

ADE DAILY NEWS CLIPS

May 3, 2013

April showers \$99.2 million more on state (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

State general revenue surged last month, exceeding year-ago collections by \$99.2 million and the state's forecast by \$88.1 million in what the state's chief fiscal officer and others referred to as the "April surprise."

April's tax collections increased by 13.8 percent over April 2012 figures to \$817.4 million - the largest amount that the state has ever collected in any one month - the state Department of Finance and Administration reported Thursday.

The previous record for a month was \$718.2 million in April 2012. Historically, the state's best month for revenue is the one in which state tax returns are due. In recent years, that month has been in April, though it was May in earlier years.

Richard Weiss, the state's chief fiscal officer, attributed the nearly \$100 million increase in general revenue last month to a large increase in individual income tax collections, mostly from high-income earners, many of whom declared income early to avoid paying higher federal taxes that went into effect on Jan. 1.

Arkansas' increased tax revenue in April is mostly made up of one-time gains, Weiss said.

"Our forecast is still good, but we got a big influx of money that was not anticipated," he told reporters. "We got a big April surprise."

Since state income taxes are mostly tied to the federal income tax code, most states are seeing "an April surprise just like the feds are seeing," said Ron Alt, senior research associate for the Washington, D.C.-based Federation of Tax Administrators.

West Virginia is an example of another state benefiting from the April surprise, said John Shelnett, Arkansas' chief economic forecaster, pointing to news reports that West Virginia's personal income tax revenue last month increased by 30 percent, or \$58 million, over April 2012 in a one-time windfall.

Last month, higher-income taxpayers paid state income taxes on dividends, capital gains, business transactions and stock bonuses rather than waiting to pay it in the future so that they could avoid higher federal income tax rates, said Tim Leathers, deputy director of Arkansas' finance department.

During the first 10 months of fiscal 2013 in Arkansas, gross general revenue increased by \$240.8 million (4.9 percent) over the same period in fiscal 2012 to \$5.149 billion. That exceeded the state's forecast in November by \$128.8 million (2.6 percent).

So far in fiscal 2013, collections from individual income taxes have increased by \$222.3 million (9.1 percent) to \$2.657 billion and exceeded the forecast by \$163.3 million (6.5 percent).

Tax refunds and several other government expenditures, including court-ordered desegregation payments, come off the top of "gross" general revenue, leaving a "net" general revenue that agencies are allowed to spend.

In fiscal 2013, net general revenue has increased so far by \$240.1 million (6.1 percent) over the same period in fiscal 2012 to \$4.145 billion, exceeding the forecast by \$163.9 million (4.1 percent).

On Wednesday, Gov. Mike Beebe's administration boosted its general revenue forecast by \$34.2 million for fiscal 2013 and by \$11.7 million for fiscal 2014, citing slightly stronger-than-expected economic growth.

According to the finance department, April's general revenue included:

A \$102.2 million (21.9 percent) increase in individual income taxes over a year ago to \$568.3 million. That exceeded the state's forecast by \$99.7 million (21.3 percent).

Individual income tax withholdings increased by \$2.6 million over a year ago to \$241.5 million and estimated individual income tax payments decreased by \$4.2 million to \$48.9 million, said tax analyst Whitney McLaughlin. Estimated payments are generally for taxes owed on income not subject to withholding, such as interest and dividends, capital gains, self-employment income, etc, she said.

Individual income tax payments for taxes due April 15 and filed with income tax returns and payments made with a filed tax extension increased by \$103.8 million over a year ago to \$277.9 million, she said.

Much of the increase in recent collections represents income shifted to tax year 2012 and paid in fiscal 2013, according to the finance department.

"Larger than anticipated payments with filing extensions and returns received in April for tax year 2012 resulted from taxpayer strategy and improved business earnings. Other states and the IRS are reporting similar results this month," the department said. "The gain included multiple types of activity, including tax shift strategy, expedited return processing compared to a year ago and one time-business transactions. Expedited returns processing potentially pulled activity from May collections into April."

A \$4.5 million (2.5 percent) decrease in sales and use tax collections over a year ago to \$174.2 million, which fell short of the state's forecast by \$12 million (6.5 percent).

Slow job and income growth, low inflation and “the diversion effect on taxable sales from elevated motor fuel costs to consumers in recent months” are contributing to ongoing weakness in sales and use tax collections, according to the finance department.

A \$1.1 million (2.9 percent) increase over a year ago to \$39.9 million in corporate income taxes. That fell \$1.5 million (3.6 percent) short of the state’s forecast. Corporate income tax collections often fluctuate based on corporations’ federal tax strategies, according to the department.

Richard Wilson, assistant director of research for the Bureau of Legislative Research, summed up April’s tax collections: “It was a pretty good month.”

Walton unit gives \$8 million to group (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

The Walton Family Foundation announced that it will give \$8 million over two years to a national organization that gave Arkansas a D grade on its state education policies.

The 2013 State Policy Report Card produced by Students First ranks Arkansas at No. 26 in the nation for its education policies. The report criticizes the state’s education policies related to teaching, charter schools, and the governance and financing of schools.

“Most states didn’t come out looking very good,” said Ed Kirby, deputy director in the education changes area of the foundation. “It’s really just a reflection of how far we need to go as a country.”

The Walton Family Foundation wants to see states enact policies that give families, especially those that are poor, greater control and power of their children’s educations, Kirby said.

In the report card for Arkansas, Students First recommends that the state eliminate automatic salary increases for teachers with master’s degrees, and instead tie pay increases to a teacher’s success with students. It recommends removing restrictions on the growth of charter schools.

The Arkansas report card also suggests that state policymakers establish a publicly funded scholarship program that allows low-income students to leave chronically failing schools, establish financing programs for charter-school construction, allow full mayoral control of low-performing districts and provide portable employer-sponsored retirement plans, such as 401(k) plans, for teachers.

Arkansas Department of Education spokesman Phyllis Stewart said department officials could not comment on the report card because the officials have not had a chance to review it.

While Students First focuses on several areas, the organization’s efforts around expanding parents’ options best fit with the priorities of the Walton Family Foundation, Kirby said.

“American society has long supported choice in K-through-12 education,” Kirby said. “The problem is there’s a huge divide between who actually has access to choice and who doesn’t. It’s tragically all about resources.”

Families with more money can afford to buy homes in communities that have high-performing schools or send their children to private schools, Kirby said. Poor families do not have the same opportunities, he said.

CSD plan to reduce almost \$985,000 is continuing (Ashley News Observer)

The Crossett School District is continuing to work toward implementing an 18-step fiscal plan, according to district financial manager Norman Hill.

The plan was presented to, and approved by, the school board in February and submitted to the state.

Hill and interim superintendent Tommy Tyler told the board at the February meeting that the steps were needed to avoid having the district placed in fiscal distress by the state.

The total amount of reduction in the plan is \$984,918.

The objectives in the plan include not replacing some positions where retirements and resignations are slated for this school year, the use of the district's RIF, or reduction in force, policy for others, and the non-renewal of some programs.

Among the positions slated for RIF elimination in the plan are that of full-time athletic director and one agriculture teacher.

The board voted in March to cut the ROTC program at Crossett High School as part of the deficit reduction plan.

Among the reductions outlined in the plan as presented in February are the cutting of \$595,347 from the salary and operating funds, \$65,000 from ALE funds, \$81,774 from Title II-A funds, \$130,485 from professional development funds and \$112,211 from National School Lunch Act, or NSLA, funds.

Tyler told the board in February that he and Hill began looking at areas where funds could be cut when the district was notified by the Arkansas Department of Education that the district faces being placed in fiscal distress if financial matters are not improved.

26th Business Expo attempts to steer Pine Bluff forward (Pine Bluff Commercial)

Pine Bluff's elected leadership must do a better job of reducing crime and changing the perception of the city as crime-ridden, Simmons First National Corp. CEO-elect George Makris Jr. said to nearly 600 businesspeople assembled for the Business Expo Breakfast on Thursday morning.

Makris was the featured speaker at the kickoff to the 26th Annual Pine Bluff Regional Chamber of Commerce Business Expo, which ran from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the Pine Bluff Convention Center. He touched on the recent controversy over residency requirements for city department heads, including the police chief.

“When it comes to public safety the city needs the most qualified professionals to implement a crime reduction plan,” Makris said. “In order to do that Pine Bluff must be able to select from the best available candidates. That cannot be done if artificial barriers to employment are put up. If Jefferson Regional Medical Center required people to live in the Pine Bluff city limits this city would not have the quality health care that we do have.”

Makris said the implementation of an effective public safety plan should be the top priority of local elected officials.

“There is also a perception of Pine Bluff as a bad place to live,” Makris said. “We all live here and know that it’s not true but others don’t know that. For them, perception is reality and that negative perception must be fought.”

Makris next took aim at the Pine Bluff School District.

“In my opinion we will never meet our potential until we have higher expectations of our public schools,” Makris said. “Students must graduate from Pine Bluff High School workforce-ready. The role of the Pine Bluff schools must change to create workforce-ready students.”

Makris said students should be prepared for their most likely career path while in high school.

“The socio-economic status of students should be strongly considered when shaping the role of schools,” Makris said. “Pine Bluff High School graduates must have a defined set of skills. When an employer hires one of these students these sorts of skills are expected.”

Makris laid out a list of attributes he said are important for a young person to have when entering the workplace.

“Character development is as important if not more important than academic excellence,” Makris said. “A student’s attendance record is a good indicator of how committed they are to their education. Deportment is important as well. It is important to find out what group activities including choir, athletics and debate a student is involved in because it is a good peer review of a student’s ability to work as part of a team.”

Makris also included service as a peer tutor, maintaining healthy lifestyle habits, knowing how to budget, registering to vote, skill with computers and knowing how to speak in front of an audience and having actual experience doing so as important traits for a high school graduate to possess.

“I want the school to produce a resume for each student,” Makris said. “The Pine Bluff School District has a real opportunity to change. I am very proud of this community for hiring a new school board but the way we do things needs to continue to change.”

Makris called upon his background with M. K. Distributors to outline a marketing strategy for Pine Bluff.

“We need to look at brand development and marketing with Pine Bluff as the brand,” Makris said. “We need to develop the brand of Pine Bluff to the point where people are willing to put up with some inconvenience for the brand, which is known as premium preference. This includes such things as being willing to pay more for a home that you want to in order to be in a certain neighborhood or having to reserve your tee time at Harbor Oaks two weeks in advance to ensure your spot.”

Makris outlined the strengths of the area including high-quality health care, strong economic infrastructure, recreational opportunities and spiritual access.

“We must address the issues of public safety and the Pine Bluff schools in order to achieve the growth in this community that we want,” Makris said. “I think Pine Bluff has a great future.”

Expo

Stephen Lasseigne, Expo chairman and vice president and advertising manager with Simmons First National Corp., was pleased with the end result of his team’s hard work.

“Being that this is the 26th year of the Business Expo, I have been fortunate that it pretty much runs itself,” Lasseigne said of the planning stage of the event. “We are also fortunate that Kali Walker was able to shadow Michelle Rocha at last year’s Expo to learn what is involved in putting one of these together. Everything has turned out well.”

Lasseigne said the breakfast was attended by 575 people including 50 Business Relations Customer Service Stars who were honored for their commitment to serving the needs of their patrons.

“We are also really excited about our 15 new exhibitors,” Lasseigne said. “Altogether we have close to 100 exhibitors this year.”

Lasseigne said the chamber was happy to accommodate exhibitor requests to have a time slot designated specifically for those operating the exhibit booths and their customers and invited guests.

“Having the VIP Premiere from 9 a.m. until 11 a.m. creates opportunities for business to business networking,” Lasseigne said.

Chamber Chair Vickey Davis shared Lasseigne’s upbeat assessment of the Expo.

“I think everything has gone exceptionally well,” Davis said. “We are building new relationships with officials in city government and working together with businesses.”

Cindy Dunn, marketing director with Fairfield Federal Credit Union, said planning for her company’s Judge’s Award-winning booth began last October.

“Since we’ve had a booth out here everybody looks forward to what we will have each year,” Dunn said. “It’s fun. I start the planning process in October. It’s just fun to be out in the community like this.”

Janet Hartz, vice president of Scott Systems in Pine Bluff, presided over a whimsical booth that won the award for most creative, composed of Popeye the Sailor, his wife, Olive Oyl, and daughter Swee' Pea on the deck of their boat complete with a crow's nest and a smokestack fabricated by Scott employees. Several wooden containers were placed around the booth, filled to the top with spinach leaves.

"We looked at the theme of this year's Expo which is Hidden Treasures, and then thought about the fact that Scott Systems wants to be the good guys, which brought us to sailors and then to Popeye," Hartz said.

Scott employees passed out packages of spinach seeds with the company logo imprinted on top.

"We were selected as the people's choice for the past three years and we are handing out these seeds to say thanks for 'picking' us," Hartz said.

Southeast Arkansas College won the Most Informative Booth award by integrating the school's Diamond in the Rough theme with the Expo theme of Hidden Treasures. Small treasure chests filled with brochures about the college were scattered throughout the booth.

Angela Parker, director of the City of Pine Bluff Parks and Recreation Department, said this was the fifth year of the department's participation in the Expo.

"We are able to promote events and other things going on in our parks by being here," Parker said. "We are planning to have a new fishing pier on Lake Saracen by November of this year and a splash park adjacent to Saracen Landing open by next Memorial Day. We have information on both of those projects available here."

New exhibitor La Quinta Inn was providing free waffles prepared by Huddle House regional manager Jason Beard.

"We prepare the breakfasts for the La Quinta Inn here in Pine Bluff," Beard said.

"Our boss thought that it would be a good idea for exposure," said La Quinta front desk employee Ren Thornton. "We decided to do a breakfast because we had heard that another hotel brought one of their beds in before and we wanted to one-up them on that."

Bullying Twitter Town Hall Meeting (KLRT, Fox 16)

Video available at <http://www.fox16.com/mostpopular/story/Bullying-Twitter-Town-Hall-Meeting/1NrJcy3e6USE7-F-JSaOw.csp>

LITTLE ROCK, AR -- As part of the "Step Up, Stop Bullying" campaign launch this week, FOX 16 hosted a Twitter town hall..

As the tweets came pouring in a panel of experts with seven people came up with the answers.

The panel included people from the Little Rock School District, the Attorney General's office, Arkansas Crisis Center and even a group of high school students.

Rebecca Aguilera is a 10th grader at Maumelle High School.

She want's bullying to stop.

That's why she helped answer questions -- from our viewers -- at the Twitter town hall.

She said, "I want the students to know this is a big problem. Students think that it's not and we are over-exaggerating. It is not over exaggerating. It's a problem"

People on the panel may have had different opinions on certain topics, but everyone agreed bullying is a problem -- not just in Arkansas -- but everywhere.

Community group endorses Watson Chapel millage bid (Pine Bluff Commercial)

Grassroots activist group Arkansas Community Organizations announced its support for the proposed 2.3-mill increase for the Watson Chapel School District during a meeting Thursday afternoon at Gospel Temple Missionary Baptist Church.

The increase to the current millage rate of 31.8 would be used to build a new building for kindergarten and first grade on the current campus of Edgewood Elementary School.

Maxine Nelson, ACO president and Watson Chapel School District board member, said that her organization is supporting the measure that will be on the May 14 ballot because of a commitment to public education.

"We come out today to announce our endorsement of the millage increase," Nelson said. "We have always been a proponent of quality public education because without it so many children would not get a quality education. We want our future generations to be in a clean, safe building that is conducive to education."

Watson Chapel board president Sandra C. Boone addressed the group of nine supporters of the measure taking part in the announcement.

"Thank you, ACO, for endorsing us," Boone said. "It is crucial that we get this millage passed. This is our second chance and the state only allows two chances. If it is not passed there is a strong possibility that the state will take over this school district. The average family with a \$50,000 home will pay just \$23 more per year which is the same as buying one 20-ounce soda every month for a year.

"The current building at Edgewood Elementary has its classrooms open to the outside and this is unsafe in today's world," Boone said. "The oldest part of the building contains asbestos and we all know how dangerous that material is."

Boone said the only use for the funds generated by the increase millage would be for the construction of the new school building.

“The current Edgewood building is 54 years old,” Boone said. “The new building is very much needed and will increase the value of the community. If anyone asks, tell them that the only thing that can be done with the money is build the school. Our last millage increase was in 1974. Even when the increase is passed we will still have a far lower millage rate than most of the state.”

Boone said district patrons should encourage others in the district to vote.

“You can’t get this millage passed by ignoring the African-American community,” Boone said. “We have to do what is best for our students. Now some may say, ‘well, my children are grown,’ but every child in this community is yours. By that I mean that depending on how they are educated they will be a positive for the community or a negative for the community.”

Boone said the voices of those against the measure must be drowned out.

“We can’t let naysayers defeat us,” Boone said. “We must push forward. I support teachers wholeheartedly but we must also support our students.”

Early voting starts soon

Early voting will be held from 8:30 until 5 p.m. May 7 through May 10 and May 13 in the Office of the County Clerk at the Jefferson County Courthouse.

Absentee ballots may be obtained from the county clerk during normal business hours. Absentee ballots will be canvassed and counted in the Election Commission office May 14 beginning at approximately 5 p.m.

Votes cast on May 14 will be canvassed and counted at the Election Commission office beginning at approximately 7:30 p.m.

Election Day May 14 voting will be conducted at Matthews Memorial located at W. 20th Avenue and Highway 79 for precincts 301, 302, 303, 306, 307, 308, 309, 310, 311, 312, 315, 316, 317, 323, 417 and 418; Goodfaith-Carr Methodist located at 3703 Ryburn Road for precincts 51, 53, 56, 57, 59, 313, 314, 321, 322, 324, 325, 326, and 327; Gospel Temple Baptist Church at 1100 Oakwood for precincts 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 413, 414, 415, and 416; and Sulphur Springs Methodist at 9238 Sulphur Springs Road for precincts 52, 54, 55, 58, 66 and 67. Voting hours will be 7:30 a.m. until 7:30 p.m.

DCSD announces Hall of Fame award winners (Advance Monticellonian)

Drew Central School will hold its Annual All-School Reunion this Saturday, May 4.

“The All School Reunion is always a big event here at Drew Central,” Mike Johnston, superintendent, said. “We certainly hope to have many students from past classes to join us on this day.”

Registration and visitation will begin in the elementary school library at 10:45 a.m. Lunch will be served at 11:30 in the cafeteria. Tickets for the meal are \$10 per person.

The program to recognize the honorees of the Drew Central Hall of Fame and Distinguished Service Awards will begin at 1 p.m. at the Earl Willis Auditorium.

The Hall of Fame recipients are all graduates of Drew Central High School and include:

- Max Johnson, a 1952 graduate of Drew Central also served in the US Army in Germany. He has spent his adult life in the furniture and appliance business. He has furniture stores in Fordyce, Monticello, Camden, Pine Bluff, Malvern and Hope. While in school at Drew Central, he was raised in the Ladelle Community and now makes his home in Fordyce.
- Lewis M. Gardner Jr., a 1962 Graduate of Drew Central, is he founder of the Crackerbox Food Store Chain. He was in business for more than forty years during which time he built his business to 32 stores. In 2011, the Arkansas Business publication ranked Crackerbox Food Stores 35th among Arkansas-based, Arkansas-owned private companies.
- Mike Pennington, a 1970 Graduate of Drew Central and Co-Owner of L. D. Long Inc. He has been instrumental in volunteering his time to support the Arkansas and National Log-A-Load For Kids Campaigns. He has been a member of the Drew Central School Board for 26 years and an avid Drew Central Pirate Fan.

The Distinguished Service Award is given to someone who has served the District in some capacity but is not necessarily a graduate of Drew Central High School. The Distinguished Service Award recipients are:

- Norma Eubanks, born in Clarence Illinois, moved to Monticello in 1945 and began raising her family. In 1967, after earning her Masters Degree, she joined the faculty at Drew Central High School as counselor, a position she held for seventeen years before retiring in 1985. She loved working with children as much as life itself.
- Ella Merle Hickham graduated from Drew Central in May of 1951. Before coming to Drew Central, she worked at Drew Memorial Hospital and as a receptionist at Pomeroy and McGowan as a draftsman. She started working at Drew Central in 1967 as a teacher's aide and later as high school secretary. She retired in 1995 after completing 29 years of service to the students and patrons of the Drew Central School District.
- Mike Johnston, born and raised in Hampton and attended Hampton Public Schools. He moved to Monticello in 1981 to become the elementary principal at Drew Central. He served in that capacity for 30 years. During 2011-2012 he partially retired and became an assistant principal at the elementary, middle and high schools. In April 2012 he was contacted by the then superintendent, Wayne Fawcett and asked if he would accept the Superintendent's Position for the 2013-2014 school year. Mr. Johnston will be retiring June 28 after 44 years of service in education.

School employee seeks hearing after changes to 2013-14 contract (Van Buren County Democrat)

A long-time employee in the Clinton School District has requested an open hearing after being notified that her contract was partially non-renewed.

Wanda Shannon, a classified office employee and member of the Personnel Policy Committee, said she has been notified by certified letter that the APSCN — Arkansas Public School Computer Network — position she held is no longer hers. She said that will result in about a \$10,000 decrease in her salary.

Shannon said she began work in the Clinton School District on July 1, 1997. She is a member of the classified PPC, which recently submitted its proposed salary schedule for the 2013-14 school year. That proposal was accepted by the School Board at its meeting last month.

Shannon said she and her attorney have received e-mails notifying them that a hearing will be held for her at 6 p.m. Monday, May 6. The meeting is open to the public unless Shannon asks that it be closed. She told the Democrat that she wants it to be a public hearing.

Shannon said she has requested that the meeting be held at the high school cafeteria to accommodate a larger audience and also has asked that the School Board members use microphones. Often at regular School Board meetings it is hard to hear the board members at their table even for those sitting near them.

The superintendent's office confirmed in an e-mail Monday that a special meeting has been set for May 6. At this point, however, the e-mail stated that the meeting is expected to be held at its usual place, which is the Junior High library.

Lucas named MHS principal (Advanced Monticelloian)

The Monticello School Board hired Jim Lucas as the high school principal during the special board meeting, which was called to discuss personnel Monday evening.

Lucas was hired as interim principal in July 2012 after Kenny Pennington resigned to take a position with AdvancED, a school accreditation firm.

Lucas said Wednesday morning that while he had been working at the school as interim principal, he was not officially the principal until the board voted to hire him.

“(My hiring as principal) wasn’t official until Monday,” Lucas said. “Now it’s official.”

Lucas has been an educator since 1995, when he retired from the U.S. Army as a Lieutenant Colonel.

“I got in [education] late in the game after retiring from the army,” he said.

After graduating from Crossett High School, Lucas received his degree in math education from Henderson State University. Because he attended school on an ROTC scholarship, he entered the army as a commissioned officer, and loved it so much that he stayed in the service.

"It [the army] just really clicked with me, so I stayed in," Lucas explained.

During his time in the army, Lucas was assigned to military intelligence. He spent most of his time in the Far East and inside the U.S. working in that field.

Upon his army retirement, Lucas started the JROTC program at El Dorado High School in 1995, where he remained until 2001. From 2001-06, he was principal at Washington Middle School in El Dorado. However, in 2006, Lucas returned to his hometown to take the principal position at Crossett High School, where he worked until 2010.

Since 2010, Lucas has been working with the Southeast Arkansas Educational Cooperative, working inside Crossett High School where he analyzed data from the school.

In late July, Lucas left the coop to take over the reigns at Monticello High School.

The board also voted to hire Kevin Hancock as the assistant principal for the middle school. The school's current assistant principal, Randy Lay, will be moving to the Occupational Education Center (EOC) as the center's director.

The board also voted to hire Ashley Weast as a fourth grade teacher at Monticello Intermediate School. Weast will be a first year teacher next year. She worked with MIS students this year as an intern.

School board bans all public comment

The public may not have been allowed to express their displeasure at one of the motions approved at the April 18 school board meeting, but they have used other venues to do so.

The meeting was one at which staff contracts for the year were voted on. After a lengthy executive session, all staff contracts were renewed, with the lone "nay" vote coming from President Al Larson not to do so. Particularly controversial in the minds of many community members was the contract of high school principal Kathryn Lavender.

The board postponed taking personnel actions at its March 28 meeting, at which some citizens attending had hoped the board would address recent ethics charges filed against Lavender by a parent and the school's music teacher, Chad Martin, among others.

Supt. Curtis Turner had said that contract issues would be resolved before May 1.

Board member Karen Gros made a motion, seconded by Sam Kirk, to ban all future public comment due to "personnel issues," based on legal advice obtained from the Arkansas School Board Association.

After the April 18 meeting, many area residents expressed their opinions on a popular anonymous bulletin board.

"(Gros') explanation was that the public is free to attend but cannot comment, that the Board was very accessible," wrote "akerue." "When asked how they were accessible she responded 'email.' The truth is the Board members do not respond to email and have never once, that I know of, cited an email they have received from a voter regarding anything. They voted to deny public comment. Shame on the whole lot of them ... what are they afraid of?"

Akerue then suggested, "I think we should all show up at the next meeting with duct tape or a gag over our mouths ... though we might have to email them what it means."

"To not allow public comment is not only unwise of any elected official, it's disrespectful of the people you represent," wrote former Eureka Springs Mayor Dani Joy. "Politics 101."

"I regret it's something that's been recommended to us because it's pretty difficult to have a conversation," said board president Larson by phone Saturday. He said it wasn't just personnel issues the board was banning, but "everything."

Larson was one of three board candidates who ran as a slate in the 2011-12 election, along with Kirk and former board member Charles Templeton, under the slogan, "Open and inclusive."

"It's one further thing that limits our exposure to our client base," Larson said. "We're really not supposed to talk about substantive issues with the public, with parents. We can't talk with each other outside meetings because of FOIA."

He said he voted with the majority to approve the ban "because that's what our lawyers tell us is the appropriate approach."

He said the public can still get something on the agenda, which is not the same as making public comment during a meeting. There is a process for getting on the agenda, however, as outlined on the school district's website. A citizen must submit the item eight days in advance of a meeting to the superintendent, who will determine whether it is appropriate to have on the agenda. The item must be given enough specific detail to make the determination.

As for public comment, Larson said, "The best the public can do is to send us letters and emails, and the best we can do is not say a thing about these issues. These issues are extremely important, and the best the public or press can do is to have conversations with the superintendent. The superintendent is really ground zero."

Asked how the public could give any feedback on an issue that is put on the agenda at the start of a meeting with no advance notice in the press and voted on with no public input until after it's a done deal, Larson replied, "I know what you're talking about, and there are a lot of things in this world that don't make sense because of our being constrained by the legal system."

In other business, the board:

* Approved Turner's recommendation to increase the district's contribution to individual health insurance by \$72.56, restoring full coverage.

* Approved \$90,000 for the purchase of a new school bus.

* Approved the hiring of Laura Evans, Adam Louderback and Beverly Wilson as substitute teachers and accepted the resignations of Katrina Pumphrey and Becky Sisco.

* Approved the minutes of the March 28 meeting and the financial reports.