



JOHN ARCHIBALD

On sports list, 130 cities have us beat

What do Birmingham and Peoria, Ill., have in common? Apparently they don't play in Peoria, either. Sports, that is. The Sporting News just ranked the 400 best sports cities in the U.S. and Canada, and Birmingham had more in common with Peoria, Teaneck, N.J., and Amherst, Mass., than any city that might actually remind you of sports.

The Football Capital of the South?

That's just a slogan slapped in peeling paint on an all-but-forgotten stadium.

Home to the 2020 Olympic Games?

Look here to see how preposterous that notion really is.

Boston was the top sports city on the list, which was based on teams and attendance, won-loss records, power ratings and such. The top 10 included all the usual pro-sport suspects: New York and Chicago, Dallas, Detroit and D.C., etc.

Birmingham ranked, get this, 131st.

Behind No. 73 Auburn and No. 78 Tuscaloosa.

Behind No. 98 Mobile.

Even behind Troy, which ranked 120th — just after Mount Pleasant, Mich.

The Sporting News — which, by the way, is owned by the same people who own the News — posted comments from sports figures arguing for their cities.

Southeastern Conference Commissioner Mike Slive made Birmingham's case:

"Every day, the voices of our fans can be heard on the airwaves, their opinions read on the Internet and in the newspapers, and they gather together in the quarterback and tipoff clubs to celebrate their institutions and their teams. College sports and the Southeastern Conference are in the DNA of Birmingham."

In the DNA, maybe, but it must take a microscope to see that. The Sporting News did not see us as an SEC city.

All the real SEC cities — Athens, Tuscaloosa, Auburn, Nashville, Knoxville, Lexington, Gainesville, Oxford, Starkville, Baton Rouge, Fayetteville and Columbia — made the top 100.

Birmingham, remember, was 131st. Beaten by Denton, Tex., home of the University of North Texas Mean Green, and their mascot, Scrappy.

How the mighty fell flat. Yes, the Barons moved to Hoover and the SEC championship fled to Atlanta.

Shoal Creek put a foot in its mouth and the University of Alabama Board of Trustees slapped a cold-blooded curse on UAB football.

But Birmingham must be better than 131st. It can't officially claim Talladega or Tuscaloosa, but it does have redeeming sport value.

We hosted Olympic soccer and cycled through half a dozen would-be pro football teams. We cling to the Regions Charity Classic, and still host a roller derby team known — sadly but appropriately — as The Tragic City Rollers.

The oldest baseball park in the U.S. remains, if no pros play there on a regular basis. UAB plays a mean game of basketball from time to time. And there's Miles College, Birmingham-Southern and Samford. We are home to the SEC and the SWAC, and the Magic City Classic is a party every year.

No, Birmingham is not Boston or New York. But 131st?

That just doesn't play in Peoria — or anywhere else.

Gas prices spotted below \$3

Lowest since February; some analysts foresee drop to \$2.50

By GINNY MacDONALD
News staff writer

Gasoline prices continued to plummet across the state Monday, falling below \$3 for a gallon of unleaded in some areas for the first time since February.

Travel analysts said the price

could drop to \$2.50 a gallon within three to four weeks.

A Chelsea service station was selling unleaded for \$3 a gallon. Stations in Odenville and Ashville in St. Clair County were selling unleaded gas for \$2.99 a gallon.

Mike Mills of Oneonta filled his pickup's tank Monday for \$2.99 a

gallon at the Shell station in Ashville.

"It could come down a little more," Mills said.

He said he spends more than \$1,000 a month on gas for his bread and baked-goods delivery

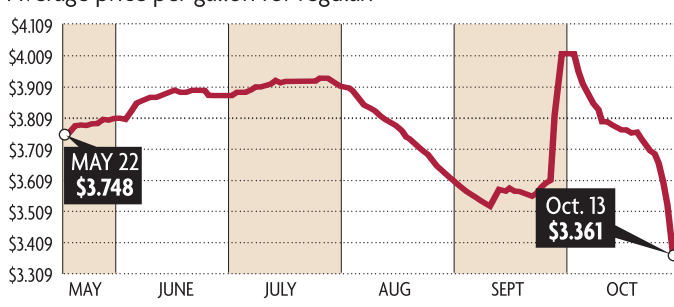
IN MONEY

▶ Experts slash predictions for oil prices / 6C

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BIRMINGHAM GAS PRICES

Average price per gallon for regular:



Source: AAA Alabama

ClasTran requests interim loans

Jeffco declines, but service vows to run

By ERIN STOCK
News staff writer

The cash-strapped paratransit service ClasTran has requested loans from Jefferson and Shelby counties to help it get by until federal money arrives, the agency's director said Monday.

But Jefferson County Commission President Bettye Fine Collins said the county will not be able to offer the \$800,000 loan requested, leaving ClasTran to search for alternatives.

"We're not going to cease operating," said Fenn Church, ClasTran's executive director. "We're going to work our way through it."

ClasTran is a transportation service for elderly, disabled and rural residents in Jefferson and Shelby counties, as well as parts of St. Clair and Walker counties, that in recent months made an average of 990 daily trips.

It has a deficit of \$996,000 and needs \$400,000 a month to operate its current services, Church said.

ClasTran also is seeking a \$500,000 line of credit from Shelby County. The agency has requested and received loans from Jefferson County for the past three years and paid them back as soon as Federal Transit Administration money came in, Church said. That funding could arrive as late as January.

"I'm just asking for a loan to bridge us through the gap," Church said.

Collins said she does not see how the county can offer the loan: "It's going to leave us with a major hole."

Collins also said she planned to meet with Birmingham Mayor Larry Langford to discuss getting the city to contribute to ClasTran. Birmingham does not contribute any money, even though most of ClasTran's riders live in Birmingham, Church said.

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NEWS STAFF/TAMIKA MOORE

Casey Gustowarow, left, and Daniel Bowman Simon are driving around the country in an eye-catching bus, gathering signatures on a petition calling for the next president to plant an organic farm on the White House grounds.

Cross-country ride urges White House to add organic farm

By THOMAS SPENCER
News staff writer

Two former Peace Corps volunteers steered an odd yellow school bus topped with an organic garden into Birmingham Monday as part of a cross-country trip to encourage the next president to turn the White House lawn into an urban farm.

Daniel Bowman Simon, 28, was inspired to embark on the journey after hearing a speech from San Francisco restaurateur and sustainable farming advocate Alice Waters in which she described her vision for a food garden at every school and at the White House.

Simon recruited his Peace Corps compatriot Casey Gustowarow, 27, who was working on a Maryland farm, and procured an attention-getting bus — essentially two buses welded together, top-to-top — and outfitted it with a rooftop garden and retractable window boxes.

The eye-catching bus starts conversations, Simon said, allowing the two to spread their message and gather petitions urging the next president to find space on the White House's 17 acres for a farm that will be "a model for healthy, economical and sustainable living everywhere."

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Gustowarow stands atop the White House Organic Farm Project bus, where he and his Peace Corps compatriot have planted an organic garden.



INSIDE

Man killed by police was attacked by stepson

A man shot and killed by a Birmingham police officer over the weekend had been under attack by his mentally ill stepson prior to officers arriving, police said Monday. 4B

Guard trained for grim duty when Afghans harmed

By TOM GORDON
News staff writer

Alabama National Guard Col. Chris Morgan trained for a lot of things before he headed to Afghanistan, and some of that training he hopes never to put into practice.

One task for which he trained was visiting a family grieving the loss of loved ones to errant NATO bombs or bullets.

Those incidents — some of them highly

publicized — have happened in Afghanistan. "It hurts your rapport with the population, just like it would, you know, (with) anybody in the United States if you think about it," said Morgan, who headed a 15-member Army Guard training team that arrived in Afghanistan about two months ago.

Morgan, who spoke by telephone, works

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SPECIAL

Col. Chris Morgan, commander of an Alabama Army National Guard training team now in Afghanistan, stands with boys at an orphanage around Kabul, the Afghan capital. U.S. soldiers have done repairs at orphanages, and take the children clothing and other supplies.

SHELBY COUNTY

Helena school awaits all-clear after sewage cleanup

By SCOTTIE VICKERY
News staff writer

Helena Intermediate School will remain closed today because school officials are still waiting for results of envi-

ronmental tests conducted last week.

The school was closed for three days last week after a malfunction at a city-owned pumping station caused sew-

age to back up through the pipes and into the school, covering about 60,000 square feet of the building with sewage.

A test conducted on a sur-

face in the cafeteria on Thursday came back positive for bacteria, according to Tom Ferguson, assistant superintendent of operations for Shelby County Schools.

The cafeteria was cleaned two more times on Thursday and Friday and follow-up testing was conducted on Sunday.

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John Archibald's column appears Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. Write him at jarchibald@bhamnews.com.



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Former Peace Corps volunteers want White House lawn to become a sustainable farm

Tuesday, October 14, 2008

THOMAS SPENCER

News staff writer

Two former Peace Corps volunteers steered an odd yellow school bus topped with an organic garden into Birmingham Monday as part of a cross-country trip to encourage the next president to turn the White House lawn into an urban farm.

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The eye-catching bus starts conversations, Simon said, allowing the two to spread their message and gather petitions urging the next president to find space on the White House's 17 acres for a farm that will be "a model for healthy, economical and sustainable living everywhere."

"The president should lead by example," Simon said.

They've traveled from New York to San Francisco and are ultimately headed to Washington, D.C. They were in New Orleans over the weekend and headed for Atlanta today. While in Birmingham, they stopped at Jones Valley Urban Farm, the education and production farm in the Park Place neighborhood downtown, and lunched at Frank Stitt's Bottega Cafe.

Using the White House grounds to produce food is not a new idea. Eleanor Roosevelt planted a Victory Garden during World War II to encourage Americans to increase food production. According to supporters, the proposed garden would encourage self-reliance and the consumption of fresh, nutritious, locally grown food, cultivated in a way that doesn't harm the environment. Simon said they've contacted both presidential campaigns, but he accepts that both are too busy campaigning now to think about re-landscaping the White House.

But when one of them is elected, the plan and petitions - gathered along the way and over the Internet at www.thewhofarm.org - will be ready. The effort is nonpartisan, Simon said. "We will work with any administration."

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