

Title: **Ethics reform leaves officials divided**
 Author: BY DERREK ASBERRY, MAAYAN SCHECHTER, CHRISTINA CLEVELAND
 Size: 80.91 square inch
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Ethics reform leaves officials divided

BY DERREK ASBERRY,
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Editor's note: This is the first in a series of articles about the upcoming session of the South Carolina General Assembly. Each member of Aiken County's delegation spoke with the *Aiken Standard* for an interview, except for Don Wells, who did not return comment by press time.

Ethics reform should include state lawmakers being investigated by an independent body when facing ethical situations rather than being able to police themselves, said members of the Aiken County Legislative Delegation.

However, the House and Senate are divided on the issue, which has left Aiken lawmakers feeling frustrated

ETHICS

CONTINUED from 1A

bill, stating the independent commission would be given the full resources of the South Carolina law enforcement community and would be tasked with investigating ethics complaints made against elected officials

over the General Assembly's inability to pass a comprehensive ethics bill.

The House passed a bill in January 2014 that would have taken power out of the hands of legislators and placed it in the hands of a newly-formed Ethics Commission comprised of 12 members: four members appointed by the Governor, four elected by the Supreme Court and two members elected by each the House and Senate.

The bill was amended in the Senate to take out the part that stated an outside agency should oversee ethics issues, rather than allowing legislators to take part of the process.

A final bill was never passed, leaving it in a pile of other pending bills heading into the next session, which

begins Jan. 12.

S.C. House Advocacy

House Rep. Bill Taylor, R-Aiken, championed the House version of the

Please see **ETHICS**, Page 5A

Coming up

- Today: Ethics reform
- Monday: Infrastructure
- Tuesday: Education
- Wednesday: Domestic violence
- Thursday: Guns
- Friday: Body cameras
- Saturday: Legislative goals

mation without being hassled," he said.

Other House members in the Aiken delegation sided with Taylor including Rep. Bill Clyburn, D-Aiken, who questioned why innocent lawmakers should be worried about independent investigations.

Reps. Bill Hixon, R-North Augusta, and Chris Corley, R-Graniteville, added that there is a need for true ethics reform in the General Assembly.

"I would like to see a system where we put legitimate restrictions on the state contracts that legislators, their business

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interests and companies they hold stock in receive,” Corley said.

‘Frustrations’ in the Senate

The divide between the two bodies of the General Assembly did not stop senators in the Aiken delegation from voicing their support for independent oversight.

Sens. Tom Young, R-Aiken, and Shane Massey, R-Edgefield, both said they are “frustrated” because lawmakers have been dealing with the back-and-forth on ethics for several years.

Young said the Senate’s amended version nearly passed; however, the bill lost its power when its independent oversight language was removed, which is why he nor Massey approved of the bill.

“I’m not backing down on my position to support independent oversight,” Young said in September.

Massey said much of his time over the past few years has been spent crafting original proposals, but also trying to work some type of compro-

mise people could live with. But there are too many people who believe the system is fine just the way it is, Massey said.

Sen. Nikki Setzler, D-Lexington, took a different approach to the issue, stating the real issue is disclosure. For example, better tracking of how election and campaign dollars are being spent should be at the forefront of ethics, he said.

“I think that’s got to be a part of any ethics reform that passes. The Senate has worked very well so far with their ethics committee, but I think there is going to be reform and I think people will support reform,” he added.

What the public wants

Despite the long-standing debate on ethics, Young said he is optimistic that a bill will pass during the 2016 session year to appease constituents who support independent investigations.

“I think the public wants that, and I support it,” he said.

Clyburn added that the issue has stewed for too long and it’s time to move forward.

He added, “I think something

is going to be done this year, because I think the pressure from the public demands it.”

Getting a bill with independent oversight language to Gov. Nikki Haley’s desk will still be a struggle, said Massey, who believes there is still a strong divide among legislators. Still, he agrees with other members of the Aiken delegation in that 2016 may be the year a revised ethics bill becomes law.

“Allow somebody else to investigate, allow somebody else to present the evidence, and then let the committee and the full body decide,” Massey said.

Derrek Asberry is the SRS beat reporter with the *Aiken Standard*. Follow him on Twitter @DerrekAsberry.

Christina Cleveland is a general assignment reporter with the *Aiken Standard*. Follow her on Twitter @ChristinaNCleve.

Maayan Schechter is the digital news editor with the *Aiken Standard*. Follow her on Twitter @MaayanSchechter.

The ethics reform package passed

by the House also includes the strengthening of the state’s Freedom of Information Act that will provide far more government transparency and make it much easier and less expensive for citizens to quickly get government information without being hassled.

S.C. House Rep. Bill Taylor, R-Aiken



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AIKEN STANDARD FILE PHOTO

The Aiken County Legislative Delegation. Pictured, from left, are Rep. Bill Hixon, Rep. Bill Taylor, Rep. Don Wells, Sen. Shane Massey, the Honorable Doyet A. (Jack) Early, Sen. Tom Young, Rep. Bill Clyburn and Rep. Chris Corley.

Title: **Most S.C. doctors will be required to use prescription database**
 Author: BY SEANNA ADCOX The Associated Press
 Size: 57.66 square inch
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Real estate
 NYC may fit more 'micro' apartments into housing picture
 Universities step into craft beer growth by offering classes

Most S.C. doctors will be required to use prescription database

BY SEANNA ADCOX

The Associated Press
 COLUMBIA

Most doctors in South Carolina will soon be required to consult a state-wide database of patients' medical history as a way to combat the state's rampant prescription painkiller problem.

The changes will direct any doctor who wants to bill either Medicaid or the state health plan to use the database that's been voluntary since 2008, said Christian Soura, director of the state's Department of

Health and Human Services.

Announcements will likely go out in February on the mandate, which starts April 1, he told The Associated Press.

The South Carolina Medical Association supports the change, but "there will be some doctors unhappy about yet another step thrown into the mix," said its CEO, state Rep. Todd Atwater.

"Some say it will slow me down another minute and

half I don't have, but really?" said Atwater, R-Lexington. "Sometimes you have to have a little inconvenience to do the right thing and get some of these opioids off the streets."

The mandate will come three years after Inspector General Patrick Maley recommended it in a report, describing high-prescribers as either motivated by

money or naively helping "doctor shoppers." In response to his report, Gov. Nikki Haley created the

Prescription Drug Abuse Prevention Council, which similarly concluded one year ago that mandating the database's use is key to combatting abuse of OxyContin, Percocet and other opioids.

Similar mandates enacted in New York and Tennessee in 2012 resulted in drops of 75 percent and 36 percent, respectively, a year later in patients seeing multiple doctors for the same drugs, according to the Centers

SEE PAINKILLERS, 5C

Effort aimed at trying to combat state's prescription painkiller problem

Similar mandates enacted in New York and Tennessee in 2012 resulted in drops of 75 percent and 36 percent, respectively

South Carolina ranks as 11th highest state in terms of prescribing painkillers

FROM PAGE 1C

PAINKILLERS

for Disease Control and Prevention's 2014 Vital Signs report.

That report ranked South Carolina 11th highest nationwide in prescribing painkillers, with 102 prescriptions written for every 100 people.

"When you look at the impact of other states with similar policies, it's harder to say, 'I don't want to spend another minute or two in front of the computer,'" Soura said of doctors' decreasing resistance.

Technology improvements to the database were also critical to gaining their

support and – according to officials – the reason for delaying the mandate.

A law passed in June 2014 required pharmacists to report daily on the controlled substances they sell, to ensure the database is regularly updated. But a clause specified that doctors and pharmacists don't have to actually consult it before prescribing or dispensing medicine.

According to the council's report six months later, just 21 percent of South Carolina's prescribers had registered for the Prescription Monitoring Program and few of them actually used it.

Officials say that's partly because registering required filling out paperwork, getting it notarized and mailing the application to DHEC. And only the prescribing doctor had a login to access the database.

Under improvements that went live Nov. 23, doctors can register online and set up an account for a delegate, such as a nurse, to run the queries. The new system also summarizes patients' prescription history, calculates their daily opioid dose and generates an alert if

their prescriptions already exceed the recommended

amount, said Lisa Thomson, DHEC's drug control director.

The changes were "about making the system user-friendly and not disrupting work flows," said Bryan Amick, pharmacy director at the state's Medicaid agency and a member of the Prescription Drug Abuse Prevention Council.

South Carolina will join 29 states that require doctors or pharmacists to consult a prescription database in at least certain circumstances. Nevada was the first to do so in 2007. Such a database exists in every state except Missouri, ac-

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ording to the National Alliance for Model State Drug Laws.

The decree will affect the vast majority of doctors in South Carolina, though the exact percentage is unclear.

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*Rep. Todd Atwater
(R-Lexington)*

Title: **SRNS donates \$10K for flood assistance**
 Author: BY DERREK ASBERRY dasberry@aikenstandard.com
 Size: 42.93 square inch
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SRNS donates \$10K for flood assistance

BY DERREK ASBERRY

dasberry@aikenstandard.com

The Savannah River Site's management and operations contractor recently contributed to relief efforts after October's historical flooding impacted the entire state.

Savannah River Nuclear Solutions, or SRNS, donated \$10,000 to the American Red Cross to assist in the aftermath of Hurricane Joaquin.

The contractor's donation joined countless other local efforts following the downpour of an estimated 6 million gallons of rainfall in early October.

Carol Johnson, SRNS president and CEO, said SRNS has not

been a company to sit on the sidelines when tragedy strikes.

"We recognized the need as a company to reach out and help

our neighbors to recover from devastating catastrophes," said Johnson. "Partnering with relief aid organizations such as the Red Cross, we can have a significant impact."

Moving forward, Johnson noted that the work is far from over. She added that her faith is in organizations such as the Red Cross who are helping SRNS employees and others who were greatly impacted in the nearby Columbia and Lexington areas.

S.C. Gov. Nikki Haley and President Barack Obama both declared a state of emergency following the historical flooding.

During a 120-hour period that ended Oct. 5, the rainfall amounts in Aiken County ranged from less than 2 inches in the southern portion to more than 14 inches in the northern-most part.

Within the City of Aiken, the soggy ground and wind caused big trees to fall.

One that came down was Maid Marion, which was the No. 1 white oak on the list of South Carolina Champion Trees main-

tained by Clemson University.

Don Cheeks, the chairman of the Aiken Red Cross chapter, spoke about the commitment of SRNS to support the community.

"The Red Cross appreciates the generous support of SRNS during one of the most severe flooding events in South Carolina history," Cheeks said.

Derrek Asberry is the SRS beat reporter for the *Aiken Standard* and has been with the paper since June 2013. Follow him on Twitter @DerrekAsberry.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

SRNS presented a \$10,000 philanthropic giving donation to the American Red Cross to assist with the relief efforts associated with recent flooding throughout the state because of Hurricane Joaquin. Pictured are several SRNS and Red Cross officials. From the left are Alice Doswell, Joey Hutto, Carol Johnson, Rebecca Jordan, Samantha Jones and Don Cheeks.

Title: **South Carolina weathers tough year with hope**
 Author: JEFFREY COLLINS AND BRUCE SMITH ASSOCIATED PRESS
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South Carolina weathers tough year with hope

JEFFREY COLLINS AND BRUCE SMITH
 ASSOCIATED PRESS

COLUMBIA - The police shooting of an unarmed black man in North Charleston. The killing of nine people during Bible study at a historic African-American church in Charleston. Historic flooding that dropped nearly half their yearly rain fall in less than two days. The Confederate flag flown on the Statehouse grounds coming down after multiple other efforts had failed.

The past year has been one of significant change for South Carolina. Here are a series of snapshots about the key moments and players in 2015:

Walter Scott

Before his death was shown around the world and he became a symbol of the ongoing debate over police shootings of unarmed African-Americans, Walter Scott was just a 50-year-old forklift driver at a warehouse and a father behind on his child support payments.

He was pulled over on April 4 for a broken brake light by North Charleston Officer Michael Slager. People go to jail all the time in South Carolina for miss-

ing child support payments and Scott, who was behind on his, called his mother from his car to say he might need her help getting bail.

Moments later, he ran from his car and around the corner. Slager ran after him toward a vacant field. A passer-by captured what happened next on his cellphone. The video showed Slager firing eight shots at Scott's back. Scott was struck by several bullets and fell.

The shooting happened in a city whose officers faced years of accusations of mistreating minorities.

Scott's family called for calm, especially after Slager's swift arrest, saying they did not want Scott's memory soiled by violence.

A co-worker of Scott said at the time it was a fitting tribute. "He wouldn't hurt a fly, man," Ronald Smith said.

Joe Riley

In his 40th and final year as Charleston's mayor, Joe Riley faced his most trying time.

The man who steered the city through Hurricane Hugo in 1989 found his toughest moments on a hot, sticky

summer night when what he called "pure, pure concentrated evil" came to a church in his 345-year-old city.

After a call at 9:30 p.m. June 17, Riley hurried to historic Emanuel AME Church where nine black parishioners had been shot and killed during a Bible study.

In the days following, Riley again became the face of the historic city, comforting victims, attending funerals and being a voice of calm.

"I knew that in this incident everything I did, everything I said, had to be perfect," to ensure calm prevailed, Riley said.

The city — and indeed the whole nation — seemed to come together in the wake of the shootings, with thousands gathering on sweeping Ravened Bridge over the Cooper River in a show of unity several days later. President Obama and other dignitaries traveled to Charleston to pay their respects for those who died. More than \$5 million has been donated by thousands of peo-

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Hope

Continued from Page 1A

ple to help support the victims' families and fund college scholarships for Charleston-area students.

Riley has made it clear that he will continue to work on the issue of gun violence after he leaves

office.

"We do not want to encroach on law-abiding citizens' rights to own a gun but we must prevent guns from falling into the wrong hands," Riley said at an event earlier this month at Emanuel to announce a new effort to

curb gun violence.

The suspected killer in the Charleston shootings, Dylan Roof, was able to buy the gun that was used in the shootings because of a record keeping problem that prevented federal officials from disqualifying him before a three-

day deadline expired.

Russell Ott

Russell Tot knew that the Confederate flag flying outside the South Carolina statehouse had to come down, and it had to come down now - not later.

The eyes of the nation

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and the world were squarely focused on his place of work and the little known 37-year-old House member who took over his dad's seat back in 2013 was having trouble believing what was happening. He hadn't made a passionate speech imploring his colleagues to let go of the symbol of a bygone era, but he firmly believed it was time for it to happen and he didn't want to see the legislature and the state blow their chance of having it happen and risk looking like fools or obstructionists.

Gov. Nikki Haley had said less than a week after the slayings at Emanuel AME Church that the flag should come down and the state Senate had reached the same conclusion.

But as the sun set on July 8, the people who wanted the flag removed were stunned. Flag supporters in the house suddenly appeared to have enough votes for an amendment to the bill backed by Haley and the Senate that would postpone its passage, keeping the rebel banner flying outside the chambers. The flag supporters wanted a guarantee that the flag would be sent to a mu-

seum and they were willing to hold up the process for it, even if it meant going against the rising tide of support to bring it down.

Tot has been around the Legislature but never before had been a key figure. He lobbied for farmers for nearly a decade before replacing his dad and in three years had been the sponsor of one bill that has become law — creating a migratory waterfowl committee. But he knew parliamentary rules and he knew there was an arcane, rarely used way that he could get the flag supporters what they wanted and also keep the state on pace to bring the banner down.

His goal was simple. The longer the debate went on, the more likely it was that the whole process would get derailed.

He and his colleagues went to work, twisting arms, holding last minute votes and watching the clock tick past midnight to allow them to vote on the final measure during a new day.

At 1 a.m. the bill finally passed. On Friday July 10 the flag finally came down. In South Carolina, however, the debate over

the fate of the flag still rages on.

Maj. Gen. Robert Livingston

It was the most important mission of South Carolina National Guard commander Maj. Gen. Robert Livingston's life, directing thousands of soldiers and civilians during South Carolina's historic floods.

Livingston was a true soldier working with Gov. Nikki Haley to carry out her wishes and by her side when she gave the public updates.

But people around the state left little doubt that Livingston's preparation in the days and years before the floods, and his decisive action as the disaster unfolded, prevented a terrible situation from being so much worse.

"We were rescuing people at the same time we were putting things together back in Columbia," Livingston said.

Livingston helped get clean water into the pipes at Columbia hospitals worried about how many critically ill patients might die if they had to close and move them. His soldiers saved dozens of

lives with air and boat rescues and helped repair washed out roads and bridges. They averted what would have been a disaster on top of a disaster by keeping Columbia's water system running and water coming from almost 400,000 taps by fixing a canal breach and laying pipe to get water into the treatment plant.

"A lot of the guys who were doing a lot of discussion had built roads and dams and things like that down in Ecuador and Honduras and places like that back in the 1980s and 90s," Livingston said. "They understood building structures in less than ideal conditions."

Now Livingston laughs that he has another set of problems, created by well-meaning South Carolinians who poured kindness at his soldiers for weeks.

"The support from the people of South Carolina was just tremendous," Livingston said "I'm having to put half of my soldiers on the weight control program now because they got fed so many doughnuts, cookies and everything else."

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JOHN BAZEMORE/AP

An honor guard from the South Carolina Highway patrol lowers the Confederate battle flag.



JANET BLACKMON MORGAN/AP

This aerial Dec 8 photo, shows flooding around homes in the Carolina Forest community in Horry County.

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CHUCK BURTON/AP

A memorial is placed near the site where Walter Scott was killed in North Charleston, S.C. Scott was killed by a North Charleston police officer after a traffic stop on April 4.

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Most doctors to be required to use prescription database

BY SEANNA ADCOX
 Associated Press

COLUMBIA — Most doctors in South Carolina will soon be required to consult a statewide database of patients' medical history as a way to combat the state's rampant prescription painkiller problem.

The changes will direct any doctor who wants to bill either Medicaid or the state health plan to use the database that's been voluntary since 2008, said Christian Soura, director of the state's Department of Health and Human Services.

Announcements will likely go out in February on the mandate, which starts April 1, he told The Associated Press.

The South Carolina Medical Association supports the change, but "there will be some doctors unhappy about yet another step thrown into the mix," said its CEO, state Rep. Todd Atwater.

"Some say it will slow me down another minute and half I don't have, but really?" said Atwater, R-Lexington. "Sometimes you have to have a little inconvenience to do the right thing and get some of these opioids off the streets."

The mandate will come three years after Inspector General Patrick Maley recommended it in a report, describ-

Sometimes you have to have a little inconvenience to do the right thing and get some of these opioids off the streets.

Todd Atwater, South Carolina Medical Association CEO

ing high-prescribers as either motivated by money or naively helping "doctor shoppers." In response to his report, Gov. Nikki Haley created the Prescription Drug Abuse Prevention Council, which similarly concluded one year ago that mandating the database's use is key to combating abuse of OxyContin, Percocet and other opioids.

Similar mandates enacted in New York and Tennessee in 2012 resulted in drops of 75 percent and 36 percent, respectively, a year later in patients seeing multiple doctors for the same drugs, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's 2014 Vital Signs report.

That report ranked South Carolina 11th highest nationwide in prescribing painkillers, with 102 prescriptions written for every 100 people.

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computer,'" Soura said of doctors' decreasing resistance.

Technology improvements to the database were also critical to gaining their support and — according to officials — the reason for delaying the mandate.

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According to the council's report six months later, just 21 percent of South Carolina's prescribers had registered for the Prescription Monitoring Program and few of them actually used it.

Officials said that's partly because registering required filling out paperwork, getting it notarized and mailing the application to DHEC. And only the prescribing doctor had a login to access the database.

Under improvements that

went live Nov. 23, doctors can register online and set up an account for a delegate, such as a nurse, to run the queries. The new system also summarizes patients' prescription history, calculates their daily opioid dose and generates an alert if their prescriptions already exceed the recommended amount, said Lisa Thomson, DHEC's drug control director.

The changes were "about making the system user-friendly and not disrupting work flows," said Bryan Amick, pharmacy director at the state's Medicaid agency and a member of the Prescription Drug Abuse Prevention Council.

South Carolina will join 29 states that require doctors or pharmacists to consult a prescription database in at least certain circumstances. Nevada was the first to do so in 2007. Such a database exists in every state except Missouri, according to the National Alliance for Model State Drug Laws.

The decree will affect the vast majority of doctors in South Carolina, though the exact percentage is unclear. About 1 million South Carolinians get their health care through Medicaid, while the state health plan covers more than 460,000 people, when combining public employees, retirees, their spouses and dependents.

Title: **MOX payday has arrived**
 Author: BY DERREK ASBERRY dasberry@aikenstandard.com
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MOX payday has arrived

DOE yet to respond to Haley's attempt to levy fines

BY DERREK ASBERRY

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South Carolina should begin collecting today \$1 million a day from the Department of Energy for the agency's failure to either remove one metric ton of weapons-grade plutonium from the state or process one ton through the Savannah River Site's Mixed Oxide Fuel Fabrication Facility.

However, collecting the money, which would max out at \$100 million a year, may prove to be a challenge since the department has yet to acknowledge Gov. Nikki Haley's attempt to levy the funds or her



Haley

threat to sue if DOE refuses to pay.

Haley sent a Dec. 14 letter to Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz announcing her intent to levy \$1 million a

day from DOE over the missed milestones for MOX, the nation's current pathway to meet an agreement with Russia by disposing of 34 metric tons of weapons-grade plutonium.

"Promises made must be promises kept," Haley wrote,

referring to a 2003 agreement signed by former Gov. Jim Hodges and the Department of Energy.

The individual promise, along with legislation signed by U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C. – who was in the U.S. House of Representatives at the time – has empowered Haley and Attorney General Alan Wilson to impose the fines.

"South Carolina cannot stand idly by while DOE violates federal laws and fails to fulfill its commitment to the State," Haley wrote in the letter.

Haley has not heard back from Moniz or DOE after sending the letter, and com-

EDITORIAL

Time to pay the piper arrives on plutonium, 11A

Nuclear Security Administration, or NNSA, said last month that "the Department is working to meet its commitment to the State of South Carolina." However, she did not specify how soon plutonium intended for MOX would leave the state.

NNSA reported last week that the agency is attempting to do right by South Carolina with its plan to remove six tons of weap-

ons-grade plutonium from SRS.

A "preferred alternative" posted last week by the Department of Energy features a plan to process the plutonium at SRS and send the new form of the material to the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, or WIPP, in Carlsbad, New Mexico.

However, the removal would

not honor the agreement since the plutonium mentioned is not part of the stockpiles intended for MOX.

Francie Israeli, a press secretary for the National

Security Administration, or NNSA, said last month that "the Department is working to meet its commitment to the State of South Carolina."

Still, Chaney Adams, Gov. Haley's press secretary, said removing any plutonium from SRS is a good thing for South Carolina, but only if the federal government follows through on the plan.

"The DOE does not have a great track record of keeping its promises to the people of South Carolina, which is why we will continue to push them in every way we can to make sure our state is not a dumping ground for others' nuclear waste," Adams said.

Derrek Asberry is the SRS beat reporter for the *Aiken Standard* and has been with the paper since June 2013. He is originally from Vidalia, Ga., and a graduate of Georgia Southern University. Follow him on Twitter @DerrekAsberry.



Title: **Country, state should accept Syrian refugees**
 Author:
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Country, state should accept Syrian refugees

The vote by our Aiken County Council and the stand of Governor Haley to not accept Syrian refugees seems to me to be contrary to the basic principles of this country.

We pride ourselves on being the land of the free and home

of the brave. Are the terrorists succeeding in changing this?

The decision made in World War II to intern all Japanese-Americans was a disgrace.

Let's not make the same mistake regarding Syrian refugees.

William A. Galston's column in the Dec. 30 *Wall Street Journal* presents a very good view on this subject.

Robert Barnett
Aiken

Title: **Time to pay the piper arrives on plutonium**

Author:

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EDITORIAL

Time to pay the piper arrives on plutonium

Today is the day. As of now, the U.S. Department of Energy owes the State of South Carolina \$1 million a day for not keeping promises made when the Savannah River Site became the de facto plutonium storage repository for the nation more than a decade ago.

Gov. Nikki Haley put the U.S. Department of Energy on notice last month when she demanded that promises made on the disposition of plutonium at the SRS must be kept – and that the time has come to pay the agreed price for not doing so.

Haley wrote Secretary of Energy Ernest Moniz to inform him that she will pursue fines of \$1 million per day, up to \$100 million, due the state in 2016 as called for in a 2003 federal law requiring DOE to process or remove 1 ton of weapons-grade plutonium from the state by today.

The promise of such payments were made when then-Gov. Jim Hodges opposed federal plans to bring 34 metric tons of the radioactive element to Aiken County for what was described as short-term storage. The plan was to mix the plutonium with commercial nuclear fuel through the MOX process. Delays in the construction of the MOX facility and funding cuts over the years made meeting the just-passed deadline all but impossible.

Under a 2000 nuclear non-proliferation agreement with Russia, the Cold War era plutonium is to be reprocessed into commercial-grade nuclear reactor fuel.

The project, overseen by the DOE's National

Nuclear Security Administration, has consistently failed to meet its milestones due to underfunding, Moniz said.

MOX opponents suggest diluting or “down-blending” the plutonium and storing it at a currently closed underground storage site in New Mexico. While possibly less costly, the option presents multiple regulatory challenges.

MOX is the best option out there and it is the one taxpayers have already spent billions pursuing. Federal foot dragging is about to get very expensive as the fines can and should start piling up in the new year.

The debate about the best path forward will proceed, but is moot as far as the fines are concerned. South Carolina has taken on the duty and substantial risk of storing the plutonium when no other state would do so.

Even now, DOE is announcing plans to bring additional shipments of plutonium to SRS from other overseas nations through the next several years. To be clear, the promise to remove the material seems hollow when the only real action being taken would actually add to the problem.

DOE, get the process of removing the plutonium from South Carolina underway as quickly as possible. In the meantime, pay up and recognize the contribution South Carolina has made to national security for so little in return.

Please note the tally at the bottom of this page. The *Aiken Standard* will keep DOE's debt top of mind here, and in Washington, D.C., by adding to the total reflected each and every day until the issue is resolved.

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Vote of confidence

Trey Gowdy kicks off SC's presidential endorsement race

ANDREW SHAIN

THE STATE

The major S.C. Republican presidential endorsement race is about to take off.

Last week, candidates fought for backers of former GOP White House hopeful Lindsey Graham soon after the U.S. senator from Seneca left the race. And in previous months, Republican candidates have dotted their campaigns with members of the state General Assembly.

Now one of South Carolina's top Republicans is ready to line up formally behind a candidate.

U.S. Rep. Trey Gowdy of Spartanburg endorsed Florida Sen. Marco Rubio on Tuesday in Clinton, Iowa, the first stop of a

two-day swing through the first state to choose presidential favorites, Rubio campaign spokesman Alex Conant said.

The congressman's announcement, along with the shrinking field, should lead to decisions by other powerful S.C. Republicans, including U.S. Sen. Tim Scott of North Charleston and Gov. Nikki Haley, who have been described as the "crown jewels" of GOP presidential endorsers.

Gowdy's backing could help Rubio with conservative voters in Iowa and South Carolina, where the senator is polling third behind New York billion-

aire Donald Trump and Texas Sen. Ted Cruz, Winthrop University political scientist Scott Huffmon said.

Gowdy, a former prosecutor, won over GOP supporters nationwide for his leadership of the special House panel on the Benghazi attack that questioned Democratic presidential front-runner Hillary Clinton in her role as secretary of state.

"There's a reason why the first appearance is in Iowa," said Walter Whetsell, a S.C. po-

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Endorse

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litical consultant who worked for former Texas Gov. Rick Perry's presidential campaign.

And those die-hard conservatives are more likely to go to the polls in the South's first primary on Feb. 20, Huffmon said. "Voters who might have bypassed Rubio might give him a second look," he said. "Hard-core Republicans see Gowdy for standing up against the Clinton machine, and people who respect Gowdy for that will pay attention."

Gowdy's endorsement of Rubio has led to speculation about whether Scott, who polls find is among the state's most popular Republican politicians, will also back the Florida senator.

Scott and Gowdy appeared with Rubio at Upstate stops on

Dec. 19 — the first time the pair showed up at an event for an individual White House candidate since the presidential town halls they hosted concluded this month. The appearance was not a formal sign of support for Rubio, Scott's campaign said.

Scott will not endorse a White House hopeful until after he and House Speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wis., host a forum on poverty in Columbia Jan. 9 that will feature seven presidential candidates, Scott's campaign said. Rubio is scheduled to attend the event. Other top S.C.

Republicans whose endorsements could help candidates include Graham and U.S. Reps. Jeff Duncan of Laurens and Tom Rice, who comes from a large GOP stronghold in Horry

County, Whetsell said.

The intentions from Haley, perhaps the state's most sought-after endorsement, remain unclear. The governor, whose popularity has grown with her handling of the Charleston mass shooting this summer, has mentioned that she might back a presidential candidate but has not offered a timetable.

"The governor has a real network," Whetsell said.

Huffmon said he could see Haley remaining on the sideline with this year's field, which is larger from four years ago when she endorsed Mitt Romney. The governor also is considered a top choice for vice president.

"She has more to lose," Huffmon said. "She can say, 'I had to play stateswoman.'"

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CAROLYN KASTER/AP

Trey Gowdy, R-S.C. Rep. has given his support to presedential candidate and Florida Sen. Marco Rubio.