

DIALOGUE

Submit letters to: The Inquirer, Box 8263, Philadelphia, 19101

inquirer.letters@phillynews.com | Fax: 215-854-5884

150-word limit. Writers must include home address and day and evening phone number.

Reduce N.J. school districts

As someone involved with the senior community, and as an advocate for our elder residents, I know the challenges seniors face every day due to the high cost of living in New Jersey. One change that is long overdue is the merging of school districts. There are approximately 600 school districts in New Jersey, which is senseless when there aren't even 600 towns. There is no rational reason for this many school districts, and it costs residents more money every year. I agree with State Senate President Steve Sweeney, who wants to make a change so that these school districts can consolidate in a way that saves taxpayer money but doesn't disrupt children's education. This is a much better approach than what we have now.

Leona Mather, Monroeville

Term limits for City Council

Councilman Allan Domb's call for term limits on Philadelphia City Council is smart and reasonable. Offices more important than those in this city are term-limited; it was a smart move to limit the presidency to two terms. Lincoln Steffens published *The Shame of the Cities* in 1904: Philadelphia deserved its reputation as "a place of corrupt political machines" without regard for its citizens, devoted to its own interests and not the common good. It's past time to change a system that protects corruption.

Ellen Kennedy, Philadelphia

Hoax inflames bigotry

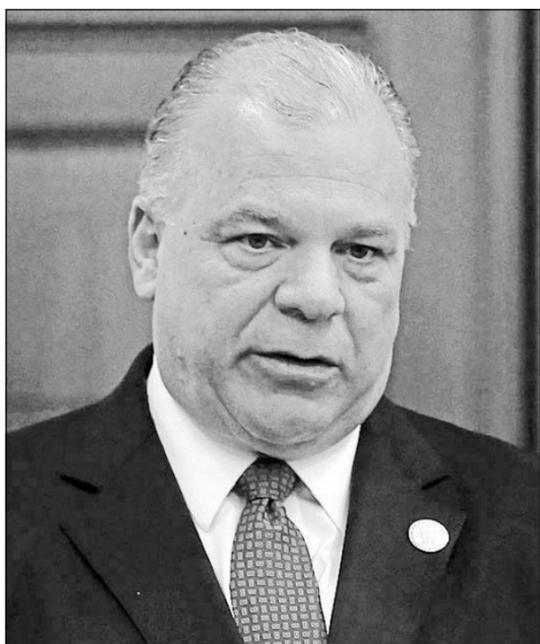
It's offensive to me as a white person, who was initially horrified by the supposed attack on Jussie Smollett, to read that columnist Jenice Armstrong feels that bigots are gloating over this fabricated incident. The superintendent of Chicago police, who openly expressed disgust that a black man would resort to using a noose, is African American. And the judge at the bond hearing, also African American, used the words *vile* and *despicable* in reference to the staged assault.

Mary Ellen Mahoney, Blue Bell, kulmax@comcast.net

Prejudice and perspectives

As an American, I was disgusted that senators chose to validate in public a newly discovered 30-year-old "assault" charge against Supreme Court candidate without any evidence or corroboration. I place a much higher value on the judge's demonstrated competence and sterling behavior, seconded by scores of people, in his personal and professional life. As a Republican, I could care less that a Democratic governor wore blackface at a private event decades ago, and that it appeared in his medical school yearbook. I care much more about his willingness to smear a political opponent as a racist during the campaign for governor less than two years ago. As a Jew, I am a bit flummoxed that a person is forced to resign from a college trustee position as a result of a Nazi costume that he wore at a fraternity party decades ago. I am much more concerned that he has been a good citizen in the years that followed that event.

Stew Bolno, Philadelphia, stewbolno@comcast.net



An advocate for elder residents likes an idea by N.J. Senate President Steve Sweeney (D., Gloucester) to consolidate school districts.

Path to clean natural gas

Banning the safe production and use of clean, affordable, and domestic natural gas, as shared in a Feb. 14 column, is a surefire way to reverse environmental progress and squash sustained economic growth, especially among Pennsylvania's working middle class. Despite the outspoken views of extreme activists, we don't have to choose between a healthy, thriving environment or economic growth. With Pennsylvania-produced natural gas, we can and do have both.

Pennsylvania has tough modern regulations that, combined with industry-leading best practices, protect our air and water. And as more clean natural gas is used in power generation, critical, asthma-causing air pollutants such as sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxide, and particulate matter plummet. Nationwide, greenhouse gas emissions have fallen to the lowest point since the early 1990s, making the United States a global leader. Crediting natural gas for this measurable air quality progress, Pennsylvania's top environmental regulator, Patrick McDonnell, told lawmakers recently that "we were already well on our way" to achieving the Obama-era Clean Power Plan targets "and have actually since met those proposed goals primarily because of the shift toward cleaner natural gas."

Alongside this progress, natural gas production and safe transportation are directly benefitting Pennsylvanians, as Peco customers, for example, are enjoying an average of \$1,600 annually in home energy savings. Radical anti-energy policies will cause lasting damage to Pennsylvania's economy and environment. We're proud of the progress we've achieved and remain committed to the responsible development of the Pennsylvania energy that's moving our state — and environment — forward.

David Spigelmyer, Marcellus Shale Coalition, Pittsburgh

COMMENTARY

Time to undo Establishment Clause tangle

For decades the U.S. Supreme Court has entangled itself in Establishment Clause decisions that have been, in the words of *Alice in Wonderland*, curiouser and curiousest. On Wednesday, it can leaven with clarity the confusion it has sown.

The First Amendment's first words say, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion." The court conducts its business after a chant that includes the United States and this honorable court," and both houses of Congress have taxpayer-paid chaplains who pray for divine guidance. The court has, however, held that any policy or practice by a public entity that touches religion, however marginally, violates the Establishment Clause unless (a) it has a secular purpose and (b) its primary effect neither advances nor inhibits religion and (c) it does not foster excessive government entanglement with religion. In

curs there each Veterans Day. There is no record that a religious event has ever been held there.

But a few cranky, pernickety, hairsplitting sectularists, with religious zeal, say that the cross on public land, so the Establishment Clause is violated. A district court affirmed the obvious: Honoring the war dead is a secular purpose. But a divided three-judge panel reversed. Engaging in something akin to Jesuitical casuistry, two judges said a cross must everywhere and always be a primarily symbol of Jesus' death, and because government provides maintenance for the plot in the roundabout, this cross excessively entangles government with religion.

In 1984, the court added an "endorsement" consideration: Would a commonsensical observer of a government display that includes a symbol with religious overtones — an observer knowing how the display came about — think the government is using it to "endorse" religion? In 1989, the court sidled even closer to wisdom, with a "coercion" criterion. Rather than igniting tens of thousands of skirmishes aimed at scrubbing all visual religious references to religion from this nation's public spaces (including the names of Corpus Christi, Texas, and Las Cruces, N.M.), let's say this: Religion is not "established" when a passive monument on government property in no way coerces reasonable, informed passersby to believe, practice, or support religion.

It was for reasons of traffic safety that the government in 1961 acquired the ground on which the Bladensburg cross sits. If, 58 years later, a few people in this age of hair-trigger rage choose to be offended by a long-standing monument reflecting the nation's culture and traditions, those people, not the First Amendment, need help. The court should so rule when, some time before this term ends in June, it announces its decision in this case, as the nine justices sit beneath a frieze that includes a symbol of religion: Moses with the Ten Commandments. Bladensburg last had the nation's attention because of the shambolic events of Aug. 24, 1814. President James Madison fled from there, where feeble American resistance enabled British soldiers to proceed to torch the president's house and the Capitol. At Wednesday's oral argument, the court, sitting across the street from the Capitol, set from to tidy up its Establishment Clause jurisprudence that Justice Clarence Thomas correctly says is "in shambles."

George F. Will writes a twice-weekly column on politics and domestic and foreign affairs. He began his column with the Washington Post in 1974, and he received the Pulitzer Prize for commentary in 1977. @georgewill



GEORGE WILL @GeorgeWillRSS



Bladensburg Peace Cross, a WWI memorial in Prince George's County, Md. ALGERINA PERNA / Baltimore Sun

1983, the court held, rudely but prudently, that Nebraska's Legislature could continue being prayed over by its paid chaplain, thereby implying that the chaplain negligibly advanced religion. (The First Congress hired a chaplain, but James Madison, principal progenitor of the First Amendment, later said tersely that this "was not with my approbation.")

The court has refereed controversies involving, among many other things, the permissible quantity of religious symbols in Christmas displays on public property, where and what kind of displays of the Ten Commandments are constitutional, and what cannot be said to "solemnize" a high school football game in Texas, where football hardly needs solemnity to be infused. The court held that books but not maps can be provided by public funds to parochial schools, causing the late Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan to wonder: What about atlases, which are books of maps?

Come Wednesday, the court will worry about a war memorial 4.8 miles away in Bladensburg, Md. In 1925, the Peace Cross, privately built on land given by the town to an American Legion post, was dedicated to 49 local men killed in World War I, when crosses marked most overseas graves of U.S. dead regardless of their religious affiliations. Time passed, the population grew, a local government commission acquired the land, which is now in a traffic roundabout. A commemoration event oc-

monument on government property in no way coerces reasonable, informed passersby to believe, practice, or support religion.

It was for reasons of traffic safety that the government in 1961 acquired the ground on which the Bladensburg cross sits. If, 58 years later, a few people in this age of hair-trigger rage choose to be offended by a long-standing monument reflecting the nation's culture and traditions, those people, not the First Amendment, need help. The court should so rule when, some time before this term ends

A cross-shaped WWI memorial is a chance for the Supreme Court to clarify the Establishment Clause.

Bladensburg last had the nation's attention because of the shambolic events of Aug. 24, 1814. President James Madison fled from there, where feeble American resistance enabled British soldiers to proceed to torch the president's house and the Capitol. At Wednesday's oral argument, the court, sitting across the street from the Capitol, set from to tidy up its Establishment Clause jurisprudence that Justice Clarence Thomas correctly says is "in shambles."

George F. Will writes a twice-weekly column on politics and domestic and foreign affairs. He began his column with the Washington Post in 1974, and he received the Pulitzer Prize for commentary in 1977. @georgewill

Could Harris deliver on Medicare for all? Truth will be in the details

By Mark V. Pauly

U.S. Sen. Kamala Harris, at a recent CNN Town Hall, said the solution for providing quality health care for everyone at an affordable price is this: "We need to have Medicare for all."

To the follow-up "Obama gotcha" question — those who like their [private] insurance don't get to keep it? — the California Democrat and presidential candidate had a ready reply.

"The idea is that everyone gets access to medical care, and you don't have to go through the process of going through an insurance company, having them give you approval. ... Let's eliminate all of that; let's move on."

My first reaction, being the designated person in my household for dealing with our kindly insurance company, was prospective relief from paperwork. It was quickly followed by my usual economist's skepticism about a free lunch. For one thing, I am due to join the current Medicare program (for old folks) when I retire during a prospective Harris' term of office. For another, as part of my role as an expert, I have had to learn a fair amount about how that program actually works.

So, I asked myself whether Kamala Harris could deliver what she promised.

(A personal note: Sen. Harris' father, Don, was my colleague when we were both assistant professors at Northwestern University years ago. I do not remember Kamala, but she must have been one of the many children present at faculty social gatherings. I do remember that I considered giving the faculty children a brief but sobering lecture on Medicare's expected tax burdens if



What would "Medicare for all," as touted recently by presidential candidate and U.S. Sen. Kamala Harris (D., Calif.), mean? TONY AVELAR / AP

they did not behave themselves.) The problem is that the label "Medicare for All" has been attached to a variety of different proposals from various Democrats, and their relationship to today's Medicare program is only slight. There are two important features of Medicare they all ignore:

- 1) It sometimes requires approval before paying doctors for some services.
- 2) The approval of coverage and development of payment policies for benefits are actually done by private insurance companies under contract with Medicare, and their policies vary across states. (In Pennsylvania, the subsidiary is Novitas Services, a subsidiary of Guidewell Group associated with Florida Blue Cross.) In addition, more than 95 percent of beneficiaries have opted for Medicare Advantage, which is coverage under

private managed care plans in lieu of traditional Medicare, and all outpatient drug coverage is administered by private plans.

Sen. Harris was forthright in saying that under her plan, eventually you would not be allowed to keep your current employment-based plan (like the one I am on now) or any private Medicare Advantage plan (some of which my contemporaries praise). But, she says, not to worry, you will like the single public plan much better.

I might like it, if it pays more for services that I like than for others I don't (though not everyone may agree with me on which is which). Of course, we as beneficiaries would all wish that insurance paid well for every service, so doctors and hospitals would pay more attention to us, although as taxpayers and premium-payers, we would prefer that it paid less for everyone but us.

So, I remain a little nervous about Sen. Harris' plan, and wish I had paid more attention to the leaders of tomorrow at my feet when I was in my first academic job. One may hope more realistic details will be forthcoming. There is no shortage of goodwill and good intentions among the emerging and impressive list of candidates and plans. However, realism, being the most valuable political commodity, is also the scarcest.

Mark V. Pauly is Bendheim Professor in the department of health care management, professor of health-care management, and professor of business economics and public policy at the Wharton School, and professor of economics in the School of Arts and Sciences at the University of Pennsylvania. He is also a member of the Inquirer's Health Advisory Panel.