

OKRA STRUT Irmo hosted its annual Okra festival Saturday.



Women of the Lake Murray-Irmo Women's Club serve up some okra at the Irmo Okra Strut on Saturday. The Women's Club is the only organization allowed to sell okra at the festival.

JUDSON DRENNAN THE CAROLINA REPORTER

Farmers to get less relief money

BY JUDSON DRENNAN
THE CAROLINA REPORTER

Limited federal disaster relief funds for farmers will be spread thin this year after both drought and flood have devastated the agricultural community in South Carolina, according to National Legislative Coordinator Larry McKinzie.

Only \$500 million will be allocated by Congress for farm disaster relief nationwide, he said. However, with more than \$1.25 billion in farm damages to the Carolinas alone, he said farmers nationwide will likely get far less than they might normally expect.

The federal money will be distributed after damages from disaster areas are calculated nationwide. Farm relief is then distributed to farmers according to their losses.

"Farmers are in a pretty tough situation right now," McKinzie said. "There have been the low market prices, the flood, the drought."

This year, South Carolina was declared a disaster area twice: first for drought and then for flood. However, the floods won't bring any more money to farmers in flooded areas, McKinzie said.

Declaring the state a flood disaster has made available Federal Emergency Management Administration funds and other public money to help the state rebuild infrastructure and to assist families who can't afford to rebuild after the flood. But this money doesn't help farmers.

"We could end up losing a lot of farmers because of these natural disasters," McKinzie said. "It doesn't look good right now."

He said that until about two years ago, farmers had been in fairly good

standing with banks. However, he said, the past two years' seasons will make it hard for many to continue farming.

"I think what you'll see this time is a lot of people voluntarily leaving prior to being foreclosed on," he said.

Federal relief funds are available each year to farmers in states deemed by the government to be disaster areas.

To qualify for these grants, farmers must be in a county that reports at least a 30 percent loss in agriculture revenues. In a normal year, farmers who qualify can expect to get somewhere between 40 cents to 50 cents on the dollar in disaster relief handouts.

"This year, they'll be lucky to get half that," McKinzie said.

Becky Walton of the S.C. Department of Agriculture said South Carolina farmers will qualify for low-interest loans from the government, but low market prices will make it difficult, if not impossible for them to repay them since many farm products are selling for less than they have in 40 to 50 years.

"Like farmers need any more loans," she said. The loans' interest rates are fixed below prime rate, a better alternative to the higher-interest loans the farmers could get from private lenders.

Walton said recent rains came too late for many farmers suffering from drought. She said the growing season is over for most of the state's crops, and the damage to farmers has been done.

"And then you have the fields in coastal areas that are underwater," she said. "It's really ironic that we got hit with Floyd, yet we are having a drought. It's an incredible situation where we have drought and flood at the same time."

City Council

Columbia City Council meets the first and third Wednesdays of each month at the City Hall Council Chambers, third floor, 1737 Main St.

County Council

Richland County Council meets the first and third Tuesdays of each month at the County Administration Building, 2020 Hampton St.

Photography exhibit

"Lord, I Wish I Had a Prayin' Church Tonight," a photography exhibit by Stanley Luzzano depicting small African-American churches in the state. Through Oct. 10, McKissick Museum. For more information, call 777-7251.

Marionette theater

The Columbia Marionette Company holds performances at 3 p.m. each Saturday and Sunday at 401 Laurel St. For more information, call 252-7366.

Eau Claire Renaissance Faire

The Eau Claire Renaissance Faire will be held today and tomorrow at Hyatt Park, as the neighborhood celebrates its 100th anniversary. Festivities include games, arts and crafts, and music. Free. For more information, call 799-5508.

Parade of homes

The Parade of Homes will be held from noon to 9 p.m. through Sunday at Windermere at LongCreek Plantation. Single-site display of 12 fully decorated homes built by some of Columbia's premier builders. For cost or other information, call 256-6238.

Caboose day

Caboose Day will be held Saturday at the S.C. Railroad Museum in Winnsboro. Activities include the chance to ride on a freight caboose, 9:45 and 11 a.m., 1, 2:15, and 3:30 p.m. For cost or other information, call 796-8540.

Blessing of animals

A Holy Eucharist and Blessing of Animals will be held at 6 p.m. Sunday at the Keenan Chapel, Trinity Cathedral. As a celebration of the feast day of St. Francis of Assisi, anyone can bring pets to receive a blessing. Free. For more information, call 771-7800.

New skills test aims to raise state's education standards

BY ASHLEY MATHIAS
THE CAROLINA REPORTER

After 20 years of using the Basic Skills Assessment Program, South Carolina is implementing a new test, the Palmetto Achievement Challenge Test, to raise the state's education standards.

PACT will take the place of the BSAP test over the next four years. In the spring, the test was administered to third- through eighth-graders. The implementation schedule is staggered among the different grade levels, but by 2003, grades three through eight and 10, 11 and 12 will be using the new test.

"Since the BSAP test is 20 years old, it was time for a change," said Marianne Bird, public information educational associate for the S.C. Department of Education. "The PACT test is part of the initiative to raise the bar and meet new state stan-

dards."

The BSAP tested a student's knowledge of basic skills. PACT measures a student's ability to understand and work out basic life situations.

A sample test question from the BSAP would be, "What is 60 percent of 270?" PACT is more of a practical test. A typical test question for a sixth-grader would be, "At a clearance sale, the price of a VCR was discounted 40 percent. The discount price was \$375. What was the original price?" Students would then have to explain how they got their answers.

Because of the new test format, the scores aren't expected to be very high for the first year.

"Because the test is more academically challenging than BSAP, the first year's scores are expected to be lower," Bird said. "We can't predict how they will be in the future."

District 5 Test Coordinator Joe Saunders said the test gives more information about students' abilities.

"With the BSAP, it really wasn't very informative about what knowledge the students had, and the test was considerably too easy," he said. "We have several high-achieving students in our district, and they were always topping out on the test."

Saunders thinks that the test might result in fewer overachievers.

"The PACT test is considerably more difficult because the standards are higher and more demanding," he said. "Because of this, the number of students who actually meet the standards will probably be lower."

Amy Gunwall, a third-grade teacher at Boundally Street Elementary School in Newberry, administered the test to her class in the spring and saw

that the test had lots of problems.

"I hated it," Gunwall said. "The test was just too long. It was untimed, so you had to wait until every student finished a problem before you could go to the next problem. This created discipline problems." Gunwall also had complaints about the test's format.

The S.C. Department of Education said it has worked out the kinks in the test format so it'll be more easily understood by students and teachers the next time. According to the department, scores have initially been lower in every state where a new testing program has been put into place.

Once students become more accustomed to the type of test and the standards are fully implemented, scores are expected to rise.

Test scores from the spring will be released Oct. 12.

Sunday alcohol sales fail to make ballot in Beaufort, Greenville

BY GINA DEMILLO
THE CAROLINA REPORTER

Residents of Beaufort and Greenville counties will have to wait until next year to vote on Sunday alcohol sales.

Restaurant owners in Beaufort County were unable to get the signatures required by Sept. 15 to get a Sunday alcohol sales referendum on the November ballot, marking the third straight year they have fallen short.

Though they successfully collected 2,500 signatures from county residents, petition organizers were told that the signatures must come from registered voters in unincorporated areas of the county.

Unincorporated areas include those from Hilton Head Bridge to Sun City, St. Helena Island and Lady's Island. The city of Beaufort can sell alcohol on Sundays.

"Everyone had to take a step back after we found out we needed the registered voters' signatures," said Beth Cooler, owner of ComerStone Grill in Beaufort and leader of the petition drive for the third consecutive year.

With the setback coming just two weeks before the deadline, restaurant owners scrambled to gather the signatures needed. Though Hurricane Floyd didn't help their cause, Cooler said she couldn't blame the storm entirely.

Greenville County restaurant owners also lacked the 2,500 registered voters' signatures needed to put the issue to vote there in a special election Oct. 12.

"Our goal was to get 10,000 signatures, to make up for any unregistered voters who signed," said Kathleen Waldman, who manages Austin's restaurant at the Greenville Marriott hotel and is on the board of directors for the city's restaurant association. As the deadline approached, however, owners had collected only about 4,000 signatures.

"When they submitted their petition on September 8, they did not have enough valid signatures," said Conway Belangia, director of the Greenville County election office.

Legally, sales advocates have until Saturday to submit another petition to get the referendum on the Nov. 2 ballot, Belangia said.

However, Waldman said restaurant owners want to avoid the November election.

"We don't want to go up against video poker at the same time," she said. "If Sunday sales are denied then, we would have to wait another four years to vote again."

Instead, petition organizers will try to have another special election for Sunday sales, though Waldman said she's not sure when.

Both Austin's restaurant and the Marriott have lost business in the past because of restricted sales, Waldman said.

"People want to check in on Sundays, but they hear we don't sell alcohol, so they don't," she said.

Cooler, who owns ComerStone Grill, said her concern isn't lost business as

much as giving customers what they want.

"As business owners, it is our responsibility to provide to our customers what all the other businesses can," she said. "The issue is not the extra revenue. The issue is that Hilton Head can do it, Bluffton can do it. Beaufort can do it."

Advocates of Sunday alcohol sales point to the revenue local governments would receive from restaurants. According to the state Department of Revenue, each business that sells alcohol pays \$150 per Sunday to their city or county.

Cooler estimates that more than \$200,000 a year would come from Beaufort County restaurants.

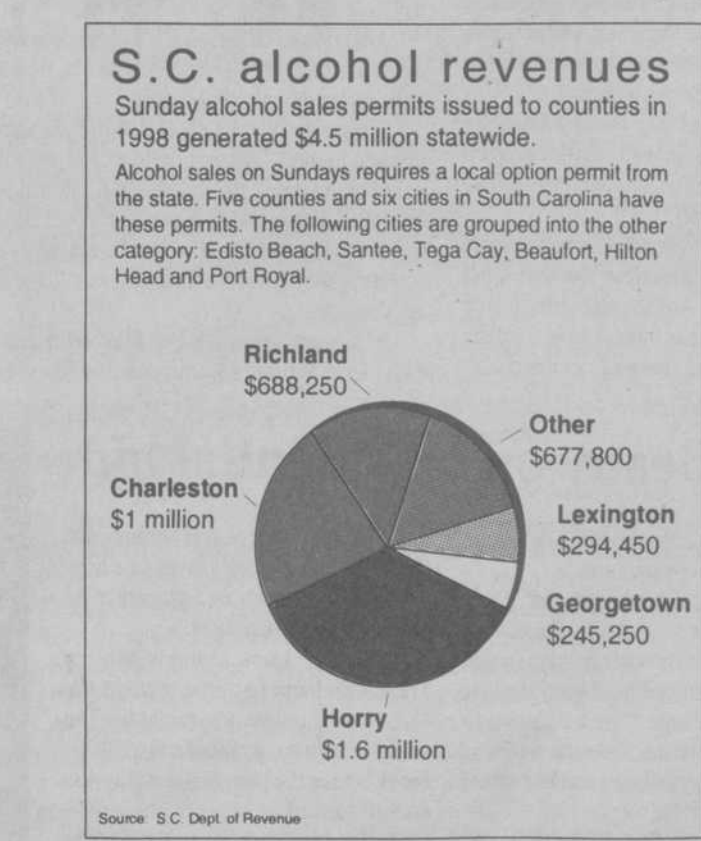
Since Richland and Lexington counties passed Sunday sales in 1984 and 1986, respectively, millions of dollars have gone to Columbia in the form of Sunday licenses. Last year alone, licenses from those counties generated about \$983,000, said Vicki Ringer, spokeswoman for the Department of Revenue.

Five counties and nine municipalities in South Carolina have Sunday sales, and most of those areas lie near the coast, Ringer said.

While many churches in the state are opposed to video poker, there's some concern there for Sunday alcohol sales, as well.

Drinking is one way people refuse to honor the Sabbath, said Joe Mack, director of Christian life concerns at the South Carolina Baptist Convention.

"We would like our churches in



Greenville to oppose that," Mack said.

In Beaufort County, just days after this year's deadline, Cooler is thinking ahead to next year.

"We've gotten some good ideas from Charleston," she said.

Cooler said that Berkeley County, where Charleston is located, hired a marketing firm and a radio station to pro-

Israel Kloss THE CAROLINA REPORTER mote Sunday sales. Eventually, the referendum passed there, and county restaurants split the cost of the hired help.

Cooler said she's hopeful of the referendum's possibilities.

"It will definitely pass in Beaufort County next year," she said.

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