

Floyd County's top stories of 2008

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— Weird weather, visits by presidential candidates and the opening of a downtown YMCA in New Albany topped Floyd County news in 2008.

With the year winding down, The Tribune staff voted on the issues they felt mattered most over the past 12 months. There was much to choose from, and arguably, the events that just missed the top five are as relevant as the ones that were included.

Below is a look at the top five.

YMCA comes to New Albany

After years of planning and construction, the Floyd County branch of the YMCA of Southern Indiana opened in November with Joe LaRocca named as president of the exercise facility.

The first phase of the Scribner Place project includes a city-owned aquatic center with three swimming pools, as well as the YMCA section with features such as a gymnasium and 40-foot climbing wall.

LaRocca said the membership base continues to swell as patrons can utilize the Jeffersonville and New Albany Y locations for one price.

Funding for the Y came mainly through the Horseshoe Foundation of Floyd County, as the riverboat organization accounted for approximately 90 percent of the cost.

The city and county are responsible for payments of no more than \$137,500 a year for the next 16 years. A debate over the city's portion of the payment made some wonder if the Y would ever be built. Some members of the City Council took issue with using property tax revenue as a backup to the New Albany portion of the payment.

Battleground state

Beginning with a fierce battle for the Democratic nod in the May primary, presidential candidates realized Indiana was up for grabs.

Democrat Hillary Clinton narrowly edged President-elect Barack Obama in May as the Hoosier choice to represent the party. Clinton, husband Bill and daughter Chelsea made several stops in Southern Indiana while on the campaign trail.

Obama spoke to a full house at Indiana University Southeast and filmed a commercial in downtown Jeffersonville in April. He would eventually lose Floyd and Clark counties to Clinton in the primary.

As the November election loomed, Vice President-elect Joe Biden made a stop at Jeffersonville's Warder Park. However, the biggest crowd in the two counties was drawn by Republican Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin, with more than 16,000 people attending a rally for the Alaskan governor at a Jeffersonville warehouse in October.

Mayor vetoes smoking ban

It was hard to find a seat in the assembly room of the City-County Building when the New Albany City Council took on the issue of a smoking ban in August.

The body voted 5-4 in favor of banning smoking in public establishments and private clubs in New Albany, but the real story had just begun.

In September, Mayor Doug England vetoed the council's decision and presented his recommendation. He wanted the ordinance to exclude private establishments and bars, similar to what Jeffersonville has used for the past two years.

Since the veto, the council has not taken action on the ban. The body could overturn the veto with a minimal vote of 6-3. Council President Jeff Gahan assigned a committee to investigate England's proposals, but that group has yet to meet.

The committee consists of council members Dan Coffey, Bob Caesar and Pat McLaughlin, all of whom voted in favor of the ban.

Wacky weather

Record snows in March, an April earthquake and Hurricane-force winds in September kept Floyd County residents on their toes in 2008.

Almost a foot of snow fell over a two-day period in March. The white stuff was followed by heavy rains March 18 and 19 that led to the Ohio River spilling over its banks.

According to the Web site www.weather.com, the Louisville-metro area received 16.76 inches of precipitation for January, February and March. During the same span in 2007, the area received 9.52 inches. Then came a 5:40 a.m. wake-up call April 18 in the form of a magnitude 5.2 earthquake. The U.S. Geological Survey reported the center of the quake was about 40 miles northwest of Evansville.

The most destructive blow Mother Nature dished out was a September 14 windstorm, which claimed lives in Southern Indiana, led to extensive property damage and left thousands of residents without electricity, some for several days.

Floyd County was declared an emergency area and residents were able to apply for relief from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, or FEMA, beginning in October.

Repairs are still ongoing, including restoration efforts to the city-owned Baptist Tabernacle located at 318 E. Fourth St., which lost its roof during the storm.

Among other damage reports, New Albany-Floyd County Consolidated School Corp. reported approximately \$125,000 worth of destruction to its buildings, and the steeple marking St. Mary's Catholic Church for 142 years had to be torn down due to wind breakage.

Secret committee considers closing schools

Though Silver Street and Pine View Elementary schools remain open, The Tribune uncovered a secret committee titled Resources for Results that considered options including closing the schools for budgetary reasons.

Citing an anonymous source who serves as a member of the committee, The Tribune ran several stories on the body that prompted action by residents, including the formation of a group that touts the motto "Save Silver Street."

Signs baring the motto have appeared throughout New Albany.

When Tribune reporter Tara Hettinger attempted to attend one of the committee's meeting, she was escorted out and told it was not a public gathering.

Dennis Brooks, superintendent of NA-FC schools, later admitted to knowing about the committee and said it had been meeting for two years. He said its work is only for recommendation purposes.

The Tribune consulted lawyers who said the meetings can be held in private, thus the gatherings were not a violation of state law.

Mayor Doug England joined the cause for keeping the schools open, having a spokesperson at each of the Save Silver Street meetings. Pine View supporters also have flooded school board meetings as a result.

The committee's recommendations have yet to be proposed publicly.

Others receiving votes

- Newly built residence halls help increase student enrollment and change climate at Indiana University Southeast.
- Doug England returns to New Albany mayor's position.
- Bill Cochran upset by Ed Clere after 34 years as state representative.
- Camille Wright Pool closes for good.
- David Camm appeal heads to state court.

- S. Ellen Jones Elementary School student unveils tape recorder of teacher yelling at him and calling him names.
- Floyd County Youth Shelter delayed, again.

Online poll for top stories of 2008

1. Secret NA-FC Resources for Results committee considers closing schools.
2. Wacky weather.
3. New Albany smoking ban passes, then is vetoed by mayor.
4. YMCA opens downtown.
5. Bill Cochran upset after 34 years in Statehouse.

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Photos



Many people were involved in bringing the new YMCA to New Albany, a few include, from left, Mark Seabrook, Mike Ricke, Jerry Finn, Neil Walkoff, Regina Overton and Joe LaRocca. The group flips through past editions of The Tribune inside the new YMCA in downtown New Albany. Staff photo by Kevin McGloshen