



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/STATON BREIDENTHAL

Jeff Baskin (left), executive director of the William F. Laman Library System, helps tear down part of a wall in the old post office in downtown North Little Rock on Tuesday morning during a ceremony to mark the beginning of the building's renovation to a new branch library.

Library branch work under way

NLR renovations to change historic Argenta post office's use

JAKE SANDLIN
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Walking through North Little Rock's former downtown post office and future Laman Library Argenta branch Tuesday, library Executive Director Jeff Baskin reveled in the building's history, showing off passageways inside walls, spy holes and even a bullet mark.

The \$2.8 million renovation of the three-floor, 82-year-old building got under

way Tuesday with dignitaries swinging sledgehammers to knock holes in a wall next to what will become the Argenta Branch's reading room.

The library's Argenta branch opened at 506 Main St. in 2006 and has outgrown its 2,550 square feet. It's scheduled to be open for business in the former post office, 520 Main St., in January. The main Laman Library is at 2801 Orange St.

After joking to the group

gathered for Tuesday's ceremonial wall bashing that "there may be some old postmasters buried back there," Baskin indicated he might have only been half kidding.

Taking a small group on a tour afterward, he pointed out narrow doors that hide "tunnels" inside the walls and mail-slot-sized peepholes where administrators could keep watchful eyes on workers throughout the building.

As one story goes, a carrier was caught taking money from an envelope. And, because in the old days "a lot of money would come through the mail" in cash, Baskin said, postal officials carried firearms.

When confronted, the employee reached for his gun and shot himself on the spot, Baskin said. The bullet lodged in a basement door frame.

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LR hospitals study savings seen in report

\$38 million to \$63 million appealing, two leaders say

EVIE BLAD
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Leaders of the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences and St. Vincent Health System said Tuesday that they are exploring savings estimates in a consultant's report before determining how they will proceed with the potential affiliation.

The preliminary report by Deloitte consultants, released in two parts Friday and Monday, said the two hospitals could save a combined \$38 million to \$63 million annually by sharing portions of their staffs, purchasing, equipment and operations.

"That's significant," UAMS Chancellor Dr. Dan Rahn said. "We embarked on this because we don't want to be incurring costs that don't add value for our patients and the public. I think this draft assessment suggests there are some possibilities."

Peter Banko, president and chief executive officer of St. Vincent, said the savings estimate was "conservative," and that hospital leaders may be able to find further ways to make any combined efforts even more efficient.

"I think \$63 million, no matter how you cut it, is a lot of money," he said. "At least on my end, I was ex-

pecting more. But it was a good start."

UAMS, the state's only medical school and largest public employer, and St. Vincent, a private hospital system owned by Colorado-based Catholic Health Initiatives, are exploring "the formation of a jointly owned and governed network," designed to cut costs, share resources and improve services for some patients.

Boards of both hospitals hope to make a preliminary decision about whether to pursue a partnership in April, Rahn said.

Among the biggest questions that the University of Arkansas board of trustees, which oversees UAMS, will have to answer: How much do the two hospitals want to intertwine their operations? And is the anticipated cost savings enough to justify the effort of creating such an agreement?

To generate the report's savings estimate, consultants assumed a "very high degree of integration that may or may not represent what the parties intend," which could include a jointly operated third organization that manages shared operations in both hospitals, it said.

Hospital leaders have
See **UAMS**, Page 10B

Website has map of debris cleanup

LR residents can track its progress

CLAUDIA LAUER
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Little Rock residents can now track the progress in the cleanup of 22,000 tons of debris stemming from the Christmas Day snowstorm, city staff members said Tuesday.

Contractors had collected more than 9,000 tons of debris as of Tuesday when the city posted maps of each ward on its website showing all of the streets that have had an initial sweep for debris.

City staff members and Little Rock city directors received hundreds of phone calls over the past two months from residents wanting to know when the piles of broken and downed trees would be collected.

On Feb. 14, the city hired contractor Ceres Environmental to do the work, after a federal emergency disaster declaration, which will pay for about 75 percent of the cleanup.

Ward 7 Director B.J. Wyrick said last week that she'd appreciate the city finding a way to let residents know when they could expect the debris to be picked up in their neighborhoods.

"The crews will do an initial pass-through of all the streets, which should be complete by mid-April," said City Manager Bruce Moore. "I've asked them to finish that initial sweep before starting a second mandatory sweep of the entire city."

Moore said the maps will be updated every Tuesday to show the company's progress.

At the Board of Director's weekly meeting Tuesday
See **CLEANUP**, Page 7B

Monitoring seismic activity



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/BENJAMIN KRAIN

David Johnston, a geologist with the Arkansas Geological Survey, prepares a seismometer to be buried 2 to 3 feet underground in a temporary seismic monitoring station. State earthquake experts will place more monitors around Greers Ferry Lake after a recent jump in the number of temblors. While many of the 60 quakes in the past year were too light to be felt by people, the Arkansas Geological Survey hopes to pinpoint a cause.

Article, 10B

Judge cites law in dismissal of 2003 charge in girl's rape

CHAD DAY
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

An eastern Arkansas judge ruled Tuesday that prosecutors can't pursue a nearly decade-old child rape case against a state prison inmate who served two separate sentences while Phillips County authorities thought he was a fugitive.

Circuit Judge Richard Proctor of Wynne wrote in an order dismissing the case against Thomas G. Ballard Jr. that too much time has passed since prosecutors filed a rape charge in 2003 and when Ballard was served with a warrant earlier this year.

Ballard, 39, was accused

of raping a young girl in the Phillips County towns of Marvell and Barton over a period of years beginning when the girl was 6 and ending when she turned 14.

In a scathing five-page order filed in Phillips County Circuit Court, Proctor wrote that Arkansas law left him no choice but to dismiss the case despite what he called "repugnant" circumstances that led to Ballard never being arrested on the charge, even though he was in state custody for years.

"This case is an unfortunate result of years of neglect by authorities in Phillips County, Arkansas," Proctor

wrote.

Proctor didn't mention former Phillips County Sheriff Ronnie White by name in the order, but the judge referred to a situation uncovered by an *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* investigation last year.

The newspaper found that hundreds of fugitive warrants weren't entered into state and national crime databases under White's 12-year watch. As a result, more than 40 percent of Phillips County fugitives wanted for the most serious felonies came into contact with police or the courts but weren't arrested on outstanding warrants.

That included dozens of
See **DISMISSAL**, Page 10B

Panel hires Medicaid adviser after fight over its GOP ties

CHARLIE FRAGO
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Lawmakers jostled Tuesday over a GOP choice for an outside consultant to evaluate Arkansas' Medicaid program before a legislative panel approved the \$220,000 contract.

The Alexander Group LLC is headed by Gary D. Alexander, a former health and welfare official in the Republican administration of former Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Ridge, as well as the designer of a Medicaid overhaul for Rhode Island.

Alexander was the best choice available, said Rep. Bruce Westerman, R-Hot Springs.

But Democrats criticized the pick, suggesting that a GOP-linked firm might not fairly evaluate the \$5 billion health-care program that

covers about 780,000 Arkansans.

Democratic legislators questioned whether the four-month contract was intended to delay a vote on Medicaid expansion during the regular session. And they said Westerman and Sen. David Sand-

ers, R-Little Rock, should have cast a wider net.

"I'm concerned that we didn't do a sufficient search to at least compare apples to apples. We found an apple and we kept it. ... I think we should consider searching
See **ADVISER**, Page 10B

80 honored for heroism on the job and off in LR

CHELSEA BOOZER
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Stories of how a police officer, a firefighter or a citizen saved a life weren't hard to come by Tuesday at the 21st annual award ceremony for Little Rock's Police and Fire departments.

The Rotary Club of Little Rock honored more than 80 of the city's first responders and citizen heroes with awards and prizes.

For Little Rock police officer Matt Murski, it was 18 months of behind-the-scenes work of updating squad-car equipment that won him the Police Officer of the Year award.

"I know that it is even more difficult to obtain an award like this when I'm

faced with other individuals who are risking their lives and doing what everyone would normally consider police work," Murski said. "I know the bar had to be set high, so I'm very honored."

Murski holds a support role of managing a fleet in which each car has about \$20,000 worth of equipment installed. He was instrumental in updating laptops, radios, infrared software and video equipment.

Ryan Baker's law-enforcement background paired well with his duties as an assistant fire marshal, leading to an increase in arson arrests and his receiving both the Fire Marshal and Firefighter of the Year awards.

See **AWARDS**, Page 10B



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/STEPHEN B. THORNTON

Ryan Baker, the Little Rock Fire Department Firefighter of the Year, receives a congratulatory peck on the cheek from his wife, Denise, as he returns to his table after receiving his award at Tuesday's Rotary Club of Little Rock banquet. Baker is also the city's Fire Marshal of the Year.

Dismissal

• Continued from Page 1B

fugitives such as Ballard who were imprisoned on other charges while they had outstanding Phillips County warrants, the newspaper found.

“Not one word came from the State to show even the slightest effort to serve either a warrant for arrest or a fugitive warrant for almost ten years,” Proctor wrote. “It is repugnant to this Court to be forced to dismiss a case which carries with it such issues such as a child rape. However, it is clear that there is not even scant evidence of any attempt by the State to avoid this terrible circumstance.”

Ballard was formally charged in November 2003, but authorities never arrested him or notified him of the charge and his court date, Proctor wrote. A month later, a judge declared Ballard a fugitive and issued a warrant, which wasn't served until this year.

In the meantime, Ballard spent years in and out of jails and prisons. Ballard served nearly all of a five-year state prison term and was paroled in 2010. He was sentenced back to the Arkansas Department of Correction in 2011 on other charges, including failure to register as a sex offender, and was about to be released again when the newspaper came across his warrant in January.

On Jan. 16, the *Democrat-Gazette* notified newly elected Phillips County Sheriff Neal Byrd that Ballard was in the Correction Department's custody while the nine-year-old warrant bearing his name sat in the courthouse in Helena-West Helena. At the time, Ballard had been granted parole and was waiting on the approval of his release plans.

Byrd, his chief deputy and a secretary then scoured the sheriff's office for the original warrant. The secretary found it in a “conglomeration of files” in a back room, Byrd has said. The sheriff's office then entered the warrant into the state's crime database maintained by the Arkansas Crime Information Center and notified the Correction Department to hold Ballard on the warrant.

Byrd then met with Phillips County Deputy Prosecuting Attorney Todd Murray, who decided to pursue the case.

Proctor acknowledged Byrd's role in his order, writing that the new sheriff's actions seemed to be the first taken by law enforcement in Ballard's case. Byrd's effort was part of a larger task he inherited from White to “serve hundreds of fugitive warrants beginning with his term in January of 2013,” Proctor wrote.

Reached Tuesday by phone, Murray said he hadn't received a copy of the order and would review it before publicly commenting on the judge's decision. Murray said he'll decide whether to appeal the case after he reviews the ruling.

Murray said he had talked with the victim, who is now 24, when he decided to pur-

sue the case. He said he didn't think it would be appropriate to elaborate on their discussions or comment on how they may affect his decisions going forward.

In a brief filed with the court, Murray argued that the statute of limitations had not been exceeded in Ballard's case and that Ballard's right to a speedy trial hadn't been violated.

Murray argued that the “speedy trial clock” should start when Ballard was arrested this year rather than the charge was filed in 2003. Murray cited current Arkansas law that requires defendants be brought to trial within a year of their arrest. That year of “trial time” can be extended for several reasons, such as continuances and mental evaluations.

But Ballard's defense attorney, Dion Wilson of Helena-West Helena, argued that the speedy trial clock should be calculated starting from when charges are filed, which was the requirement under Arkansas law until it was changed to the current interpretation in 2007.

Authorities had plenty of opportunity to serve the warrant, Wilson said, citing Ballard's testimony during a Feb. 13 hearing that he had been arrested 10 to 15 times since 2003.

Ballard's prison time in those years included a sentence from Jefferson County based on allegations from the same victim as the Phillips County case. The Jefferson County case involved a sexual assault in Humphrey and was prosecuted separately from the Phillips County case.

In his order, Proctor pointed to a 2007 Arkansas Supreme Court *per curiam* ruling that applied to Ballard's case. The court found that people charged before the speedy-trial rule changed but arrested afterward would be held to the earlier standard: “the time for trial commences on the date the charge was filed.”

“The Per Curiam is clear and unambiguous,” Proctor wrote in dismissing the case with prejudice, which bars any future prosecution of the charge.

As of Tuesday, Correction Department spokesman Shea Wilson said Ballard was still being held and would remain in custody until prison officials receive word from the parole board about his release.

John Felts, chairman of the parole board, said after the board learned of the Phillips County charge earlier this year that it directed a parole officer to hold off reviewing Ballard's parole plan — which includes a review of his potential living arrangements and other conditions — until the charges were resolved.

After the board receives formal notice of the judge's decision, the board “will allow the parole officer to take action to either accept the plan or deny it,” he said.

If approved, Ballard will be released, Felts said.

Outhouse experience



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/BENJAMIN KRAIN

Tykel Ray examines an outhouse on the grounds of the Historic Arkansas Museum during a field trip with classmates from Jacksonville High School Freshman Academy on Tuesday. The ninth-grade students were taking a field trip to eight museums relating to Arkansas history for a class project about their experience.

UAMS

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not determined a governance model for the proposed partnership, which could combine purchasing, custodial services, information technology and clinical services related to cancer and cardiac treatments.

Also awaiting review are several of the report's conclusions about large savings areas, such as information technology.

UA trustees approved in May plans to spend \$87 million to cover the costs of software, training, materials and installation associated with a new computer system at UAMS called Epic. Although consultants said UAMS could trim costs by abandoning its investment in Epic and joining St. Vincent's computer system, Rahn said the public hospital does not plan to do so.

In the area of information technology, “I quite frankly don't know where those [cost savings estimates] have come from,” Rahn said. Banko said there are advantages to partnering that extend beyond cost savings, such as the ability to share equipment and extend education pro-

grams in the two hospitals.

“The devil's in being able to execute on it and actually being able to make it happen,” Banko said. “There will have to be another round of due diligence.”

Rahn said any decision related to governance would be affected by concerns about anti-trust regulations and UAMS' responsibility to disclose information as a public organization.

“We believe strongly in our accountability to the public and in our status as a public institution,” he said. “I want us to be as open and transparent as we can be.”

A 135-page copy of the consultant's report was heavily redacted before a UAMS spokesman released it to reporters, with all information related to St. Vincent finances and operations blacked out, as well as some details about UAMS.

On one page, a pie chart detailing Little Rock hospitals' share of inpatient cardiac care was entirely covered in black ink, with the exclusion of the UAMS portion.

On another page, consultants ranked St. Vincent's and UAMS' clinical networks' “preparedness for integration,” with one being “limited” and

five being “mature.” On that scale, UAMS scored a 2.7. St. Vincent's score was blacked out.

“UAMS has sought the advice of legal counsel and has determined that some parts of this report are subject to the competitive advantage exemption of the Arkansas [Freedom of Information Act],” UAMS spokesman Leslie Taylor said.

Arkansas Code Annotated 25-19-105(b)(9)(A) exempts from public disclosure “files that if disclosed would give advantage to competitors or bidders.”

Rahn said any jointly owned operation that would be formed after partnership discussions would respect UAMS' obligations under open-records law. He did not specify what level of financial information such an organization would make public.

UA trustees will review unredacted copies of the report, and any agreement would be reviewed by several teams of attorneys and Attorney General Dustin McDaniel, Rahn said.

“I don't envision that there would be some kind of final product that would be produced behind closed doors,” he said.

Library

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“They patched over the bullet hole,” Baskin said, rubbing his finger over the obvious patch job. “So there is a ghost in the building. We don't know his name.”

When relocated, the branch will have 5,500 square feet of usable room on the first floor and 4,300 on the second. The 5,500-square-foot basement will be turned into an 140-seat auditorium with a stage and a 35-seat meeting room, according to architect's drawings displayed Tuesday.

The new branch library is also to include a gallery for exhibits, a cafe, the library's railroad history collection and a second-floor computer lab with 25 stations.

Baskin said he envisions the loading dock in the back serving as a stage for bands performing outdoor concerts for crowds sitting in lawn chairs on the parking lot.

North Little Rock's Public Building Authority purchased the building late last year for \$775,000 with a loan the Laman Library Commission will pay off over the next 10 years that covers the entire \$3.5 million cost, including the renovation. Once the debt is paid, the authority will deed the building to the commission.

The library needed the city's help — the City Council lent the money initially to make the purchase — because of a short time frame to make its bid. Those funds were paid back by the new loan in December.

The U.S. Postal Service closed the post office branch June 15, a move that city and library officials said had been coming for years. The building, completed in 1931, is on the National Register of Historic Places and inside the Argenta Historic District.

“This building is one of the most historic in Argenta,” Baskin said. “It took us seven years to buy it. After seven years, the post office gave us 30 days to buy it [once on the market].”

Mayor Joe Smith lauded the partnership between the library commission and city government in making the project come about.

“Partnerships are what great cities are about,” Smith said. “City Hall can't do it by itself. This downtown library will do nothing but help to create more partnerships.”

The renovation will restore much of the building to its original look, based on photographs of its construction and the original blueprints that Baskin said postal officials denied still existed until he found them inside a metal cabinet he said was

labeled “Blueprints.”

The first-floor ceiling, lowered about a foot during past post office renovations, will be raised, Baskin said. Walls that cover “hugely high” windows that extend from the first floor to the second floor will also be uncovered to let more natural light in, he said.

“This was a magnificent building till the post office decided to change it up,” Baskin said. “I think it's going to make a wonderful branch library.”

The Laman Library system is funded through its own fee revenue and a 3-mil library tax on Pulaski County property tax bills and doesn't receive city funding for its operations. Laman Library is independent of the county-wide Central Arkansas Library System.

Awards

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“I couldn't have got this if it wasn't for the men and women of the Little Rock Fire Department, their hard work and all of their assistance in helping me do my job,” Baker said.

Other award recipients were Traskwood Mayor Michael Nash and Sandra Kitchens, who works in Little Rock. They received one of four Citizen Life Saving awards for their efforts to stop an out-of-control vehicle on Interstate 630.

The vehicle's driver was knocked unconscious by a flying tire, and his foot became stuck on the gas pedal. Nash caught up with the vehicle, pulled in front of it and slowed it down. Kitchens followed behind, eventually turning off the ignition and attending to the driver once the car was slowed to a stop 2 miles later.

“Little Rock Fire Chief Gregory Summers said there was no telling how many lives Michael and Sandra saved that morning with their quick action,” said the event's master of ceremonies, Craig O'Neill with KTHV-TV, Channel 11.

The fire and police departments also honored their 2012 employees of the month.

Some honorees had saved people from drowning. One pair took a widow with no family to Kroger and bought her food to last her until a shelter reopened and could serve her.

Another officer had a 50 percent clearance rate in residential-burglary cases, 37 percentage points higher than the national average.

One group of firefighters went above and beyond to save a man who had been run over by a vehicle on the interstate, and another group made record speed in putting out a dorm fire after initially being told the wrong address.

“This is typical of what happens in our police and fire departments in a day-in, day-out basis,” Little Rock Mayor Mark Stodola said. “It's typical of the risk that these men and women go through in risking their own lives to keep us safe.”

Most of these actions went unnoticed at the time, and it does the officers and firefighters good to be recognized each year, Little Rock Police Chief Stuart Thomas said.

“It is easy to see what goes wrong. That usually makes the front page,” Thomas said. “There is a lot of good work being done out there by a lot of officers who invest their heart and soul in their jobs.”

“This is just a nice opportunity to give them a little ‘thank you’ from members of the community.”



See the award winners
arkansasonline.com/documents/

State to set keener eye after rise in quakes

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

HEBER SPRINGS — Earthquake experts intend to place more monitors near Greers Ferry Lake after a recent jump in the number of tremors in the area.

While many of the 60 quakes in the past year were too light to be felt by people, the Arkansas Geological Survey hopes to pinpoint a reason for the increase.

“It's enough now that, given the number of earthquakes we've had, it warrants us taking a closer look,” geologist Scott Ausbrooks told Little Rock television station KATV, Channel 7.

The monitors will be placed between Clinton and Heber Springs.

Ausbrooks said the quakes could be a natural occurrence, perhaps tied to recent water-level changes at the lake.

The region also has a pair of injection wells serving the natural-gas industry. Seismic activity fell in the Guy-Greensbrier area two years ago after a moratorium on injection-well operations.

Ausbrooks said it is too early to say whether injection wells near Greers Ferry Lake contributed to the recent increase in earthquakes.

of the study, which could be terminated after a month. Westerman and Sanders didn't ask the Alexander Group to offer an opinion on expansion of Medicaid under the federal Affordable Care Act, they said.

The current Medicaid program “is broken,” Sanders said, and the study could help improve it. The existing Medicaid program faces a \$61 million deficit in July. Republicans have also raised concerns about fraud.

But expanding the rolls by up to 250,000 people has an effect on the current program, Sanders said.

A plan for accommodating the additional Medicaid recipients — first proposed by Republicans — was unveiled last week by Gov. Mike Beebe,

a Democrat.

Beebe received assurances from the federal government that the state could offer health coverage, paid with Medicaid dollars, on the state's health insurance exchange to those earning up to 138 percent of the poverty level, or \$15,415 a year for an individual.

Such an unprecedented deal makes a consultant even more valuable, Sanders said.

“We're not only in uncharted waters, we're in a new orbit,” he said.

Adviser

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some more,” said Rep. Darrin Williams, D-Little Rock.

Williams and other Democrats said Westerman should have put the contract through the regular bidding process.

Republicans on the Joint Budget Committee, which was reviewing the contract, said that when Democrats controlled the Legislature, they pushed through a state Department of Human Services contract with another consultant, global giant McKinsey and Co. Inc. without putting it up for bid or conducting a wide search.

Democrats then, “found an apple that worked and stuck with that apple,” said



Westerman Sanders

Sen. Johnny Key, R-Mountain Home.

Sen. Joyce Elliott, D-Little Rock, said lawmakers deserved more time to digest the contract. But motions by her and Rep. Hank Wilkins, D-Pine Bluff, to delay its consideration failed.

Another vote to approve the contract passed 30-6.

After the meeting, Sanders said the existing Medicaid program would be the focus



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