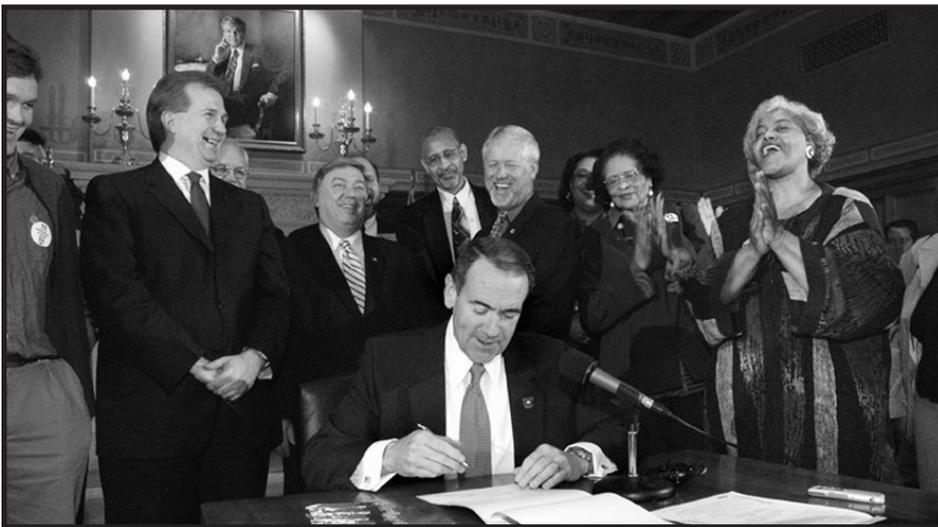


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ARKANSAS FAMILIES WIN MINIMUM WAGE INCREASE



Governor signs Minimum Wage bill!

Arkansas' working families won a hard-fought, crucial victory with passage by the Arkansas General Assembly of a \$1.10 an hour increase in the state minimum wage. Effective October 1, 2006, the minimum wage in Arkansas will rise from the current level of \$5.15 an hour to \$6.25 an hour.

This increase will raise the yearly earnings of minimum wage workers in Arkansas by \$2,288 a year. An estimated 127,000 working Arkansans will benefit from the increase. 80 percent of these workers are age 20 or older and 53 percent of them work full-time.

The increase comes less than four months after Give Arkansas A Rai\$e Now, a coalition of more than two dozen faith,

nonprofit and community groups, announced a campaign to raise the state minimum wage. It is no understatement to say that the massive groundswell of grassroots support for the coalition's efforts played a key role in persuading the Legislature to approve this minimum wage increase.

Lawmakers recognized that a vast majority of Arkansans - 87 percent according to our polling - supported an increase in the minimum wage. On behalf of all the working Arkansans who will benefit from this increase, we thank all the legislators who voted for the increase.

We especially thank House Speaker-designate Benny Petrus of Stuttgart and Senate President Pro Tem-

designate Jack Critcher of Batesville, who played a key leadership role in building the legislative consensus for a minimum wage increase.

Thanks also to Governor Mike Huckabee, who agreed to include the minimum wage increase in his call for a special legislative session and signed the increase into law.

As of April 2006, Arkansas is the only state in the South in which the Legislature has voted to increase the state minimum wage above the federal level of \$5.15 an hour.

To give you some perspective on why a minimum wage increase was so important, keep in mind that the federal minimum wage of \$5.15 an

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SOUTHEAST CAUCUS CONCLUDES MEETINGS AROUND THE STATE

Youth speak out on needed reforms

Over 50 leaders of community groups in Wilmot, Lake Village, Dumas, Gould, Marvell, Monticello, Oakwood Bayou and Mitchellville met to share issues and agendas on April 9 in Dumas.

The Southeast Arkansas Caucus was the last of a series of Citizens First Congress meetings that convened two hundred fifty people and six state legislators from around the state. Caucus meetings began in January with the Southwest Arkansas Caucus in El Dorado.

Then the Northwest Caucus met in

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NEWS BRIEFS

The Arkansas Public Policy Panel is seeking interns for this summer, fall and next spring semesters. Interns will work with Panel staff to survey communities, coordinate grassroots activities, research issues, monitor legislation, and more. Contact us for more information.

May 2. Lynn Brewer, an Enron whistleblower, presents "Confessions of an Enron Executive", hosted by UALR's College of Business (including the Labor Education Program) 2:00 – 4:15 p.m. at the Stella Boyle Smith Concert Hall on the UALR campus. For information go to www.aiea.ualr.edu/lep/ or call 501-569-8483.

May 17-19. The Arkansas Community Action Agencies Association Conference will be held at the Radisson Hotel in Fayetteville. John Selig, Director of the Arkansas Department of Health & Human Services, will speak on Wednesday at 2:00 p.m. Events include breakfast round-table discussions, 16 workshop options, a luncheon. info: (501) 372-0807 or info@acaaa.org.

June 6 is National Hunger Awareness Day. The Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance will participate in events across Arkansas. Domestic hunger-relief organizations will raise awareness about hunger and highlight the work being done to end hunger in America. For information, go to www.ARhungeralliance.org or call 501-399-9999.

June 10-23. "Exceptional educational opportunity for natural science-oriented 11- and 12-year olds". The Arkansas Audubon Society Halberg Ecology Camp, is hands-on teaching about ornithology, biology, entomology, geology, botany, mammalogy and herpetology. Each camp session lasts from Sunday through Friday. For information, go to www.arbirds.org. Or contact Liz Fulton, efulton@aristotle.net, 501-663-9380, or Barry Haas bhaas@sbcglobal.net, 501-821-4097. Limited scholarships/ tuition assistance available.

July 22, Saturday. The Arkansas Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice will hold their annual awards banquet at 6 p.m. at the First Presbyterian Church in Little Rock. The awards will go to representatives of the faith, labor and community who have worked tirelessly to further the cause of working people.

SAVE THE DATE. For The Amethyst Ball on Saturday, September 30. Proceeds benefit The Arkansas Coalition Against Domestic Violence. Place: Clinton Presidential Library. Time: 7 – 11pm. A black tie event with dancing, hors d'oeuvres, festive drinks and auction items that promote health and well being for all genders. For information call Kerri Bangert at (501) 907-5612.

SAVE THE DATE Oct 6 and 7 For a Gridiron Political Comedy, hosted by The American Association of University Women (AAUW) Fayetteville Branch, the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) at the UA and Rogers Little Theater, with performances at 8 p.m. at the RLT in Rogers. All profits go to scholarships and community theater. Info/tickets at 479-409-6072.

GET READY. Arkansas Sustainability Network will host Natural State Expo 2006 in October at the Statehouse Convention Center. We invite businesses, farmers, government agencies and programs, and community organizations to showcase the sustainable side of Arkansas. Reserve space at the Expo now! Call Katy Elliott at 501-837-7959 or email naturalstateexpo@yahoo.com

ARKANSAS CITIZENS FIRST CONGRESS CONVENES AT UAPB

A Voice for People in the Political Process.



The Citizens First Congress will hold its spring convention on April 28-29 in Pine Bluff at the University of Arkansas. The convention will bring organizations together from across the state and across a wide range of issues. Delegates from the organizations will introduce their ideas for moving the state forward and discuss strategies for building strong campaigns. They will share their plans for supporting candidates in the 2006 elections. Candidates who are running for Arkansas Governor will speak to the group.

In August, the Citizens First Congress will meet again to finalize its legislative agenda for the 2007 Arkansas legislature. For more information call organizer Sarah Dillard at 870-382-6584, or send an e-mail to Congress@CitizensFirst.

THE PANEL STAFF

Bill Kopsky, Little Rock
Celestine Wesley, Little Rock
Beth Ardapple, Bass
Bernadette Devone, Pine Bluff

VISTA Volunteers

Fay Knox, Deer
Sarah Dillard, Dumas
Sandra Faison, El Dorado
Rosemary Brown, Monticello

ARKANSAS STREAMS AGAIN AT RISK

BY DEBBIE DOSS



Lee Creek, Arkansas

A single special interest group is now endangering all of the scenic waterways in Arkansas for the sake of their own pet project. Unless the public acts soon, we may miss the chance to help save Arkansas' most important waterways.

Only the public comment period stands between Arkansas' most unspoiled waterways and developers in Van Buren and Crawford County who want to build a large dam on Lee Creek. The deadline for comments is May 3. Lee Creek is a pristine stream in Northwest Arkansas. In order to build their dam, developers need to weaken water quality standards that protect all Extraordinary Resource Waters in Arkansas. ERWs are the most pristine bodies of water in Arkansas and include free-flowing streams like North Sylamore Creek, Mulberry River, Saline River, Spring River and Strawberry River.

Of 20,000 stream miles in Arkansas, less than 8 percent are designated extraordinary and given extra protection. These streams and lakes are the most important waters

for fishing and outdoor recreation. Arkansas' most rare and endangered wildlife inhabit these bodies of water and their economic value for tourism and recreation generates millions of dollars to the states economy. People from all 50 states and many other countries come to Arkansas just to enjoy these waters.

These streams are protected by Arkansas Department of

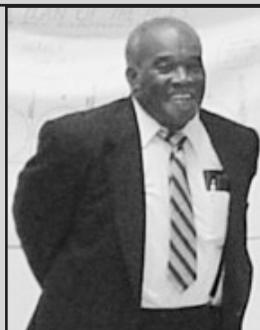
If you'd like to comment on this issue, public comments are accepted through May 3 via e-mail to reg-comment@adeq.state.ar.us or by U.S. mail to Doug Szenher, Public/media Affairs Manager, Arkansas Department of Environmental Quality, Public Outreach and Assistance Division, P.O. Box 8913, Little Rock, AR 72219-8913.

Environmental Quality Regulation 2, and a key part of that protection is that it prohibits any physical change to an Extraordinary Resource Waters that interferes with natural flow or endangers existing uses. Prohibitions include the building of a dam.

But against recommendations of the Department of Environmental Quality, the Pollution Control and Ecology Commission voted

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IN MEMORY of two friends



Long time activist **Lee Davis Hines**, the chair of Southwest Arkansas Good Government Commission, passed away April 11th in Camden. He was born June 7th in Chidester, attended AM&N College, now the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff, received two Masters degrees from Ouachita Baptist University and Auburn University and was a lifelong educator. His wife, two sons and two grandsons survive him. He was long-time friend and we will miss his sense of humor and commitment to improving life for everyone in South Arkansas.

Miriam Ella Alford passed away December 3, from lung cancer. Arkansas Public Policy Panel was just one of many progressive organizations that Ella generously supported. As a young mother, she became acquainted with the Panel at a time when its young mothers and founders were visiting civic organizations to encourage peaceful school integration and promote the value of diversity. Ella leaves behind a legacy of quiet, sincere support that helped organizations like the Panel to flourish. Thank you, Ella.

ARKANSAS STREAMS AGAIN AT RISK

BY DEBBIE DOSS |continued from Page 3|



to initiate a rule change that would allow dams on such waters, threatening every one of the streams in Arkansas. The Commission sets environmental policy while Environmental Quality carries out that policy by establishing and enforcing environmental regulations. It is almost unprecedented in the history of the Commission for them to go against the recommendations of Environmental Quality.

A few years ago the City of Fort Smith tried to dam Lee Creek for a water supply, but was stopped by Environmental Quality and the Arkansas conservation community. Instead, Fort Smith raised the level of Lake Fort Smith to meet future water needs. Crawford County and the City of Van Buren were included in Fort Smith's plans, but they remain dissatisfied. They split off and formed River Valley Regional Water District and continue to lobby for a large dam on Lee Creek.

River Valley does not need to dam Lee Creek for

water, even if they continue to shun Fort Smith. They have several other alternatives, including the Arkansas River. Instead they propose to topple a key protection for every designated extraordinary stream in Arkansas.

These streams are places that connect us with nature and our past by allowing us to see Arkansas as it once was. They provide scientists with a standard for comparison for other waters that have become degraded and provide habitat for a diversity of species found nowhere else.

Concerned citizens should ask how these streams will be protected from degradation. How will endangered species and their habitat be preserved? Why change the rules now, when our regulations already allow for use of Extraordinary Resource streams for drinking water as long as it does not alter stream flow? Won't the kinds of changes proposed by the River Valley Regional Water District clearly violate federal Clean Water Act protections and be ruled illegal, wasting tax dollars and public time on an issue a court is likely to overturn?

Arkansas has more than

ample water in existing lakes and reservoirs to meet our water needs for decades to come. A better solution than damming another stream needs to involve communities working together to make better use of existing water supplies. Rather than a piecemeal approach by the Arkansas Natural Resources Commission and the Arkansas Pollution Control and Ecology Commission, the state is in dire need of a comprehensive water plan that protects our remaining streams and provides clean water when and where it truly is needed. Such a plan would guarantee that future generations not only have clean water to drink, but also a wonderful natural legacy of beauty and diversity of life.

Arkansas is "The Natural State" largely due to its breathtaking and beautiful waterways. What will we be known as if we allow special interests free rein to plunder what should be left for all to enjoy?

Find more information at:
www.arkansascanoecub.com or
www.adeq.state.ar.us

Debbie Doss is the conservation chair of the Arkansas Canoe Club. Reprinted from April 17 Arkansas Democrat Gazette -- contact us for more information on this issue.

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ARKANSAS FAMILIES WIN MINIMUM WAGE INCREASE [continued from page 1]

hour was last increased in September 1997. In the eight and a half years since the last increase, the minimum wage lost 17 percent of its purchasing power and was at its lowest buying power in all but one of the last 50 years. Give Arkansas A Rai\$e Now, under the leadership of the Rev. Stephen Copley, a United Methodist Pastor, is proud to have played a part in bringing this important issue to the forefront of public attention. The volunteers who took time out of their busy lives to help circulate petitions and spread the word about why a minimum wage increase was so important are the real heroes of this effort.

The coalition partners in Give Arkansas A Rai\$e Now are:

- Individuals from the following faith traditions: African Methodist Episcopal Zion; Christian Church (Disciples of Christ); Episcopal Church; Jewish; National Baptist Convention USA; Presbyterian Church; Roman Catholic Church; Unitarian Universalist Church; United Church of Christ; and United Methodist Church
- Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families
- Southern Good Faith Fund
- Arkansas AFL-CIO
- Arkansas Public Policy Panel
- Arkansas Citizens First Congress
- Arkansas ACORN
- Arkansas NAACP
- American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Council 38
- Arkansas Hunger Coalition
- Arkansas Chapter, Methodist Federation for Social Action
- Arkansas Conference, United Methodist Church, Board of Church and Society
- Arkansas Interfaith Alliance
- Arkansas Interfaith Conference
- Arkansas Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice
- Arkansas Association of Community Action Agencies
- Arkansas Homeless Coalition
- Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance
- Arkansas Supportive Housing Network, Inc.
- Arkansas NOW
- Central Arkansas Labor Council
- Pulaski County Democratic Committee
- Stonewall Democratic Club
- Women's Project
- National Conference for Community and Justice of Arkansas
- William H. Bowen School of Law School Young Democrats
- Sebastian County Democratic Committee

THANK YOU TO OUR SUPPORTERS IN 2006 FOR HELPING THE PANEL MAKE ARKANSAS STRONGER

- Ben and Jerry's Foundation
- Catholic Campaign for Human Development
- Corporation for National Service
- Environmental Support Center
- First Presbyterian Church
- Marguerite Casey Foundation
- The Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation
- Norman Foundation
- Southern Partners Fund
- University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, School of Social Work
- University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff
- White River Environmental Protection Association
- ...and many Arkansas donors and activists

GRASSROOTS ROUNDUP

NORTHWEST ARKANSAS

The Northwest Arkansas Progressive Coalition meets monthly in Fayetteville. Top issues are affordable housing, water quality and education issues. Contact Rey Hernandez, Chair reyhernandez2003@yahoo.com

SOUTHEAST ARKANSAS

Members of the **Southeast Arkansas Regional Council** are surveying local communities about issues. Members formed a chapter of Arkansans for Excellence in Education to lobby for school reforms. Contact Onie Norman, chair (870) 382-0607 oniet@seark.net

The **Gould Citizens Advisory Committee** completed a city beautification campaign and is developing a Neighborhood Watch program. Members are developing voter engagement and turnout plans and are addressing school reform with Arkansans for Excellence in Education. Contact Curtis Mangrum, chair (870) 479-3465

Lake Village Concerned Citizens are engaging youth in community planning and a city beautification campaign. Contact Ella Edwards, chair (870) 265-2753

The youth and adult members of **Concerned Citizens of Wilmot** are developing voter engagement and turnout plans. They recently completed a city beautification campaign and began a neighborhood watch program. Members formed a chapter of Arkansans for Excellence in Education. Contact Rosie Dunn, chair (870) 473-5379

The Oakwood Bayou Community Development Corporation is working to secure a fire truck for their area. Members are advocating for pavement on an eight-mile stretch of gravel road, and planning a beautification campaign. Contact Mr. Robert Phillips, chair 870-382-1318

EDUCATION GAP EXPOSED

Spring 2006, Little Rock, Arkansas



The gaps in education performance are fairly easy to document, but much more complex to resolve. The question is what will close the achievement gap and provide an equal educational opportunity to every child in Arkansas no matter where they live or what family they come from.

A report released last year by the Panel highlights severe gaps in school performance between different classes of students. The document is a factual reinforcement for problems that most Arkansans already know. It is available at www.ARPANEL.org or call our office. Some of the findings include:

- In literacy, the percentage of children passing literacy proficiency declines as they get older across all subgroups. A nearly 3 to 1 gap exists in 11th grade literacy scores between Caucasian and African American students.
- In mathematics, the percentage of children passing mathematical proficiency also declines as they get older across all subgroups. The overall mathematics gap between white and black students is the 15th largest in the nation, and scores for African Americans in Arkansas are the lowest in the country.
- A gap also exists in the rates that students attend advanced placement classes and gifted and talented programs; and a gap exists in the rates that students drop out of school.
- In terms of college readiness, again there are large gaps between subgroups of Arkansas students.
- Children with disabilities score extremely low across nearly every measurement.

Last year we partnered with professors from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock and the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff to provide basic workshops on the achievement gap in Camden and in Dumas. We also partnered with Advocates for Children and Families to expand pre-school funding for low-income children, as well as passing legislation to make it easier for communities to use closed school buildings as community resource centers and protect their schools' historical archives.

Now community members of Arkansas for Excellence in Education (AEE) are beginning to assess achievement gap factors in their own school districts and meet with policy experts and educators to identify potential solutions. AEE has chapters made up of parents and community activists in 10 different Arkansas communities, and growing. They are developing partnerships with policy organizations and experts to assist in the assessment of potential solutions.

Research indicates that progress on the achievement gap can be made through in-school reforms, but that very significant achievement factors are outside of the school in families and communities. In fact the single greatest indicator of student performance, according to many studies, is the income of parents.

Other indicators of the out-of-school impact of the achievement gap is that a very significant achievement gap already exists in children as young as 4-years-old – a full 2 years before they attend a public school.

Members of AEE are taking a holistic approach towards the achievement gap and are examining both in-school and out-of-school reforms at their local and state levels. They will identify both short-term and long-term policy options for their own communities as well as the Arkansas Legislature. They are interested in developing holistic community development plans that address the total needs of families and children in the community. Progress on the gap is going to have to include addressing school house issues like class size and teacher pay, but it is also going to have to include addressing core issues of poverty and family stability in Arkansas.

The achievement gap is a daunting problem to say the least, but 3 to 1 gaps in performance are not acceptable and we must do better in a changing global economy. And we can do it by working together.

Contact The Panel for more information or to get involved.

THE PANEL BOARD:

Rev. J.C. Owens, *Bearden*
Curtis Mangrum, *Grady*
Rev. Howard Gordon, *Little Rock*
Alice Lightle, *Little Rock*
Judy Matsuoka, *Little Rock*
E.J. Miller, *Little Rock*
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Perry Hayes, *Pettigrew*
Maria Christina Moroles, *Ponca*
Linda Polk, *Russellville*
Basil Kyriakakis, *Waldron*

GRASSROOTS ROUNDUP

EAST ARKANSAS

The **Concerned Citizens of the Marvell Area** are developing an electoral strategy with 8 candidates to run for county offices, and are addressing school reform issues. Contact Calvin Jarrett, chair 870-829-2448

SOUTHWEST ARKANSAS

The **South Arkansas Good Government Commission** members are working on city beautification, economic and environment issues in and around Camden. The group also runs voter registration campaigns and candidate forums. Members are reaching out to youth and have formed a chapter of Arkansas for Excellence in Education. Contact Pastor John Owens, Chair 870 687-3161

The Bearden Community Development Corporation is working to build a community center for youth. Members have completed a beautification campaign. Contact Grover Newton, Chair (870) 687-2765

The El Dorado Concerned Citizens formed a chapter of Arkansas for Excellence in Education, and are in the process of analyzing environmental issues in the city. Contact Pastor Lee Vell Faison, Chair 870) 862-3548

Stamps Citizens in Action completed a beautification campaign and is beginning a Neighborhood Watch project. They are planning countywide forums to Get Out the Vote, and will endorse local candidates. Members formed a chapter of Arkansas for Excellence in Education. Contact Bonnie Daniels, Chair, (870) 533-2258. danielsw@sbcglobal.net

VISTA Volunteers Sarah Dillard, Rosemary Brown, Sandra Faison and Gladys Tiffany support Arkansas residents to organize their communities and begin creating community plans. Thank you for your excellent work.

SOUTHEAST CAUCUS CONCLUDES MEETINGS AROUND THE STATE

| continued from Page 1 |



Fayetteville. In March, caucuses met on Economic Justice, the Environment and Education Reform.

In the Southeast Caucus, the leaders included students from high schools in Wilmot, Dumas, Lake Village and from the University of Arkansas at Monticello. Leaders shared information about their local campaigns (see Grassroots Roundup). Then they moved to create an agenda and action plan for the priorities they defined for their region.

Expanding economic opportunity, improving education and improving environmental and health conditions topped the agenda for the Southeast Caucus, including:

- more accountable economic development
- more youth job and mentoring programs
- better job training for adults
- better resources and facilities in schools
- better counseling and academic planning for minority students
- to address issues of racial prejudice in schools
- to find solutions to the pervasive achievement gap in Arkansas schools
- more access to health care
- to find solutions the high cancer and disease rates in the region
- tighter controls on chemical use and production.

Staff from the Panel facilitated the meeting and provided training on how to more effectively influence political leaders. The Panel

provided a range of information on education reform, economic issues, the recently concluded Arkansas Legislature's Special Session on Education (including winning a higher minimum wage), and the candidates who are running for election in 2006.

Elected officials who attended were Dumas Mayor Marion Gill, State Representative David Rainey, State Senator Hank Wilkins, and Senator Wilkins' opponent in May Democratic Primary for Arkansas Senate, former State Representative Lindburgh Thomas.

To prepare for the 2007 Arkansas Legislature, the caucuses will continue developing their agendas at a convention in Pine Bluff on April 28 and 29, hosted by the Arkansas Citizens First Congress. At a second convention in August, the coalition will elect its 2007 legislative platform.

The meetings are building a more effective community-based force for improving Arkansas. Local community organizations use them to begin addressing larger regional and state policy issues. They are a place where community groups can start working together. They bring grassroots and policy organizations together to share analysis and build agendas.

Thanks to EVERYONE who is participating. To get involved, contact Panel Organizing Director Bernadette Devone at 870-718-7700 or e-mail us at thePanel@ARPanel.org.

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Arkansas Farm Community Alliance celebrating their big win to create an Arkansas Department of Agriculture at 2005 Legislature with a big feed!

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- **Education Gap Exposed**
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