

PUBLIC POLICY WATCH

The Newsletter of The Arkansas Public Policy Panel

Winter, 2001



New Voice for Arkansas Farmers and Rural Communities



A coalition of farmers and rural families is launching the Arkansas Farm-Community Alliance (AFCA). AFCA is a new voice representing everyday farmers around Arkansas.

“Seems like everyone is setting farm policies in Arkansas except farmers. We need to be much more involved in strengthening family farms and rural communities in Arkansas,” said Pat Ford, a berry farmer from London, Arkansas.

A broad spectrum of farmers has joined AFCA including organic farmers, large row crop farmers, contract poultry growers, cattlemen, dairymen, berry growers, wineries, members of the Black Farmers Association, and many others. Consumers are a part as well. They’re joining because every year more and more farmers are forced off their land while little is done.

The first priority of the group is to push for the creation of a state Department of Agriculture. Arkansas is the only state in the U.S. without a Department of Agriculture or similar agency serving its farmers, though we rank 10th in Agriculture sales in the nation.

“Not having a department makes no sense,” said Jimmy Wallace, a farmer from Lonoke County. “If we were doing alright it would be one thing, but nobody in farming is doing alright these days and a Department of Agriculture is something that would help.”

< Cont. See Agriculture Pg. 5 >

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Members of WCSSE discuss safety at the explosives storage facility with officials

Citizens’ Group Wins Victory in South Arkansas

Woodberry Citizens for a Safe and Secure Environment (WCSSE) won a major victory in November in their struggle to get heightened security at Highland Industrial Park, a nearby facility which houses explosives for private industries and Department of Defense contractors. The group’s hard work and organizing efforts convinced local, state and federal officials that security at the site was inadequate.

After a town hall meeting where over 100 community members voiced their concerns to several public officials and the Highland CEO, the Governor called in the Arkansas National Guard to protect the site while an investigation of the industrial park’s security is conducted.

Woodberry is a rural community of about 200, located a few miles east of Camden. Citizens became concerned for their safety when an explosion in April at a Highland bunker damaged area homes and property and left a crater in the ground the size of a football field. Their fears were further heightened by the September 11 terrorist attacks.

Woodberry residents were dismayed at how accessible the storage bunkers were - the two gates entering Highland Industrial Park were unguarded and unlocked 24 hours a day, there was no fence surrounding the facility and no surveillance equipment was in place. When attempts to get Highland officials to address these concerns failed, the community decided it was time to organize.

< Cont. See Woodberry Pg. 3 >

NEWS BRIEFS

Newton County Wildlife Association recently elected new cochairs, George Imrie and Barry Weaver, to take over the helms of the organization. The group also successfully held the annual Forest Fest, a mixture of live music, camping and crafts, on October 13th at Josh Brown's Farm on Cave Mountain Road. The group continues work on a project mapping out the national forests in Newton County and Northwest Arkansas.

Arkansas Voices is the newest member of the Citizens First Congress. Arkansas Voices is a statewide coalition for mothers in prison and the children they leave behind. The group recently held their 7th annual *Mothers in Prison, Children in Crisis* event at the state Capitol to bring awareness to the prison-justice system. The group also received this year's Volunteer of the Year award from the Women's Project for their work on prison issues.

Women's Action for New Directions (WAND) is launching a national education campaign in response to events on and following September 11th. The campaign — Women Take Action for Real Security — will include candidate and elected official briefings, a speakers tour, "Kitchen Table Talks," library gatherings, neighborhood circles, forums and workshops. Please join us as we raise our voices and roll up our sleeves to lead our nation and world toward real security.

The State AFL-CIO is calling on federal lawmakers to pass an economic stimulus bill that would benefit workers, instead of the current package that gives \$100 billion to corporations. State union members also continue to support the nurses at St. Vincent's in Little Rock in their struggle to gain their first contract.. Although it has been over a year since the nurses voted to organize, the administration still refuses to offer up a realistic proposal.

Our Youth..Our Future New Project on Rural Education

Rural schools and communities offer students opportunities that large schools can only dream about: low student-teacher ratios; individualized attention for students by staff who know students and their families well; high levels of student participation as well as community participation in school extracurricular activities; and strong community support. However, some schools face insurmountable obstacles, including a declining economic base, increasing poverty and population loss.

Our Rural State, The Facts:

Education reform in Arkansas must account for rural education. Nearly half (46.5%) of our state's population lives in rural areas, (places with 2,500 people or less). Thirty percent of our students are enrolled in rural schools, and rural children are more likely to live in poverty. Arkansas has a higher percentage of students attending small rural schools than any other state, yet rural schools and residents are often forgotten in policy debates.

Arkansas' rural education districts are in dire straits. Factors that combine to place our rural districts in need are the distressed state of the Delta region, declining student enrollment, low levels of educational attainment, and consistently low teacher pay.

What Rural Schools are Facing:

Given the obstacles, it's amazing what rural schools in Arkansas are accomplishing. In some schools ceilings are falling in, bathrooms are leaking, and teachers are forced to teach classes that they're not certified to teach.

The Lakeview school system filed a lawsuit against the state for not providing enough resources for a fair and adequate education -- a guarantee in our State Constitution. Ninety-four percent of the Lake View school district's children qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. It is so impoverished that its high school math faculty consists of an uncertified substitute teacher paid \$10,000 per year to teach pre-algebra, algebra I and II, geometry, and trigonometry. He supplements that meager salary by earning \$5,000 a year driving the school bus. In the classroom, he operates with calculators for less than half his students, no compasses for geometry, a computer printer that does not work, and an old addressograph duplicating machine that works so rarely that even examinations have to be handwritten on the one chalkboard in his classroom.

< Cont. See Education Pg. 5 >

THANKS!

We gratefully acknowledge these major donors to the purchase of the Progressive House. Thank You for your vision and gracious donations to help the cause of citizen involvement in public policy.

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The Poultry Growers Group

Central Arkansas Labor Council

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Good Faith Fund

Ben Allen

White River EPA

June Williams

Ozark Headwaters Group, Sierra Club

Teamsters Local Union #878

Community Environmental Watch Association

Arkansas Fair Housing Council

Roger & Susan Amick



Phillips County Residents ask “What Happened to \$766,321.20?”

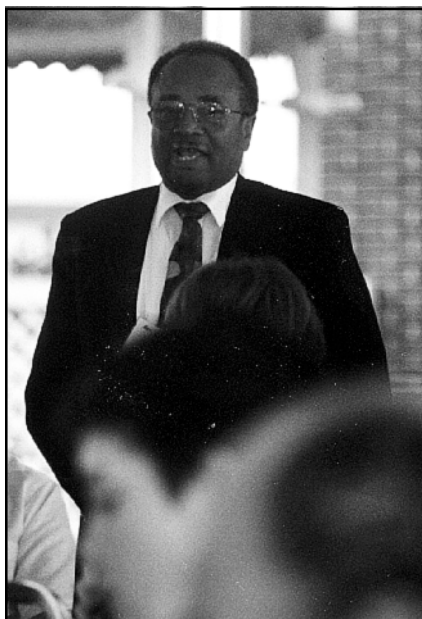
Residents in Phillips County are organizing to find out what happened to \$766,531.20 ear-marked to help welfare recipients find jobs through the local TEA Coalition (Transitional Employment Assistance). Concerns are that low-income folks trying to find jobs are paying the costs of a political fight between the Department of Human Services (DHS) and county TEA Coalitions.

State DHS authorities met with the group and the money was sent back to state TEA authorities when the Phillips County TEA coalition voted to disband. The issue is complicated and controversial, but the goals of the group now are to make sure that the money is returned to the community and spent on programs that TEA recipients need. Over half of Phillips County residents qualify for some type of assistance (45% of the children in Phillips County live below the Federal poverty line).

The group is pleased that Ruth Whitney and Melissa Dean of DHS gave them straight answers. Whitney and Dean also agreed to work with the group to improve services for low-income folks in Phillips County. The group is now preparing a report with recommendations for DHS and will meet with DHS again soon.

In the mean time, other representatives from communities across the Delta are starting to get together to talk about keeping some kind of local control provisions in welfare reform programs and demanding more consistent and accountable action from DHS. They met recently in Pine Bluff at a meeting facilitated by Brownie Ledbetter and Freeman McKindra, who both broke retirement to help out. The group made plans to document the success that local programs have had in alleviating poverty and also the challenges those local programs face from state and federal bureaucracies.

Further meetings are planned. Contact the Panel if you are interested in learning more or getting involved.



Rev. HO Gray, Chairman of the Jefferson County TEA Coalition pictured at the Citizens First Congress

< Woodberry from Pg. 1 >

Residents formed Woodberry Citizens for a Safe and Secure Environment and formed a strategy to enlist the support of public officials and educate the public about the problems at the industrial site. They took reporters for a tour of the unguarded and wide open gates leading to the stored explosives. The efforts of WCSSE convinced local, state, and federal officials to take action.

WCSSE is also concerned about Highland Industrial Park because of toxic contamination from the site. Department

of Defense (DOD) contractors make and test rockets and missiles at Highland. Many components of the rockets and tests are toxic to both the environment and human health. The group is continuing to work on getting answers about what kinds of chemicals are at the site and what is being done to ensure the safety of the environment and the surrounding communities.

Contact the Panel if you are concerned about pollution and other threats to your community.

Note from the Director

Like everyone else, our thoughts and prayers have been on the disastrous events of the past couple months. On the morning of September 11, I was in a meeting between an emerging grassroots group in Helena and employees at DHS who are in charge of administering welfare reform dollars. The conversation was a little bit heated but concessions were made and it felt good to be a part of our political process that day.

We remain committed to the dream of grassroots democracy. While the world is thinking globally, small town Arkansas continues to struggle to create economic opportunities, save our farms, improve education, clean up toxic pollution, end discrimination, and more. September 11 changed many things and we have all taken time to mourn and reflect, but our resolve for fairness, justice and democracy is as strong as ever.

We have a new organizing project on education and continue our work on civil rights, agriculture, economic justice and the environment. The Panel Board met in early November and adopted a new structure that is more consistent and efficient. We're in the middle of a new strategic planning process and expect to have a new strategic plan in place sometime early next year. We're strengthening our ability to help everyday folks enter the political debate and create stronger communities.

On December 8th activists from across the state are gathering to network and work on agendas for agriculture, civil rights, economic justice, and the environment. That night we are having a party to celebrate the great grassroots work going on across Arkansas. We'll recognize some outstanding activists with Brownie Ledbetter Dragon Slayer Awards. I hope you can join us, and drop us a line if we can be of help.

Bill Koop

News cont.

The **Campus Democracy Collective (CDC)** at the **University of Arkansas**, in a joint effort with the University's debate team, recently held a debate on whether the two party system hurts democracy. The group also held a teach-in on the Middle East and Islam featuring guest speakers, films and a panel discussion. The teach-in was held in conjunction with a national day of action put on by a coalition of student and youth groups calling for a peaceful, nonmilitary resolution to the terrorist attacks.

The **Good Faith Fund** is focusing on several issues over the next few months. They are working on a policy paper analyzing Arkansas' workforce investment system that is expected to be out by the end of the year. The report will look at how effective the system is in serving its two most important customers – workers and employers. The group is also working with Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families and the Kids Count Coalition to develop recommendations for the reauthorization of TANF – the new federal welfare program.

Students Transforming and Resisting Corporations (STARC) at **Hendrix College** recently held a rally and demonstration in front of Staples in Little Rock to urge the company to supply 100% recycled paper and to phase out supplies of paper from clearcut forests. The group also is holding a week long event to bring awareness to hunger and homelessness. Activities during the week include speakers, "Free Speech Friday," a food waste survey, and panel discussions.

Friends of the River is a new group out of Dardanelle formed to fight pollution on the Arkansas River. They are currently organizing to prevent the Russellville sewage plant from discharging into the Arkansas River just upstream of Dardanelle.

Citizens Carry Progressive Agenda to Capitol

2001 Legislative Session Post Mortem



The

2001 legislative session has long since ended and folks are beginning to work on plans for the 2003 session. As we look ahead at the work to be done, lets also take a look back at how the Arkansas Citizens First Congress' Citizen Agenda fared in the 2001 General Assembly. Below is how the session went, what passed, what failed, and where we are today.

The 2001 session marked several new beginnings, both for the Congress and for the legislature. The Congress went into the session under new leadership, with a new lobbyist; for the first time in at least 25 years Brownie Ledbetter was not at the helm. At the same time, this General Assembly was the first with no House members with more than five years' experience, and was the last session for many of the "old timers" in the Senate, who will be term limited out in the next election.

Overall, the Congress did well. We held several citizen lobbying events where we pushed our 5 priorities:

- *Creating a State Department of Agriculture*
- *Passing Hate Crimes legislation*
- *Providing incentives for Renewable Energy*
- *Limiting Conflicts of Interest on State Boards & Commissions*
- *Passing a Public Sector Bargaining Bill*

Department of Agriculture – Arkansas is the only state without something that functions like a Department of Agriculture. We knew going in to the session that we would not come out of it with a Department. We hoped to simply create some debate, build support for the issue and sow seeds for the future. The number of legislators who are supportive of a Department of Agriculture has greatly increased since the last session. Farmers and the Panel collaborated to release a report on why Arkansas needs an Ag Department (see www.ARPANEL.org). The final outcome was that the issue was introduced into interim study, where the necessary number-crunching and in-depth hearings will be done this coming winter.

Hate Crimes – We are still one of only five states that does not allow for

< See Session Pg. 6 >

< *Education from Pg. 2* >

Still, Lake View has produced an attendance rate of 99%, a graduation rate of 94.7%, and a dropout rate of two percent, rates that are better than the state average. While it's amazing what they've accomplished, students and teachers shouldn't have to do so much with so little. Lake View and their lawyers took on the Goliath of the State Department of Education and won.

Partnership Formed:

The issues vary a great deal between areas of the state. Some schools are dealing with immediate problems of teacher and funding shortages, civil rights issues and poor academic performance. Other schools are doing well but are concerned about the changes likely to take place on the state level, such as consolidation and taxes. The Lakeview lawsuit has forced the issue into the limelight with a court ordering the state to find an additional \$400 million to nearly a billion dollars more per year for

education. A state Blue Ribbon Commission is now debating the future of Arkansas schools at the Capitol. The time is right to talk about improving schools.

The Panel has formed a partnership with the Rural School and Community Trust (RSCT) to work with parents, students, teachers, and others to improve school policy at the state and local levels, with focus on rural schools. We are also working with the Arkansas Education Association, which is actively working on school reform as well. The Panel is organizing community forums in different parts of the state, and in some communities we are meeting privately with teachers and parents to create strategies to improve their local school.

The Panel's website has links to a variety of websites with policy research on education. Contact the Panel for more information regarding rural education issues or to learn how you can get involved.

< *Agriculture cont. from Pg. 1* >

The farmers believe a Department of Agriculture could coordinate the many different parts of the agriculture community and even government agencies. It would provide a central location and voice for Agriculture in Arkansas that could both respond to requests for help and advocate on behalf of the State's farmers at the Federal level. It could provide services for things like value-added marketing and other innovative programs that surrounding states have for their farmers, but that Arkansas lacks.

"In Arkansas we have all of the regulatory burden that a Department

would place on farmers already, but we don't have nearly the same support that other states' farmers get," said Wallace.

AFCA helped convince the Arkansas Legislature's Agriculture Committee to hold hearings and conduct a study on a Department of Agriculture this winter. Two studies of agriculture issues in Arkansas are available on the Panel website.

To become a member and/or receive information on the Arkansas Farm-Community Alliance (AFCA) contact the Panel's lead farm organizer Sonny Cantrell, 501-425-9966.

News cont.

The **Southwest Arkansas Good Government Commission** is meeting with residents in the Camden Housing Authority to set up adult education classes and meet other needs. The group recently joined the Camden Chamber of Commerce and is busy conducting a survey of Camden community members to find out local concerns. Contact the Panel for more info.

The **Sierra Student Coalition at the University of Arkansas** is working on improving recycling on campus and helping the National Sierra Club work on the End Logging in National Forests Campaign. They are also continuing to educate students on environmental issues.

The **Silas H. Hunt Institute** recently sponsored a "Youth Speak-Out" in Lafayette County on, "Organizing and Empowering Youth for the 21st Century and Beyond." The event included keynote speaker Elaine Brown, author of *A Taste of Power; A Black Woman's Story*.

The **Green Party of Arkansas** is running a candidate, Sarah Marsh, for U.S. Congressperson in a special election to replace Rep. Asa Hutchinson in Arkansas' Third District. Marsh, a recent graduate of the University of Arkansas' School of Architecture, is running a campaign based on the Greens' Ten Key Values including: Grassroots Democracy and Nonviolence. The Greens recently won a victory in the campaign when a Federal Judge ruled that Marsh and the Green Party must be placed on the November ballot in a lawsuit filed by the **American Civil Liberties Union**.

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New cont.

Friends United for a Safe Environment (FUSE) is continuing to work on environmental issues in the southern part of the state. The group currently is fighting to prevent the Arkansas Department of Environment Quality from granting an air permit to an asphalt production facility in Texarkana feared to be releasing harmful substances into the environment. The group has garnered substantial citizen support on the issue and is struggling to obtain a public hearing from ADEQ on the matter.

The **Drug Policy Education Group (DPEG)** will be hosting, "Stand Up! A Celebration" on Saturday, Dec. 1 at 6:30 at the Ozark Mt. Smokehouse in Fayetteville. The event, full of food, music, and spirits, acknowledges two years of drug policy reform work in Arkansas. Among items that will be discussed is the recent poll showing 63% of Arkansans support medical marijuana laws. Tickets will be on sale for \$15 per person, \$25 per couple. For more information, contact DPEG at (501)839-8543 or Denele Campbell at (501)839-2475. Visit their website at: www.dpeg.org. The **Alliance for Reform of Drug Policy in Arkansas (ARDPARK)** are sponsors of the Arkansas Medical Marijuana Act, ARDPARK is currently gathering petition signatures. Visit their website at: www.ardpark.org.

Common Cause Arkansas is organizing new student groups on Arkansas university campuses. Two new groups have recently formed at the University of Arkansas, Little Rock and Arkansas State University in Jonesboro. The student chapter at ASU is currently involved in an investigation of ASU student fees and is also helping to monitor their upcoming student elections.

Session continued from Pg. 4

enhanced penalties for crimes motivated against someone simply on the basis of who they are, despite support from Attorney General Pryor and the leadership of the legislature. The good news is that for the first time ever, hate crimes legislation passed the Senate. However it was defeated in House Judiciary Committee. The issue was not lost on the merits of our arguments but rather on the basis of a well-organized lobbying effort by the opposition. We pulled together as a coalition despite the defeat. Our groups worked together closely on strategy and were united on lobbying. A series of meetings and press events on the issue were held around the state and helped generate support from all areas of Arkansas. We are in a stronger position to try again. Call or see our web site for a list of legislators who voted for or against hate crimes.

Renewable Energy – Success – We passed provisions allowing consumers who produce renewable energy to sell their excess energy back to utility companies at the same rate that the utility charges them for it. The bill also included tax deductions for renewable energy generating equipment and a "public benefits fund" to help low-income families implement renewables. As the session progressed, it was decided to split these issues into three bills. As predicted, the tax bill did not pass. The public benefits bill didn't pass either, but has been put into interim study with the support of the utilities, which makes it more likely to pass in the next session.

Conflicts of Interest on state boards and commissions – Our bill, sponsored by Sen. Jim Argue of Little Rock, would have made it illegal for board and commission members to vote on issues where their family members and employers had a financial stake. This passed the Senate, but proved too controversial for the House Committee. State board and commission members, along with some of the biggest corporate lobbyists and the Governor's office fought the initiative aggressively. We had good support behind the issue; the Congress, the Arkansas League of Women Voters, and Common Cause Arkansas all testified at the hearings for the bill. The committee was unwilling to consider the bill without examples of abuses under the current law.

Collective Bargaining for public employees – Arkansas state, city and county employees currently do not have the same right to union recognition that private employees have. This legislation would have simply extended the same rights enjoyed by most Arkansas working folk to public employees like fire and police personnel. We had an uphill fight against powerful corporate and government lobbyists. This bill got through Senate committee during the final weeks of the session, but never gained the needed support in the full Senate to bring it up for a vote.

This legislative session showed that folks getting involved is more important than ever, and we can win when we unite behind progressive issues. We're in a stronger position today on a Department of Agriculture, Hate crimes and Conflicts of Interest legislation

Want to Help Make a Difference?

We need a few good VISTA Volunteers to work in the Delta/ South Arkansas region, or out of the Little Rock office. Contact the Panel.



because of website for more information. It took enough of the legislators who were involved in a hard and difficult battle to get it to the floor. Now for the REALLY hard work.... www.CitizensFirst.org

Sierra Club Works To End Commercial Logging In National Forests

By Randy Zurcher

America's first National Forests were established over one hundred years ago. Today we have 155 of them, stretching across 191 million acres. Commercial logging has taken a harsh toll on the National Forests, decimating most of our nation's last old growth forests, washing topsoil and nutrients into streams, destroying wildlife habitat and intensifying the severity of forest fires.

Many people assume our National Forests are off-limits to logging. They aren't. Not only is commercial logging allowed, it's subsidized by taxpayers at a huge loss. From 1992 to 1997, the General Accounting Office said taxpayers lost \$2 billion on the Forest Service logging program. More than 440,000 miles of roads now cover our National Forests; the overwhelming majority of those roads were built for the logging

industry and paid for by taxpayers. Some revenue from National Forest timber sales goes to local schools, but the government could provide that money in other ways.

People assume our National Forests are off limits to logging. They aren't. Not only is commercial logging allowed, it's subsidized by taxpayers at a huge loss.

The Ozark-St. Francis and the Ouachita National Forests in Arkansas are being badly damaged by logging, with 120 million board feet extracted in one year. They are routinely managed for pine, a faster maturing commercial species than hardwoods. Hardwood trees including oak, hickory, beech, cherry, elm, and

others are girdled, burned, and sometimes just cut down and left on the forest floor to rot.

Healthy forests purify water, stabilize hillsides, and protect us from floods. They also provide a place to hike, camp, fish, and hunt. The Forest Service predicts that in the year 2000, recreation, hunting and fishing in National Forests will contribute 38 times more income to the nation's economy than logging, and create 31 times more jobs.

It will take generations for our National Forests to recover - and that's if we start restoring them immediately. We must stop logging our National Forests.

Our Ouachita National Forest is one of the Ten Most Endangered Forests in the nation. Call Randy Zurcher at 501-571-3005 for more information on protecting our watersheds and critters from logging on the National Forest.

Randy works as an organizer for the Sierra Club out of Fayetteville.



Arkansas Citizens First Congress



CAUCUS MEETINGS, RALLY, AND CELEBRATION!

SATURDAY DECEMBER 8, 2001

LITTLE ROCK



Meet folks from across the state fighting the good fight. Learn what other progressives are doing, share your issues, and help shape the citizen agenda for the 2003 Legislative Session. Join us on the steps of the Capitol to rally for our issues and community rights. Celebrate with some of the best people in the state with blues, food and awards.

Give us a call to register or find out more. You can also visit www.CitizensFirst.org.

Caucuses and Rally at the Capitol.
Lunch and party at Arkansas Education Association building.

Schedule of Events -- Saturday December 8
 11am-12noon: Lunch, \$6
 noon-4pm: **Caucuses**
 -Agriculture
 -Economic Justice
 -Public Health and the Environment
 -Social Justice and Civil Rights
 4:30-5:30 **Citizens Rally on the steps of Capitol**
 5:30-8:30 **Party and Fundraiser, \$10**
 -Music and Dancing
 -Food and Drinks
 -Dragon Slayer Awards





The Arkansas Public Policy Panel

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In This Issue:

- *Farmers Organize for Dept. of Agriculture*
- *South Arkansas group wins*
- *Improving Arkansas education*

and don't forget

Arkansas Citizens First Congress

Caucus Meetings, Rally, and Celebration!
Saturday December 8, 2001

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* executive committee

WHAT'S THE ARKANSAS PUBLIC POLICY PANEL?

We are a 38-year old private nonprofit based in Little Rock. We work statewide for social and economic justice by organizing and working with grassroots groups. Currently we work with more than 70 groups on issues they select including: sustainable and family agriculture; civil rights; economic fairness; health and environmental protections; and public schools.

In addition to assisting local groups, the Panel facilitates a coalition of more than 50 community groups that lobby together as *The Arkansas Citizens First Congress* for state policies. *The Congress* and its predecessor, the *Fairness Council*, have worked with grassroots groups to improve state policy since 1981 to: protect Arkansas' natural heritage and environment; change regressive tax structures; add citizen representation to state boards and commissions; pass the state's first civil rights bill; pass protections for victims of domestic violence; pass renewable energy incentives; and more.

We have staff based in Bass, Coy, Eagle Mills, Moro, West Helena, and Little Rock. Call if we can help.

Yes! I want to help build a stronger citizen voice

Enclosed is my donation:
___ \$200 ___ \$100 ___ \$75
___ \$50 ___ \$30 ___ \$ Other

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___ I want to volunteer some time.

Contact me at (include name) _____
