



EDITORIALS

The games and beyond

By this time next year, the FEI World Equestrian Games will be history. But with vision and planning, the fortnight of international competition could leave behind more than just a pleasant memory. Frankfort, like several Bluegrass communities, hopes it can capitalize on the events to be held at the Kentucky Horse Park next Sept. 25-Oct. 10 and keep the visitors coming long after the horsey set has gone back home. A contingent of 21 members of the local events committee visited the park last week to get an update on how the work is progressing.

What they learned is that ticket sales, which began Sept. 25, are off to a roaring start, brightening prospects that enough people will descend on Lexington to produce ample opportunity for spillover business in the region's smaller cities. First lady Jane Beshear outlined how the state is setting up a 25,000 square foot "Kentucky Experience" exhibit area in the horse park's new indoor arena. The idea is to give visitors a crash course on Bluegrass history, culture, food, music and products. The local events committee hopes some will be inspired to make the short trip to Kentucky's capital city and learn more. To make them feel a little more at home, special permits are under consideration to allow open beverage containers, imparting something of a European bistro ambience to St. Clair Street. The group is also working with Downtown Frankfort Inc. to expand the Farmers Bank concert series for the event. And big-screen TVs on St. Clair may allow visitors to follow the games, broadcast on NBC, while in Frankfort.

Downtown, even though it's no longer the city's dominant retail center, is an ideal destination for tourists, who seek something beyond the chain food and merchandise found on the outskirts of town. Perhaps they, like the local people who'll return to downtown streets next month for the annual Christmas shopping kickoff, will be enchanted by the quaint specialty shops now located throughout the central business district.

Visitors may also want to see more of the countryside that nurtured Kentucky's equine culture. Even though too much of our farmland has been gobbled up by urban sprawl, there are still some bucolic byways like the Old Frankfort Pike where tourists can traverse miles of horse country lined with plank fences and rock walls and relatively little commercial intrusion. Such outings provide a welcome respite from doomsday hysteria in the horse industry, some elements of which are pushing to legalize Vegas-style gaming devices at venerable tracks like Keeneland and make the races more appealing to patrons accustomed to electronic forms of entertainment.

As members of the local events committee understand, the equestrian games will be most valuable if they are treated not as a temporary bonanza but as a first step toward lasting awareness of what is special about this region. That, in turn, could get local communities more committed to preserving the unique character of Bluegrass towns and landscape over the long term — for our own benefit as well as for tourism promotion.

Those nasty swipe fees

Oct. 8
The Star-Ledger, Newark, N.J., on credit card fees:

When it comes to credit card swipe fees, Americans are getting Third World treatment. U.S. consumers and businesses pay markedly higher charges than those in other developed nations when it comes to purchasing with plastic, according to a report by the Merchants Payment Coalition. ... Every time a consumer uses credit, roughly 2 percent to 3 percent of the charge goes to banks or other payment networks, which set the fees at rates that often vary from country to country. American swipe fees are double those in the United Kingdom and New Zealand, and four times those in Australia, the merchants contend.

The beauty part for the credit card issuer is that it scores twice — once in a transaction fee it gets from the merchant and again with an interest charge to the customer. In 2008, those charges produced an estimated \$48 billion for American banks, an average of \$427 per household, the merchant coalition claims. The swipe fees per transaction are small but have almost tripled in amount over the last decade. ...

Lawmakers, including Sen. Richard Durbin, D-Ill., have introduced legislation that would impose more restrictions on such fees. That's a good start, but it's not enough. The bills are stuck in committee. They deserve a better treatment, as do the merchants and consumers burdened by these too-high charges.

JIM HOAGLAND

Aghanistan on brink

Obama is right to take time for a thorough review

Is President Obama dithering on Afghanistan, as critics claim? Or do loyalists praising his deliberate pace have it right? Both camps rush past the obvious: The president is almost certainly applying a calculated, coldblooded squeeze on his partners in the Afghan endeavor to get what he needs for a successful policy.

Obama is orchestrating a drawn-out review that is actually a policy instrument itself. That reality is (happily for Obama) obscured by the miasma of leaks, counter-leaks and guesswork that has settled over official Washington. But three things are absolutely clear:

First, Hamid Karzai cannot be accepted as the legitimate ruler of Afghanistan on the basis of August's election. He should either accept an immediate runoff ballot or agree to become Afghanistan's ceremonial president and appoint a national unity government to run the country. Only then can the U.S. and its allies move forward to significantly expand military and civilian aid to Kabul.

Second, NATO's European members must greatly increase their involvement (and spending) in civilian reconstruction projects and provide some more manpower. Little noticed in Washington's overheated debate about troop numbers, a new U.S.-European bargain on counterinsurgency is an essential feature of Gen. Stanley McChrystal's best-seller of a secret report to the president.

Third, the Obama administration must not slip back into letting Pakistan present itself as an aggrieved party whose delicate national sensibilities are unjustly offended by suggestions that its army and intelligence services

might be ripping off U.S. aid and covertly encouraging terrorism.

They are doing just that. And they must continue to be told directly that Washington is keeping score. Congress gently did that in passing a \$7.5 billion five-year aid bill that requires assurances that the money will not be stolen — provoking nationalist outcries in Islamabad.

This third task will be easier if Defense Secretary Robert Gates and others cease publicly bemoaning how "we turned our backs" on Pakistan in 1989. Pakistan's refusal to heed U.S. warnings about developing nuclear weapons forced the Bush 41 administration — of which Gates was a senior official — to halt aid to a country determined to become a proliferation rogue.

Pakistan spread nuclear technology to Iran and North Korea, and continued its support for Taliban and al-Qaeda networks for its own perverted reasons of national security and/or greed — not out of hurt pride.

Yes, Pakistan is the problem from hell and essential to the fight for Afghanistan. But the record of the Bush 43 and Obama administrations shows that only when the U.S. applies pressure — instead of apologizing to Islamabad for the past, or trying to play three-dimensional strategic chess with its rulers — does Pakistan provide significant support for U.S. goals.

Afghanistan's Karzai has turned into a similar problem for Team Obama. He successfully resisted Washington's efforts to get him to resign or hold fair and free elections in August. Allegations of widespread fraud call into question Karzai's ability to work with the administration, which now prefers to watch him twist in the wind rather

than frontally assault him. Obama gave subtle but clear backing for U.N. coordinator Kai Eide on the fraud issue by instructing the U.S. ambassador to appear with Eide at a Kabul news conference.

But this leaves only one weapon to squeeze Karzai into sharing power with more honest, competent Afghans: the threat of U.S. withdrawal. Obama allows that idea or something close to it to linger in the air as the review ostentatiously grinds on, perhaps to get Karzai's attention. But there is a harsh reality behind the implicit threat that both Washington and Kabul must understand: Obama could be driven to dramatically scale down U.S. support if Karzai continues to be a major obstacle to change. Karzai can push Afghanistan over the brink if he does not work with Obama.

A similar warning is directed at European nations that have stunted on combat support while emphasizing their largely theoretical commitment to reconstruction and development. McChrystal believes NATO must become more active and deeply involved in reconstruction efforts if the U.S. adds tens of thousands of troops for military tasks. New European troops, even if the numbers are small, are also needed.

Afghanistan is at the brink, as Obama's review prudently recognizes. Only a focused effort by Washington and Kabul — and other capitals — can pull it back. The president is right to give that message time to sink in everywhere, see what results it produces, and then act.

©2009, Washington Post Writers Group



Protect DNA as a defensive tool

The following editorial appeared in Monday's Washington Post:

On its face the proposition seems reasonable enough: Anyone who pleads guilty to a federal crime must give up the right to use DNA evidence in the future to challenge that conviction. This Bush-era policy would work just fine in a perfect world, where only those who actually committed crimes pleaded guilty to those offenses.

But the facts show that this is not always the case. Defendants sometimes cop to a plea for reasons having nothing to do with guilt. Some are coerced or intimidated into a confession and subsequent plea bargain. Others accept a plea offer if it provides for a much lighter sentence than could be expected if convicted at trial. In short, not every-

one who pleads guilty is guilty — and prosecutors understand this.

Yet according to The Post's Jerry Markon, the Bush Justice Department lobbied strenuously during the early part of this decade against legislation to assure inmates of access to post-conviction DNA evidence that could prove their innocence. When the bill appeared on the verge of passing, the administration succeeded in jamming through a provision that allows defendants to waive that right. Prosecutors in the Bush administration were then instructed to insist on such waivers when negotiating a plea bargain. While not all U.S. attorneys in the country went along, many routinely abided by the mandate, including federal prosecutors in the District of Columbia and in Alexandria, Va.

Attorney General Eric J. Holder Jr.

has called for a re-examination of the Bush policy — and rightly so.

DNA evidence has become an invaluable tool in the criminal justice system, providing prosecutors, defendants and victims with more certainty about guilt or innocence. The technology has been used to prove the innocence of some 240 or so wrongly convicted people, including some who had entered guilty pleas and some who were sentenced to death. It has been used countless more times to put actual offenders behind bars.

It takes a special kind of callousness and disregard for the truth to insist that a defendant give up his rights to scientific tests that could definitively prove guilt or innocence.

Mr. Holder should rebuff this jaded approach to justice by throwing out the Bush policy as soon as possible.