

Hoosiers and the Trump milestone



Republicans and journalists feel Trump's power with Hoosiers, but risks and opportunity abound

By **BRIAN A. HOWEY**

NASHVILLE, Ind. – There is agreement with President Donald Trump in these quarters that his “100-day” milepost is the arbitrary product of network TV producers and newspaper assignment editors. So why not a 105-day assessment?

From the Hoosier perspective, Republicans like U.S. Reps. Luke Messer and Todd Rokita continue to rally around their president, though it might be more a



function of their loyalty to Vice President Mike Pence. When they appear with President Trump, they have star-struck looks on their faces. They tell me they feel that support in the 4th and 6th CD's. In 2016, driving these prairies was to find them punctuated with Trump/Pence signs, many and U.S. Reps. Luke Messer and Todd Rokita last week, and Trump at carrier last fall. **Continued on page 3**

Home rule encroachment

By **JOSHUA CLAYBOURN**

EVANSVILLE – Each year the Indiana legislature prides itself on reducing the size and scope of government, yet each session, including this one, that same legislature grabs more power from the hands of local municipalities.



The message from Indianapolis is clear: The Statehouse knows best and mayors and town councils can't be trusted to do what's in their communities' best interests. It is time we fundamentally change our approach.

Indiana's Home Rule Act first passed in 1980 and generally grants municipalities the power to govern themselves as they see fit. The idea, modeled



“(George) Stang stated he wanted to mobilize a movement after being disappointed in and fearful of the national election.”

- Brown County Prosecutor Ted Adams on the arrest of church organist George Stang for defiling St. David's church in Beanblossom



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off the national principle of federalism, gives more choice, options, flexibility, and freedom to local leaders. Now those ideals are under greater attack than at any time since Hoosier home rule began.

In recent years the Indiana legislature handcuffed municipalities from setting a local minimum wage or from regulating housing, agricultural operations, worker schedules, or plastic bags. A move to preempt local rules for services like Airbnb failed to get out of the Indiana House, but it was a rare setback for the never-ending march to scale back home rule. This year legislators successfully banned local zoning rules for certain utility poles and undermined so-called “good neighbor ordinances.”

Good neighbor ordinances hold tenants accountable when they repeatedly inflict crimes and nuisances on their neighbors. The police can issue an eviction filing order after several violations, depending on the crime or nuisance, and the landlord must then initiate eviction proceedings. It’s one of the few tools communities have to address recurring crimes at rental properties by looping landlords into the process.

Senate Bill 558 does away with all of that by effectively banning this approach. Locals can no longer fine landlords and must generally absolve them of any responsibility. Once again, the Statehouse deemed its wisdom better than the cities and towns dealing first hand with chronic criminals at the same rental units.

A more high profile attack on home rule came in the form of Senate Bill 213 banning municipalities from regulating antennas and utility poles. Telecom giants want to convert from 4G technology to a 5G wireless network, which is 10 times faster. To help achieve that, SB213 gives them free reign to place “small cell tower” antennas on existing, or even new, utility poles in virtually any right-of-way.

Telecom giants understandably want to bring this technology to customers more cheaply, and legislators understandably want the state

to be seen as business friendly. But instead of working with local governments to craft a sensible approach, legislators passed a one-size-fits-all bill that removes most local input.

A provision in the bill permitted cities to keep regulatory powers over the towers if, within eight days of SB213’s passage, they designated areas off-limit where there are underground utilities. The result was a chaotic few days with over 50 cities and towns rushing to pass sweeping ordinances declaring entire communities as underground zones. The whole affair provided a model of poor governance.

This debate isn’t really about small cell towers or good neighbor ordinances. It’s much bigger than that. This is about better governance, greater policy choices, and more flexibility. This is about reining in big, inefficient, unresponsive government and returning power to the people.

The state legislature

singled out Bloomington’s annexation process by inserting language into the biennial budget bill that terminated the city’s proposed annexation and prohibited any related annexations for five years. The state could have let the process play out, or at least kept the decision making process in Monroe County. Instead the Statehouse pushed through a heavy-handed provision stripping locals of input.

Home rule should be Indiana’s fundamental vision for government. If we hope to keep Indiana a place for dynamic innovative government, home rule needs to be the framework that undergirds all our proposals.

Home rule need not be a partisan issue either. Liberals need to understand that a smaller state government doesn’t necessarily mean less government overall, it just means a government closer to the people. It means less concentration of power, and the right of local governments to grow or shrink according to the desires of the people who reside in the area. Meanwhile, conservatives need to understand that there are people in this state who do want robust regulatory checks, and that in regions where

this desire is common, home rule will create one.

The Statehouse will not give up power voluntarily. The incentives, bureaucracy, power structures, and institutions in Indianapolis have all evolved to help state government acquire more power and influence over locals, not less. Citizens, and their mayors, councilors, and commissioners, will have to take this power. They will need to elect leaders who are willing to leave Indianapolis less powerful than it was when they arrived.

Hoosiers want a legislature that trusts them and their local communities, not paternalistic laws under the guise of leadership. But the latter is largely what they've gotten. State leaders need to offer Hoosiers real choice and a real vision for a better government. Dispersing government functions is the best way that Hoosiers, both conservatives and liberals, can achieve their policy goals. ❖

Claybourn is an Evansville attorney.

President Trump, from page 1

homemade. This writer, reaching some 300,000 Hoosiers with the weekly newspaper column, feels the same thing. A poll (which isn't in the works) along with our gut would probably find Trump's support in Indiana above 60%. Columns that assail Trump often bring a batch of critical reader emails.

Voters who supported President Trump have few regrets. A new University of Virginia Center for Politics poll of Trump voters shows his approval rating at 93% with these voters, though just 42% "strongly approve" while 51% "somewhat approve."

Messer explained, "Back home people are excited by Trump's leadership, they're willing to give him the benefit of the doubt and they are waiting to see the results from his promises. They are excited by many of the executive orders that have already come. They almost like the way he's sparring with the media. When you talk to the media, when you talk to the most establishment folks back home, there is, of course, a lot of consternation and concern because Trump conducts himself in very untraditional ways."

Rokita, who will likely face a 2018 U.S. Senate race showdown with Messer, adds, "I am all in for President Trump. He has connected to the forgotten man.

The Republicans are the party of the working man. We can't forget that. If we run for the Senate, that's going to be a huge part that we talk about. There are candidates or potential candidates with the same old playbook, the same old people, many who were against Trump, many outright hostile. You're going to see that contrast in the Rokita camp, whatever form that campaign takes over the

next 14 months. He is not your typical president, I will acknowledge, and I think ultimately that is going to be to his credit.

"Every day I hear constituents say, 'Nobody is polling me and I'm for this man,'" Rokita continued. "These are small business owners, rank and file Republicans.



Candidate Trump enters the rally last July in Westfield, while Sullivan County Republican Chairman Bill Springer (left) and former state chairman Rex Early were the only pro-Trump delegates when the Republican National Convention slate was named. The rest of the party came around with Mike Pence on the ticket. (HPI Photos by Brian A. Howey and Randy Gentry)

These are just regular people. A man last fall put Trump signs up all over Putnam County along with my signs. He hadn't voted in 20 years. He's back engaged now. That's what Trump brings. That's one of the big reasons I'm behind him."

Parting with Trump is risky today

To part with Trump in these early days is to ask for a political rumble. But the fact is, it's not going to be easy. Trump, with the help of the combative Bobby Knight, connected with Hoosiers by promising to build a wall. He was going to repeal NAFTA. He was going to cut regulations (which he has). He saw China as a currency manipulator. He was against the import/export bank. He vowed to

rip up the Trans Pacific Trade and Paris climate pacts. And Trump, the artful deal maker, had this great plan to repeal and replace Obamacare, with something magnificent, that would cover more people, with fuller coverage and at less cost.

Hoosier folk found in Trump the ultimate bull to send into the Beltway Pottery Barn. They said he "tells it like it is." Their support was in reaction to their own fears, resentments and assessments that Main Street was getting left behind, that their adult kids were still living in the basement, and heroin and meth plagues were prairie rip currents that reeked of ammonia, leaving contaminated Lowe's buckets on highway bridges and needles dangling from limp arms.

Over the last 105 days (a wonderfully arbitrary number), President Trump has flipped on so many issues.

After talking with Mexican President Enrique Pena Nieto and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, he said he wouldn't terminate NAFTA. The Paris accords are under review.

In just one day in April, Trump flipped as the Washington Post observed "on a dizzying array of policies in a stunningly brief period of time: China as a currency manipulator. The future of the Export-Import Bank. NATO's relevance. A federal hiring freeze. The Federal Reserve chair. The wisdom of low interest rates. Syria air strikes. Russia as friend or foe. Taken individually, the reversals of just the past week seem to prove the oft-stated point that Trump is not bound by even his own past words – that even Trump does not take his words literally. A president accused of having no fixed ideology is proving it by reversing himself on core campaign promises and a range of positions that seem to have been based on gut instinct, not evidence. But add them up and a broader portrait emerges of a president who is changing his worldview in front of the eyes of the world."

TrumpCare vote today

Then there was the RyanCare of March and the TrumpCare of this week. House GOP leaders believe they have the 216 votes needed for a roll call expected mid-day. Mike Allen of Axios writes this morning: House Republicans — promising that they really, really have the votes this time — plan to rush into a health-reform vote



Trump won the Indiana primary with 53% of the vote despite no endorsement from Gov. Mike Pence, then his 19% November plurality helped pull in Gov. Eric Holcomb.

this afternoon without waiting for a Congressional Budget Office estimate of how the updated bill will affect estimates of the costs and impact. plunging ahead carries its own risks — short- and long-term:

■ Potential landmine

1: House GOP is voting on a bill not knowing how many people it covers and how much it costs. Maybe the numbers will come back fine — but imagine if they

don't.

■ Potential landmine 2:

Tampering with protections on preexisting conditions is the new "third rail of politics." Think about how easy it will be for Democrats to argue this bill erodes protections for your mom with cancer or friend with multiple sclerosis.

■ Potential landmine 3:

Republicans are playing with a fire they have seen burn fatally before. Obama lost a Democratic-ruled Congress by jamming through a complex and easily demagogued health-care law during his first two years in office. Now Trump, with his own full control of Congress, is doing the same thing.

David Nather of Axios notes, "Any Republican who votes for this bill is also taking a lot of risks. They're voting for waivers from the ACA's ban on charging higher premiums to sick people, as well as waivers from the minimum benefits it requires insurers to cover. They're also voting for \$880 billion in Medicaid cuts over 10 years. And — based on the original CBO estimate — they're voting for a bill that could cover 24 million fewer people."

MSNBC's Joe Scarborough called today's vote "political day trading. They're going to jump off the cliff. This vote hangs around them forever." And economist Steve Rattner notes that even with Rep. Fred Upton's \$8 billion cover for pre-existing conditions, there's more than a \$120 billion shortfall for high risk pools. He notes that under the proposed AHCA, Indiana would face a \$282 million shortfall in its high risk pool that covers 22,000 Hoosiers.

Through this policy fog, Trump didn't seem to grasp what was in the legislation he was committed to passing.

Axios reports: "During a recent phone conversation about the evolving health-reform bill, President Trump asked a simplistic but apparently sincere question: 'Is what we are going to do going to take care of people? What I told people is, 'We'll take care of people.' No deep dive on the detail. But Trump, the salesman, wanted reassurance selling a big, complicated product he doesn't fully understand. The House Republican on the other end of the line told the president that the bill would, indeed, look after people so long as it kept in certain provisions, like allowing states with expanded Medicaid coverage to keep adding people until at least the end of 2019."

The wobble over pre-existing conditions is that while to bring on board the Freedom Caucus, it was losing the Tuesday Group and Republicans like U.S. Reps. Susan Brooks, who said Wednesday she would vote yes.

Danger for Republicans

The danger for Rokita, Messer and Republicans is staking a position with Trump is like campaigning alongside a band of gypsies. Wake up in the morning and they're gone with your pants and wallet. You can be a career-long deficit hawk, only to find a Trump tax reform plan that will explode the deficits. Appearing last Sunday on NBC's Meet The Press, Pence found himself in a state of contortion. Will deficits go up? "Maybe in the short term," Pence told host Chuck Todd. "But the truth is, if we don't get this economy growing at 3% or more, as the president believes we can, we're never going to meet the obligations that we've made today."

Two points here: Try and find an economist who sees 3% growth coming, let alone the 4.5% growth that it would take for the deficits not to explode in the trillions of dollars; and that pesky truth thing.

Hoosier Bullshit-o-meters

Many Hoosier voters have decent bullshit-o-meters. They might laugh and wink at the locker room braggart, or the guy who stretches perceptions at Sunday school. But we're quick to identify a bullshitter. While we've said that Trump's approval in Indiana is still likely to crest 60%, part of that is the perception that Trump says what many of us think and believe. At Day 105, many ardent Trump supporters still grasp these perceptions. How long that lasts will be part of the 2018 narrative that Rokita and Messer play with like an unpinned grenade.

On Monday, the Washington Post called Trump "the most fact-challenged politician that The Fact Checker has ever encountered. He earned 59 Four-Pinocchio ratings during his campaign as president. Since then, he's earned 16 more Four-Pinocchio ratings (Washington Post). So here are the numbers for the president's first 100 days: 488, the number of false or misleading claims made by the president. That's an average of 4.9 claims a day."

Trump fuels the "alternative fact" regime into "The Twilight Zone" with his own historical narratives. On Monday, he posted a video talking about President Andrew Jackson's role in the American Civil War. Trump said that President Jackson, "Was really angry that he saw what was happening with regard to the Civil War." The problem? President Jackson died 16 years before the Civil War began. Trump seemed to backtrack, saying later, "I mean, had Andrew Jackson been a little bit later, you wouldn't have had the Civil War." Perhaps. President Jackson was a vicious slave owner and had he been in office in the 1850s, he might have handled things differently than President James Buchanan.

Historian Douglas Brinkley observed, "It seems to

be among the most bizarre recent 24 hours in American presidential history. It was all just surreal disarray and a confused mental state from the president." On MSNBC's Morning Joe, Brinkley observed that Trump appears



"unhinged" and "willy-nilly" and his embrace of tyrants and despots "a little bit frightening." He added of Trump's stream of consciousness, "Nobody is putting the proper brakes on it." He drew a contrast to President John F. Kennedy, who would have been 100 years old on May 29. A new book, "The Legacy: JFK at 100 with Stephen Kennedy Smith, Douglas Brinkley, Robert MacNeil and Jonathan Alter," Brinkley observes that Kennedy was a journalist as well as "a man of history who understood history."

The obvious segway is the George Santayana 1906 "The Life of Reason" quote: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

'My previous life'

A week ago in another one of those "100 day" interviews with Reuters, Trump lamented, "I loved my previous life. I had so many things going. This is more work than in my previous life. I thought it would be easier. You're really into your own little cocoon, because you have such massive protection that you really can't go anywhere. I like to drive. I can't drive any more."

"I thought it would be easier." Whew.

The exposed President Trump is a chief executive who doesn't know history, doesn't read, likes brief proposals (thus last week's comically brief Tax Reform Plan that caught just about everyone at Treasury off guard), likes maps and pictures. We find him saying things like no one knew that President Lincoln was a Republican, or why was the Civil War fought, or who would have known that health reform could be so complicated.

The frustrated President Trump tweeted over the weekend on "how tough getting things done in government is, saying, "It's a very rough system. It's an archaic system ... It's really a bad thing for the country." Joe Scarborough responded: "Wrong. It's Madison and Jefferson's checks and balances. It's separations of power. It frustrates would-be tyrants. It's perfect now."

The invisible man hovers

The Reuters reporters noted that Vice President Pence hovered during this Oval Office interview. The Pence hover is, from an Indiana GOP worldview, the most exciting development. Could Pence be poised to join the Harrisons as the third Hoosier president?

Politico's Matthew Nussbaum and Eliana Johnson's 99th day portrait paints Pence as the "invisible man."

They write: Vice President Mike Pence has delicately sidestepped the infighting, scandals and staff shakeups that have dragged down many of Trump's aides, instead taking his cues from the president as he shapes one of the most consequential jobs in the world. While many vice presidents angle for power inside the West Wing, Pence has defined his role narrowly. His thinking, according to those close to him, is that the vice president has only two constitutional duties – to serve as president of the Senate and to be prepared for the worst. The rest is up to Trump. Pence's approach has allowed him to artfully navigate the warring fiefdoms that have emerged in the West Wing and stay in Trump's good graces, even if it means he hasn't amassed the influence, as many had hoped, to pull the president in a more conservative direction. The former Indiana governor speaks with Trump multiple times a day and is a regular presence in the Oval



Office, senior administration officials say.

"I think that Mike has said many times that he serves at the pleasure of the president and that he looks to support the president and help the president get the job accomplished," said Marc Short, a former Pence aide who now serves as White House director of legislative affairs.

So Vice President Pence sits shotgun in the Trump circus motorcade. The administration's Zelig is ambitious and cunning. Just as the retired John Boehner offered President Obama a cigarette in a 2016 Correspondent's Dinner video, perhaps Pence whispers in Trump's ear how he misses the day he could ride his motorcycle across the amber waves of grain. He might wistfully wonder what the view from Trump Tower is this fine May day, or what fun it would be to do a round of golf at the Trump course in Scotland.

In the Trump White House, truth is flexible and alternative, policy resides in kaleidoscope, and dealmakers are exposed and pondering a government shutdown. Democrats are scoundrels for begging off as Republicans wallow in their Obamacare safe room. Ideology is negotiable, nuclear war is an option on the table, ruthless dictators can be "smart cookies" who must be good because their approval numbers are in the 90th percentile, while Trump dangles between 35 and 40% in a democracy. The future is no sure thing. ❖

4 Drivers
33 Goals
1 Mission

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A PLAN FOR HOOSIER PROSPERITY

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The decisions of Trump and Pence

By JACK COLWELL

SOUTH BEND – Two decisions, evaluated together, have been great for Indiana. Donald Trump’s decision to select Mike Pence as his choice for vice president. The decision by Pence, when he was governor, to pick Eric Holcomb for lieutenant governor.



Picking Holcomb wouldn’t have meant much if it were not for the later decision by President Trump to take Indiana’s governor as his running mate. With Pence gone from Indiana, Holcomb was elected governor. That thus far is great for Indiana. Holcomb is a better governor than Pence. And Pence is providing some

stability and a calmer, more-informed voice for the administration in dealing with Congress and with the real world. He was instrumental in forcing out the dangerous Michael Flynn as national security adviser. He could be doing a better job for President Trump than he did for Indiana.

Some readers won’t take kindly to any praise for Pence. There is room for criticism. But fair is fair. He does some things right. He hand-picked Holcomb to fill a lieutenant governor vacancy, putting Holcomb in position to win the Republican nomination for governor, to win the election and to be a good governor, a better governor than Pence, who had sagging approval ratings back when it appeared he would struggle for reelection as governor.

The reason Pence is performing better for President Trump is also the reason his performance wasn’t that good as governor. Pence, more at home in Congress, came back to Indiana to establish executive credentials for his goal of getting back to Washington as president. He got into trouble as governor in trying to do things to win favor with conservatives nationally who could help him win presidential primaries.

His push to passage of the controversial “religious

freedom” act amid contentions that it really provided freedom to discriminate was a disaster. Hoosier business leaders and finally even Republican legislative leaders forced a change to halt threatened boycotts and national ridicule.

Holcomb, conservative but not as dogmatic as Pence, isn’t running for president. He wants to run this state, not run in the New Hampshire primary. The highlight of the just-adjourned legislative session is the much-needed 20-year road plan to fix Indiana’s crumbling infrastructure and provide the gas tax increases and fees to pay for it. Holcomb pushed for it. Pence would have blocked it because it wouldn’t fit with his cultivated image of not raising taxes.

Holcomb worked closely with legislative leaders in the Republican-controlled General Assembly. Pence didn’t. Holcomb, pragmatic in his approach, wanted to get things done, especially on roads. Pence, the ideologue, opposed legislators wanting to get something done on roads rather than just helping to burnish his tax-cutting image.

There were small as well as big differences. One involved a simple order by Holcomb in the case of Keith Cooper, wrongly convicted and finally released from prison when new evidence, including conclusive DNA results, proved his innocence. But Pence wouldn’t grant him a pardon. An Indianapolis Star editorial put it this way: “It took Gov. Eric Holcomb a month to do what Mike Pence failed to do for years: Pardon Keith Cooper.”

Pardons don’t help in establishing a national tough-on-crime image. And what if Cooper, after pardon, got in trouble? Holcomb quickly granted a disaster declaration for East Chicago to address dangerous lead and arsenic contamination. Pence had denied the request.

Even Democratic legislative leaders said nice things about Holcomb. Amazing in this era of partisan hatred. The session was civil. There are complaints, of course. Some progressives are irked because their priorities were not addressed and a bill was signed into law to make it more difficult for Hoosiers under 18 to obtain an abortion without parental involvement. Some at the other end of the spectrum are displeased that their social issues were neglected and that

“religious freedom” legislation wasn’t brought back.

Just imagine if Pence still was governor. Just imagine if he wasn’t President Trump’s vice president. ❖



Gov. Mike Pence with Lt. Gov. Eric Holcomb during the latter’s swearing in in March 2016. (HPI Photo by Mark Curry)

Colwell has covered Indiana politics over five decades for the South Bend Tribune.

A president struggles to get on track

By **LEE HAMILTON**

BLOOMINGTON – I have significant differences with Donald Trump’s political stances, but I want him to enjoy a successful presidency. It’s good for neither the country nor the world when a U.S. president struggles or fails. Yet I also believe that constructive criticism can help a president grow more capable. It’s in this spirit that I want to take a hard look at the Trump presidency so far.



President Trump’s personal and stylistic approaches may have served him in business and on the campaign trail, but are problematic in office. He has

an unfortunate tendency to dodge blame for things that go wrong. He makes charges with no evidence to support them and refuses to admit he was wrong. He routinely over-inflates his achievements, as when he recently declared that “no administration has accomplished more in the first 90 days,” an assertion that no one familiar with FDR’s and other notable presidents’ first months in office would accept.

Crucially, he does not appear to know how to use or coordinate the levers of American power – economic, diplomatic and political. He appreciates military power, but lacks a coherent, comprehensive strategy and the clarity, consistency, and discipline required to apply one.

President Trump has also shown little evidence of the political skills necessary for success. He has been unable to build coalitions in Washington or rally public support around difficult-to-achieve policy goals. He shows little instinct for finding natural allies to help push legislation through. He shows no interest in inspiring and uniting Americans. And he has hurt himself with his bluster, tenuous relationship with the truth and flouting of the rules of ethics, transparency and conflicts of interest.

Throughout the campaign and his first weeks in office, he painted issues in easy-to-solve, black-and-white terms. Until, that is, he began to confront them as president. Recently, he has admitted that issue after issue is more complicated than he’d expected, which suggests that he had not considered them carefully before.

The president has made some solid choices, put-

ting in place a measured, professional national security team in Defense Secretary James Mattis and National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster. But his policy rhetoric bears little relation to the reality of his accomplishments. We do not have universal, comprehensive health care at lower cost. Tax reform, immigration, cyber reform; it’s hard to find any meaningful progress on any of them.

Chances appear iffy for infrastructure investment in our states and communities that is not a boondoggle. Foreign policy seems to be guided by a team of generals who are competent in their areas of expertise, but unlikely to come up with the comprehensive economic, diplomatic and political policies needed to resolve conflicts and build stable relations abroad.

Given the president’s erratic, impulsive leadership and dizzying string of policy changes, where will we find stability over the next few years? One source of hope is the president himself. His policy switches on China and Syria may have been abrupt, but they moved us in the right direction. He seems to be capable of learning, and reversing himself, on a broad range of policies. He appears willing to accept the sober, mainstream advice of his national security team.

Ordinarily, I’d include Congress in any list of institutions capable of stabilizing a presidency that could go off the rails, but it seems unable to help the president improve his policies. Instead, other forces have stepped into that role. The courts, especially on immigration, have kept him within the bounds of the Constitution. State and local governments are stepping up to lead on a variety of issues, including climate change.

The media have been crucial in highlighting problems within the administration and the implications of its policies. And ordinary citizens have grown vocal in their opinions and active in trying to safeguard and improve their own corners of the world.

These are hopeful developments. But the Trump administration is still struggling to get on track, consumed with internal problems, at a time when we desperately need to

move ahead on the serious problems we confront at home and abroad. My hope is that he can find his way to asserting the leadership the country and the world order need. ❖



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First look at Indiana Senate 2018 battlefields

By **BRIAN A. HOWEY**

NASHVILLE, Ind. – With the 2017 General Assembly concluded, the 2018 mid-term election cycle begins to set up, with State Sen. Jim Tomes already announcing a bid for a third term.

Scanning 2014 and 2010 results, as well as for a potential national mid-term dynamic that impacted the 2010 election, HPI has identified five Indiana Senate seats where the pluralities were under 5,000 votes as a measure of where competitive races could take shape.

We add a sixth seat, that of State Sen. Ron Alting to the mix because he has been so conspicuous on an array of different issues that could potentially prompt a credible challenger to emerge.

The competitive districts in 2014 included:

■ **SD1**, where State Sen. Frank Mrvan defeated Republican Kenneth Stevenson 15,538 to 10,506. There is speculation that Mrvan could retire, so this could be an open seat. Mrvan reported a 2016 ending balance of \$7,222.

■ **SD15**, where State Sen. Liz Brown defeated Democrat Jack Morris 15,101 to 10,482. Brown ran a 2016 3rd CD race, so her name ID is even stronger than it was in her first legislative race. Brown has a 2016 year-end balance of \$28,657.

■ **SD29** saw State Sen. Mike Delph defeat gay Democrat J.D. Ford 15,140 to 12,744. This district is trending Democratic and could potentially be an open seat if Delph pursues a U.S. Senate bid. The Friends of Mike Delph committee reported a 2016 balance of \$104,459. There is no report from Ford or any related committee on the Elections Division website.

■ **SD38** saw State Sen. John Ford defeat former Democratic Sen. Tim Skinner 13,585 to 12,580. A rematch could make this a competitive race in 2018. Ford had a 2016 year-end balance of \$62,261,

while Skinner reported \$8,244 after a beginning balance of \$29,34 and \$29,477 in contributions for the year.

■ **SD45**, State Sen. Jim Smith 19,827 defeated Democrat Julie Berry 19,827 to 16,994. The Friends of Jim Smith Committee is listed as “disbanded” on the Indiana Election Division website.

■ **SD46**, State Sen. Ron Grooms defeated Democrat Charles Freiberger 16,950 to 13,168 in a rematch race. In 2010 Grooms defeated Freiberger 21,019 to 18,965. A potential rematch exists here. Grooms has \$35,553 cash on hand at his 2016 year end report while Freiberger has a zero balance.

While Sen. Tomes was unopposed in 2014, in 2010 he defeated Democrat Patty Avery 15,254 to 14,248 under the 2001 maps. The district is considered more Republican with the 2011 maps with Posey County one of the river counties that is trending toward the GOP at the county and municipal level. Tomes has \$44,857 in his campaign fund, according to his 2016 financial report filed with the state election office, according to the Evansville Courier & Press. He’ll face at least one challenger in the May 2018. Brady Hall, a financial adviser in Evansville, announced in April he was challenging Tomes in the Republican primary next year.

The other close race in 2010 saw State Sen. Jim Merritt defeat former Marion County Sheriff Frank Anderson 16,545 to 14,187. Merritt is now Marion County Republican chairman, but his seat is trending Democrat, even though he ran unopposed in 2014. The Citizens for Jim Merritt Committee reported \$62,719 at the end of 2016.

In SD27, State Sen. Jeff Raatz is expected to mount a 6th CD campaign if U.S. Rep. Luke Messer opts for the U.S. Senate race. Raatz easily defeated Democrat Jake Hoog and Libertarian Rex Bell in 2014 and it would take a major Democratic tidal wave to put it into

play.

This will be President Trump’s first mid-term election, and while his job approval numbers are historically low and suggest a potential trend election against Republicans in 2018, all you have to do is parse through 2016 coverage of Trump to make that type of assumption with great risk. There was talk of a Demo-



State Sens. Ron Grooms and Mike Delph both had competitive races in 2014.

cratic tsunami after Trump won the nomination in early summer 2016 and was shunned by a number of potentially top vice presidential candidates, and again after the Republican National Convention when he assailed Gold Star mothers, and again in October when the Billy Bush "Access Hollywood" video surfaced. But in every case, Trump defied conventional wisdom.

Indiana Democratic

Chairman John Zody reports widespread interest in 2018 congressional and legislative races, and Democratic events have been well attended this year, suggesting new energy. But making any kind of bet that involves the Trump dynamic at this point is a dangerous proposition.

Of all the Indiana Senate races, it is SD22 that could prove to be interesting. Alting ran unopposed in 2014 and in 2010, he easily defeated Democrat Michael Oxenrider 20,418 to 8,926. As Lafayette Journal & Courier columnist Dave Bangert



State Sen. Ron Alting ran unopposed in 2014, but he has been conspicuous on a number of issues and could be a target in 2018.

explains, Alting and State Democratic Rep. Sheila Klinker have overlapping districts. "People know Alting for what and who he is," Bangert said. "He's very visible in town (not quite Sheila Klinker, who is everywhere, all the time, but if you go to Lafayette Jeff basketball games, he'll be there). And Democrats don't have many beefs with him, just like Republicans have no real beefs with Klinker. Tippecanoe County tends to work in a way that Klinker and Alting get the same set of voters."

Alting was conspicuous on the cold beer and vaping controversies of the past two sessions. "Those are big issues statewide," Bangert said. "But I doubt voters here would blame him for cold beer sales, no matter how many times I write that he's in the middle of it."

Where Alting could be in trouble are social issues. "His bigger issue might be voting for things and then apologizing/walking things back later," Bangert observes. "Notable: RFRA (voted for then recanted) and (same sex) marriage (voted for constitutional amendment before he was first GOP senator to bail when that was hot a few years ago). And

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even vaping law, which he promised to fix after it cast him as a hometown buddy for a hometown business."

Alting reported a 2016 year end balance of \$76,872 after beginning the year with \$347,238. He made contributions of \$30,000 to the Senate Majority Fund, \$5,000 to Senate President David Long's campaign, and \$3,500 to Sally Siegrist's Indiana House campaign.

Remember, powerful and motivated special interests also have the option of making a point in a Republican primary. Look no further than 2004 when the Rex Early wing of the GOP and Right to Life went after Finance Chairman Larry Borst, and in 2006 when Right to Work forces successfully targeted President Pro Tempore Robert D. Garton. The primary upset threat has been in place since 2002 when Sen. Steve Johnson was defeated by Jeff Drozda and the Right to Life forces. The upset of a Republican senator can be a policy change fulcrum.

So here is Alting in a district that includes Purdue University where an issue like cold beer might find traction with Boilermaker students, along with a constituency that includes Democrats who also align in the Klinker camp. And funders like Ricker's CEO Jay Ricker, who might be motivated to get involved in the 2018 cycle after the General Assembly crimped him this year, along with a Democratic mid-term trend, and there is a potential that SD22 could come into play.

It's way, waaaaaay too early to say much more than that.

U.S. Senate: Messer on American dream

Some Republican leaders are claiming a loss of faith in the American dream is tied to the opioid epidemic (Arnold, WBND-TV). In an effort to change that, they banded together Tuesday for the first hearing of the new Task Force for the American Worker. "When I grew up, I was taught the American dream.

If you work hard, and stayed focused, anything was possible... I think today, there are folks that don't believe that any longer," said Rep. Luke Messer, Republican Policy Committee chair. Messer says that's a huge problem for citizens and the economy as a whole. "There's been a lot of effort to get the top level of the economy going, but not enough effort on providing opportunity for working Americans. We're working on developing the agenda that will help get that," he said.

2020 Presidential

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg hung out with South Bend Mayor Pete Buttigieg and Elkhart firefighters on Saturday, setting off more speculation that he might be the next celebrity presidential candidate. "I've been going around to different states for my personal challenge for the year," Zuckerberg said in one video, "to see how different communities are working across the country. Seeing how people are living, how people are thinking about their work, their hopes, their challenges. It's been really interesting so far."

In Elkhart, Zuckerberg said, "I stopped by the



South Bend Mayor Pete Buttigieg with Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg last Saturday.

Elkhart Fire Department to meet the crew and for some of the ribs and chicken they were cooking. Almost all the firefighters have worked together for a while, and some even went to high school together. They give each other a ton of crap for being skinny, fat, tall or short, but they trust each other completely. When you're going into a burning building together, you have to. Thanks to the fire department for letting me crash your dinner. The community in Elkhart should sleep easier knowing this crew has their back."

On Sunday, former Vice President Joe Biden once again disappointed Democrats hoping to hear there might be another presidential bid in his future (CBS News). "Guys, I'm not running," Biden said in a speech to a New Hampshire Democrats on Sunday, who booed his decision not to run in 2020. "When I got asked to speak, I knew it was going to cause speculation," Biden said.

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Predicting the base rate of farm property

By **LARRY DeBOER**

WEST LAFAYETTE – The late great George Carlin had a routine about a weather forecaster. “The forecast for tonight, dark. Continued dark throughout the night, with scattered light in the morning.” Some predictions are easy.

Predicting the base rate of farmland used to be easy too. The base rate is the starting point for setting the assessed value of farmland for property taxes. The state’s Department of Local Government Finance (DLGF) recalculates it every year with a capitalization formula. They divide measures of farm income by a rate of return. The base rate for taxes this year is \$1,960 per acre.



Here’s how easy it was. The base rate for taxes in 2015 was calculated in 2014, averaging data from 2006 through 2011. There was a four-year lag between the most recent numbers and the base rate used for taxes. I could take numbers that were already in the books, feed them

through the DLGF’s set formula, and come up with a really accurate prediction. In January 2012, I predicted the base rate for 2014 at \$1,760. Nailed it. In January 2013, I predicted \$2,050 for 2015. Right again. It was no big deal, like “scattered light in the morning.”

Then, in 2016 the General Assembly changed the formula to eliminate the four-year lag. Now, the most recent numbers are used. The base rate for taxes in 2017 was calculated in 2016, with numbers up through 2015. That’s a two-year lag.

This is a good idea. The Indiana Supreme Court says that assessments for property taxes should be based on “objective measures of property wealth.” Surely the most recent “objective measures” should be used.

But in 2016, I wanted to predict the base rate for taxes in 2018. Now, I needed numbers on prices and yields for corn and soybeans for 2016. That year wasn’t over. So I needed predictions of those prices and yields. My co-author Tamara Ogle and I waited until late summer, then used the best projections of all those numbers that we could find. The predicted base rate for taxes in 2018 came out to \$1,770.

In March, the DLGF announced the base rate for 2018. It was \$1,850. I was off by \$80! It turned out that the actual prices for corn and soybeans were higher than the predictions I’d used, so the DLGF’s actual base rate calculation was higher. That produced an error of 4% – I’m tempted to say “just 4%” – but

after years of hitting the number on the nose, it looks bad. You can find the DLGF’s base rate memo and documentation at www.in.gov/dlgf/7016.htm.

How about a prediction for 2019? Our plan is to wait until summer to get a better read on prices, then publish an update in the Purdue Agricultural Economics Report in the fall. You can find that publication on the Purdue Agricultural Economics website, <http://ag.purdue.edu/agecon>. Look under the Extension tab.

But let’s take a look at the numbers now. The base rate is a six-year rolling average, ignoring the highest number of the six. In 2019, the numbers for 2017 will be included, and the numbers for 2011 will be dropped. The capitalized value – income divided by rate of return – for 2011 was \$3,699. That’s when corn was \$5.85 and soybeans were \$12.04 per bushel. Prices were much lower in 2016, \$3.69 for corn and \$9.50 for beans. The capitalized value for 2016 was \$2,416.

Prices in 2017 will be more like those from 2016 than those from 2011. That means \$3,699 will be replaced with a number like \$2,400. That should drop the base rate calculation to something like \$1,600, a 14% decline from \$1,850 in 2018.

The average capitalized value in the base rate formula from 2012 through 2014 is more than \$4,000. If commodity prices remain low, small numbers will replace big numbers in the base rate calculation for the next few years. The base rate will decline, and so will farmland property taxes.

The days of precise-to-the-dollar predictions of the base rate are over. There will be forecast errors. But we can say this, with near certainty. The forecast for the base rate, down. Continued down through the early 2020s, with scattered ups and downs after that. ❖

DeBoer is professor of agricultural economics at Purdue University.

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Bigger sometimes is just bigger

By **MORTON MARCUS**

INDIANAPOLIS – “Is that all you got to say this week?” HomeFree asks as he bends over my laptop at the diner. He’s that kind of fellow. Named for his illiterate mother’s favorite movie star, he is inquisitive with a preference for the obscure.



“Yes,” I reply. “I’m writing about the relationship between population in a metro area and its economy as measured by GDP.”

“Bigger is better,” he says. “The more people, the more and better things an economy can produce. That means the value of those things (their GDP) is also greater.”

“Not true,” is my rejoinder. “I took all 382 metro areas in the U.S. and found no meaningful statistical relationship between their population size and their Gross Domestic Product.”

“Can’t be,” HomeFree says. “Economists always talk about the good things that happen as an urban area gains population. Growth has been a virtue going back to biblical times.”

“No,” I insist, “there’s much more to it. There’s natural resources, location, education of the population, industry mix, and other factors at work. High per capita GDP doesn’t mean people are better-off. It does indicate the capacity of the economy to be productive and, perhaps, meet the needs of the population.”

I proceed, “Which Hoosier metro has the highest per capita GDP?”

I give him no time to answer. “It’s Columbus, ranking 18th out of those 382 metro areas. And what’s their population? They’re down there in 376th place.”

HomeFree seems puzzled; I press my advantage. “Elkhart-Goshen is just five places behind Columbus in per capita GDP, but ranks higher (217th) in population.”

“No relationship between population and GDP per person?” he asks.

“**Right,” I say, ‘but Indianapolis** ranks 34th in population nationally and 32nd in GDP per capita. Muncie is even more ‘balanced’ than Indy; it’s the most ‘balanced’ in the nation, ranking 329th in both measures.”

“How about New York, Chicago and other big cities?” he asks.

“Some of the biggest in population are also among the top in GDP per capita. New York is first in population and 11th in per capita GDP, but Chicago is third in population and only one place in front of Indianapolis in per capita GDP. The San Jose metro in California, on the other hand, is right behind Indianapolis in population at 35th

and is second in per capita GDP. Size alone doesn’t tell the story.

“Just think about Midland in the oil fields of Texas; that metro leads the nation in per capita GDP with lots of machinery producing a highly valued product, crude oil, with the 246th largest population.

“**Casper (WY) with all** that low sulphur coal is 12th in GDP per person, but 375th in number of persons. Weirton (WV)-Steubenville (OH) straddles the Ohio River in the heart of high sulphur coal and closed steel plants, struggling with 339th place on the GDP scale and 321st in population.

“It’s not how big you are, but what you can do with what you’ve got.” ❖

Mr. Marcus is an economist, writer, and speaker who may be reached at mortonjmarcus@yahoo.com.

Chief Dowling to launch Lake sheriff bid

By **RICH JAMES**

MERRILLVILLE – Although he has been on the campaign trail for about eight months, Schererville Police Chief David Dowling formally launched his bid for Lake County sheriff a week ago. Dowling is looking to become the first chief of a small town to become Lake County sheriff.



He spoke briefly to a sizable crowd at the Andorra Banquet Hall in Schererville, and he had two very noteworthy things to say about the race. Perhaps the most interesting

is that Dowling said he will retire from the Schererville Police Department prior to the 2018 Democratic primary. He didn’t elaborate as to why he would retire, but one got the feeling that he wanted to be unencumbered during the last few months prior to the election.

I suspect that it also makes Dowling look like a very serious candidate in that he will give up his current job while hoping to win a new one. And if he didn’t win the sheriff’s post, he would pretty much be without a job.

Dowling, who has spent his 33 years as a police officer, also talked at some length about his family, which has been involved in politics and law enforcement for decades. The family hails from Hammond, which could provide a pretty good base in a countywide race.

Dowling's father was a Hammond police chief and his grandfather was the mayor of Hammond. When he graduated from the Police Academy at Plainfield, Dowling said his father had a message for him. "This job will bring a lot of rewards," the senior Dowling said. "Never embarrass the name."

In terms of being honest, Dowling made reference to what is happening now, without mentioning Sheriff John Buncich. Buncich, who remains in office, is under federal indictment for allegedly taking bribes from tow truck

operators. Buncich has pleaded not guilty and is slated for trial in early August.

As he spoke to the crowd last week, Dowling said, "My promise to you is that I will never embarrass you." The reference, of course, was to Buncich without using his name. ❖

Rich James has been writing about state and local government and politics for more than 30 years. He is a columnist for The Times of Northwest Indiana.

Brooks will vote for TrumpCare

Howey Politics Indiana

INDIANAPOLIS – Several national publications had been listing U.S. Rep. Susan Brooks as "undecided" on today's vote on the American Health Care Act. But spokeswoman Kristen Johnson told Howey Politics Indiana on Wednesday, "That is incorrect. She's a yes."

She joins the other seven Republican members of the Indiana delegation who are expected to vote yes. The Washington Post is reporting this morning that 20 Republicans oppose the bill and 35 are undecided. The New York Times has 18 Republicans opposing and 33 undecided. Exiting the relatively brief leadership meeting, House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.) guaranteed victory. "Do we have the votes? Yes. Will we pass it? Yes," he told reporters.



Vice President Mike Pence and CMS Director Seema Verma spent the last three days on Capitol Hill seeking enough votes to get the AHCA to the 216 vote threshold.

Indiana Democratic Chairman John Zody said that Brooks "flipped" on the issue. "Congresswoman Brooks' apparent flip-flop feels like a betrayal to the hundreds of thousands of families in her district living with pre-existing conditions," said Zody. "For families, the Affordable Care Act meant a sense of security in knowing they would be covered. Brooks' decision erases that security." In early March, Brooks had indicated her support for protecting coverage for Hoosiers living with pre-existing conditions

but reports surfaced earlier this week that Brooks would vote in favor of the current version of the American Health Care Act, which likely eliminates protections for Hoosiers with pre-existing conditions, the news release stated. Zody questioned the sudden shift in Brooks' position.

House will vote today on TrumpCare

The House will vote Thursday on GOP legislation to repeal and replace Barack Obama's Affordable Care Act, as Republicans finally aim to deliver on seven years of campaign promises that helped them gain control of Congress and the White House (Werner & Fram, Associated Press). But the move announced late Wednesday by GOP leaders also carries extreme political risk, as House Republicans prepare to endorse a bill that boots millions off the insurance rolls and may not even survive the Senate. "We will pass this bill," House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., confidently predicted after a day of wrangling votes and personal arm-twisting by President Donald Trump. After an earlier defeat when Republican leaders were forced to pull the bill for lack of votes, the decision to move forward indicated confidence on the part of GOP leaders. Failure would be catastrophic. But a successful outcome would make good on the GOP's No. 1 goal of undoing Obama's signature legislative achievement, and provide a long-sought win for Trump, who has been in office more than 100 days without a significant congressional victory save Senate confirmation of a Supreme Court justice.

Donnelly opposes ACHA

U.S. Sen. Joe Donnelly (D-IN) posted a video on his official website that featured a Boone County mother and her family to underscore his opposition to the House American Health Care Act (Howey Politics Indiana). "I still believe we should work together to improve the health care law rather than pursuing a misguided effort, like the American Health Care Act, which would make premiums more expensive and take away critical protections from millions of Americans," Donnelly said. "I will continue fighting to protect health care for Hoosiers, and if you need a reminder of how high the stakes are for Indiana families,

listen to Rylin Rodgers." A 5-minute video discusses the impact of Obamacare on Rodgers, stating her children were born with complex neuromuscular conditions and were previously uninsurable.

House prevents shutdown

The House voted Wednesday to approve a bi-partisan spending plan, bringing the United States a big step closer to avoiding a government shutdown (Pramuk, CNBC). The bill, which would fund the government through the end of the fiscal year on Sept. 30, will go to the Senate, where it is expected to pass. The House voted 309 to 118 to approve the measure, as 103 Republicans voted against it. It follows two days of partisan spin on the nearly \$1.2 trillion measure, which came about after weeks of negotiations. The deal puts an additional \$15 billion toward President Donald Trump's planned military buildup and \$1.5 billion more for border security. Democrats talked up how the deal lacks funding for a wall on the border with Mexico, and pointed out that it does not include some of the massive cuts to domestic programs that Trump wanted. The president and House Speaker Paul Ryan both focused on defense and border security spending as Republican victories. On Tuesday, Trump called the bill a "clear win for the American people," while Ryan said "this is what winning looks like."

Messer, Banks, Hollingsworth oppose spending bill

Three Republican members of the Indiana's congressional delegation voted against the Consolidated Appropriations act which funds the federal government through the end of September (Howey Politics Indiana). Voting nay were Luke Messer, Jim Banks and Trey Hollingsworth. Supporters of the legislation included Republicans Jackie Walorski, Todd Rokita, Susan Brooks, and Larry Bucshon. Democrats Peter Visclosky and Andre Carson also voted yea.

Banks said, "This legislation fails to properly address our \$20 trillion national debt and reduce the size and scope of the federal government. As work immediately begins on next year's spending bills, I am hopeful that Congress will follow the regular budget order and work with the Trump Administration to cut spending and change the Washington status quo."

Hollingsworth ex-

plained, "The spending bill that was brought before the House of Representatives today failed, yet again, to address the conservative principles that Hoosiers and Americans demanded to see this past November. For this reason, I voted against this \$1.1 trillion spending measure that neglected critical priorities such as our nation's nearly \$20 trillion debt."

Rokita says budget helps Trump agenda

U.S. Rep. Todd Rokita (R-IN) issued the following statement after voting to fund the federal government for the remainder of the 2017 fiscal year. It passed 309 - 118. "Today I voted to keep President Trump's agenda moving forward by keeping spending flat and better ordering our priorities," Rokita stated. "As Vice-Chairman of the Budget Committee, I can confirm that the funding bill keeps the federal government within the budget caps. This helps ensure fiscal discipline. Equally important, we broke the Democrat's long-standing priority on a dollar for dollar match for defense and non-defense discretionary spending, which before now, allowed some programs to have an out-weighted influence over limited funds. While keeping spending flat, this bill re-prioritizes existing funds to keep Americans safe, reauthorizes school choice programs and enhances border security."

Walorski budget will make U.S. safer

U.S. Rep. Jackie Walorski said, "This fiscally responsible bill makes America safer with critical investments in rebuilding our depleted military, and it ends the arbitrary Obama-era practice of matching increases in defense spending with increases in non-defense spending. We are



putting our national security first by providing the resources our military needs to defeat any enemy and giving our troops their largest pay raise in six years. This legislation also supports new border security improvements, provides resources for state and local efforts to combat the opioid epidemic, prevents new spending on Obamacare, and maintains important pro-life protections to prevent taxpayer funding for abortion. I look forward to continuing to work with President Trump and my colleagues to roll back the bureaucratic overreach of the Obama administration, restore fiscal sanity to Washington, and pass pro-growth tax reform that will jumpstart our economy."

Carson says budget step in 'right direction'

U.S. Rep. André Carson (D-IN) said, "While today's omnibus appropriations bill is a compromise and does not fully fund every Democratic priority, I voted for it because it is a step in the right direction and a compromise that averts another government shutdown. This spending bill funds the Indianapolis Red Line project and provides a critical increase for the National Institutes of Health, which supports research jobs across Central Indiana. It reinstates year-round Pell grants and funds critical nutrition, clean water, law enforcement, job training, and infrastructure programs. This compromise also removed many controversial proposals. It includes no funding for President Trump's immoral and expensive border wall with Mexico and does not cut funding to Planned Parenthood or sanctuary cities. I am disappointed this bill could not pass until 7 months into the fiscal year. This is an irresponsible way for Republican leadership to govern. Despite this, this legislation keeps the government open and eliminates the uncertainty and economic instability that results from the kind of short-term 'fixes' that have been too commonplace over the last few years."

Budget opens path for South Shore

South Shore Line expansion supporters consider the five-month federal spending plan approved Wednesday by the U.S. House to be a win for their cause, even though the West Lake and double-tracking projects weren't yet eligible to be funded (Carden, NWI Times). The Consolidated Appropriations Act, expected to be signed into law Friday, includes \$2.5 billion in grants for transit system capital projects across the country, including \$100 million to modernize the Red and Purple "L" lines in Chicago and \$50 million for an Indianapolis bus rapid transit system. Perhaps more importantly, the measure signals that the Republican-controlled Congress remains committed to promoting economic development through new and improved transit connections, despite Republican President Donald Trump's desire to slash federal transportation spending. U.S. Rep. Pete Visclosky, D-Merrillville, said he's pleased his colleagues once again recognized the transit grant program "represents an economic investment in communities across the nation. U.S. Sen. Todd Young, R-Ind., agreed.

He said funding the nation's transportation needs is vital to the economy. Congressional support for South Shore expansion crosses party lines as Visclosky, a veteran Democrat, is working with U.S. Rep. Jackie Walorski, R-Jimtown, in the House; and Young is promoting the cause alongside U.S. Sen. Joe Donnelly, D-Ind.

Trump reportedly mulls RFRA order

President Trump may issue an executive order on religious freedom Thursday, and activist groups on both sides are preparing for a fight (Berman, WIBC). Brigitte Amiri with the American Civil Liberties Union acknowledges it's unclear exactly what the executive order will contain -- but if it looks anything like a draft that was leaked three months ago, she says the ACLU will go to court. The pro-gay rights Human Rights Campaign predicts lawsuits from several other groups will follow "very rapidly." The February draft gave people the right to exclude abortion and birth control from insurance coverage for religious reasons, and banned the IRS from treating comments on traditional marriage as political commentary that could justify a church's tax-exempt case. The Human Rights Campaign's Sarah Warbelow warns the changes could curtail same-sex partners' rights to adopt children or visit their spouses in a sickbed. Curt Smith with the Indiana Family Institute says religious-run hospitals, shelters and other social services shouldn't have to go against church doctrine in areas like abortion in order to continue the rest of their mission. He says faith doesn't stop at the church or synagogue door, and contends after the fierce backlash over Indiana's religious freedom law in 2015, the pendulum is swinging back toward a belief that religious groups' rights have been "trampled."

Donnelly says better without RFRA

U.S. Sen. Joe Donnelly (D-Indiana) says the administration has not talked publicly about the coming RFRA issue. "I don't want to speculate, but I do want to say that one of the things we found in Indiana is we're a much better state, a much stronger state, when we welcome everyone, when we bring everyone together," Donnelly told Eyewitness News on Wednesday. "When we try to divide, it weakens us. When we bring everyone together, it makes us stronger. Donnelly says he has heard rumors of this executive order, but no specifics on what it might contain.

Trump church order expected

President Donald Trump is likely to sign an executive order Thursday targeting a rarely enforced IRS rule that says religious organizations and other non-profits that endorse political candidates risk losing their tax-exempt status (Lukey, Associated Press). Two administration officials said Wednesday that Trump would likely sign an order including language on the rule, but stressed nothing was finalized. ❖

George Will, Washington Post: It is urgent for Americans to think and speak clearly about President Trump's inability to do either. This seems to be not a mere disinclination but a disability. It is not merely the result of intellectual sloth but of an untrained mind bereft of information and married to stratospheric self-confidence. Now, however, he has instructed us that Andrew Jackson was angry about the Civil War that began 16 years after Jackson's death. Having, let us fancifully imagine, considered and found unconvincing William Seward's 1858 judgment that the approaching Civil War was "an irrepressible conflict," Trump says: "People don't realize, you know, the Civil War, if you think about it, why? People don't ask that question, but why was there the Civil War? Why could that one not have been worked out?" Library shelves groan beneath the weight of books asking questions about that war's origins, so who, one wonders, are these "people" who don't ask the questions that Trump evidently thinks have occurred to him uniquely? What is most alarming (and mortifying to the University of Pennsylvania, from which he graduated) is not that Trump has entered his eighth decade unscathed by even elementary knowledge about the nation's history. As this column has said before, the problem isn't that he does not know this or that, or that he does not know that he does not know this or that. Rather, the dangerous thing is that he does not know what it is to know something. The United States is rightly worried that a strange and callow leader controls North Korea's nuclear arsenal. North Korea should reciprocate this worry. Yes, a 70-year-old can be callow if he speaks as sophomorically as Trump did when explaining his solution to Middle Eastern terrorism: "I would bomb the s--- out of them. . . . I'd blow up the pipes, I'd blow up the refineries, I'd blow up every single inch, there would be nothing left." As a candidate, Trump did not know what the nuclear triad is. Asked about it, he said: "I think -- I think, for me, nuclear is just the power, the devastation is very important to me." Someone Trump deemed fit to be a spokesman for him appeared on television to put a tasty dressing on her employer's word salad: "What good does it do to have a good nuclear triad if you're afraid to use it?" To which a retired Army colonel appearing on the same program replied with amazed asperity: "The point of the nuclear triad is to be afraid to use the damn thing." ❖

Matt Tully, IndyStar: Many have told me, in emails helpfully cc'd to the bosses, that I'm so liberal that they cannot continue subscribing. As you can imagine, these threats (or promises) are not the least bit effective. Why? Well, first, because offering opinions is in my job description. Second, there's not a political opinion on earth that doesn't tick someone off, so seeking to avoid complaints would be both an impossible goal and one that would result in nothing but wishy-washy columns. I thought

about this over the weekend as liberal readers of the New York Times reacted with similar outrage to the first column published by the paper's new conservative columnist, Bret Stephens. Stephens' column dealt with the issue of climate change and centered on his argument that the rhetoric of many environmentalists is ahead of the science. I thought the column was weak. ❖

Thomas Friedman, New YorkTimes: Has the first 100 days of the presidency made Donald Trump nuts? I don't ask that question as a doctor. I don't do medical diagnoses. I ask it as a newspaper reader. You read all of Trump's 100-day interviews and they are just bizarre. Out of nowhere Trump tells us he would be "honored" to negotiate directly with the leader of North Korea, after weeks of threatening war. Out of nowhere he says he would consider a gasoline tax to pay for infrastructure. Out of nowhere he says he is considering breaking up the nation's biggest banks. He also insists that his Obamacare replacement legislation contains protections for people with pre-existing conditions that it doesn't. There's barely a dictator in the world for whom he doesn't have praise. And he repeats a known falsehood -- that Barack Obama wiretapped him -- and tells reporters they should go find the truth, when, as president, he could get the truth from the F.B.I. with one phone call, and when pressed whether he stands by that allegation, answers, "I don't stand by anything." Is this a political strategy unfolding or a psychiatric condition unfolding? I don't know -- but it tells me that absolutely anything is possible in the next 100 days -- both good and bad. Trump was always going to be an unpredictable work in progress because he did no homework before coming to office -- which is why he now tells us that he's finding so many problems more difficult than he anticipated -- and because he didn't know most of his cabinet members. They're sort of a pickup basketball team, bound not by a shared vision but by a shared willingness to overlook Trump's core ignorance, instability and indecency and serve in key jobs as much to restrain him as to be guided by him. ❖

Chris Cillizza, CNN: Donald Trump has been president for 99 days. And, in an interview with Reuters Thursday, it sounds like he misses the days when he, well, wasn't president. "I loved my previous life, I loved my previous life. I had so many things going," Trump told Reuters. "I actually, this is more work than my previous life. I thought it would be easier. Then, later: "I do miss my old life. This -- I like to work. But this is actually more work." That sentiment is, in a word, strange. For a few reasons. It's absolutely true that all presidents express -- privately and then, eventually, publicly -- some level of longing for the life they left behind or the life they will return to. But that usually happens after, say, seven or eight years in the White House. Not after 99 days. ❖



Comey defends Clinton decision

WASHINGTON — James B. Comey, the F.B.I. director, sharply defended his decision to notify Congress about new emails in the Hillary Clinton investigation just before Election Day, reopening on Wednesday the still-raw debate over whether he cost her the presidency (New York Times). Mr. Comey's remarks at a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing were his first public explanation for his actions, which roiled the campaign in its final days and cast a harsh spotlight on him. He acknowledged that revealing the renewed inquiry and enduring the torrent of criticism that followed had taken a toll. "It makes me mildly nauseous to think that we might have had some impact on the election," he told the senators. "But honestly, it wouldn't change the decision." He displayed unusual emotion Wednesday in explaining his motives. By turns animated and defensive, at one point throwing his arms up to punctuate a point, the typically unflappable Mr. Comey argued that he had been left with no choice when he sent a letter to Congress on Oct. 28 disclosing that his agents had just uncovered emails that might have been relevant to the Clinton investigation. "Concealment, in my view, would have been catastrophic," he said, adding later that he knew the decision would be "disastrous for me personally."



Organist defiled church

NASHVILLE, Ind. — A Bloomington man who was the Sunday morning organist at St. David's Episcopal Church in Bean Blossom has admitted he is the one who spray painted words and symbols of hate on the church back in November, but said he had no evil intent (Bloomington Herald-Times). Instead, he feared the impact of the Donald Trump adminis-

tration, police say, and took a drastic step to draw attention to his concerns. George Nathaniel Stang, 26, called the Rev. Kelsey Hutto early the morning of Sunday, Nov. 13, to report he had discovered vandalism after he arrived at the church before services. Wednesday, he was charged with institutional criminal mischief, a misdemeanor punishable by up to a year in jail and a \$5,000 fine. Brown County Prosecutor Ted Adams issued a news release saying the investigation into the graffiti — a swastika, along with the words "Fag Church" and "Heil Trump" on the exterior walls of the church — led police to conclude Stang's action was not intended as a hate crime. "Stang stated that he wanted to mobilize a movement after being disappointed in and fearful of the outcome of the national election," Adams' news release said.

Rep. Bacon seeks disaster order

WASHINGTON — State Rep. Ron Bacon (R-Chandler) is reaching out to the governor's office, asking the executive branch to declare portions of Southwest Indiana a disaster area due to flooding caused by near record rainfall, the House Republican Caucus announced. Bacon said hundreds of acres of farmland in Warrick and surrounding counties are under water. Rain and inclement weather throughout the spring season destroyed crops and closed down flooded roadways. The governor's office is working with the Indiana Department of Homeland Security on Bacon's request for the flooded areas of Southwest Indiana to be declared a disaster area. Bacon said if a disaster area is declared, there may be some financial relief for damaged property from the State's Disaster Relief Fund.

Mt. Baldy set to reopen

MICHIGAN CITY — Indiana

Dunes National Lakeshore officials say they're ready to reopen the beach near Mount Baldy nearly four years after the massive dune swallowed a 6-year-old boy (Indiana Public Media). National Lakeshore spokesman Bruce Rowe told The (Northwest Indiana) Times on Wednesday that a date has yet to be selected to reopen the beach along Lake Michigan in northern Indiana. Mount Baldy itself will remain closed to visitors because research shows more holes are likely to open on the massive dune. An estimated 11-feet of sand swallowed a 6-year-old boy from Sterling, Illinois, for more than three hours before he was rescued July 12, 2013.

Storm cripples Brown Co. SP

NASHVILLE, Ind. — Crews are clearing campground sites and trails at Brown County State Park after last weekend's storms downed trees throughout the park. About 20 state park employees were hard at work Wednesday clearing sites and trails for park visitors. As of Wednesday afternoon, only Trail 5 and the Discover Trail near the nature center were completely clear of downed trees. Haulter said Trail 7 was passable. The mountain bike trails throughout Brown County State Park are completely shut down for now because of downed trees and the wet conditions after several days of heavy rains.

Chrysler named to state defense office

INDIANAPOLIS — Danielle Chrysler has been named director of the Indiana Office of Defense Development (McGowan, Inside Indiana Business). She is a member of the Indiana National Guard 215th Area Support Medical Company and previously served as chief operations officer and president of the Indianapolis-based National Center for Complex Operations. Chrysler served as chief of staff and deputy chief of staff for former Lieutenant Governor Becky Skillman.