that if adopted will also mean higher taxes for District, Virginia and Maryland residents.

The scandal here is not just overtime abuses, however. Metro pensions are based on the three-highest earning years, so a unionized bus operator with an annual base salary of \$50,000 and lots of overtime during those "High Three" years

AGREE? DISAGREE?

If intervening militarily in Iraq was wrong, sending U.S. troops to Darfur would also be a mistake. Send your comments to threads@dceaminer.com.

can easily end up with \$80,000 in annual pension benefits. This is substantially more generous than even the old federal Civil Service Retirement System.

Sooner or later, Metro will have to address its growing unfunded pension liability. Major management reforms are probably impossible under the present union contract and political leadership, which means that higher taxes, more fare increases, deferred maintenance and diminished service are likely unavoidable. Catoe is paid \$360,000 — more than any area elected official — and his perks include a company car, so it will be tough for him to demand austerity from the union without practicing it himself. And Metro Board members — political creatures who should be looking out for taxpayers but don't — need to learn some new pitches instead of always begging for more tax dollars.

Metro employees deserve good working conditions and competitive salaries, but they shouldn't be allowed to take the rest of us to the cleaners.

EDITORIAL CARTOON By Nate Beeler/The Examiner

