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PERSONALS PAGE 17

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BUSINESS

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CHICAGO

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Tribune photo by Zbigniew Bzdak
Four years behind schedule, the "Black Box" sewage treatment facility in Stickney is set to begin a 60-day test next month.

Of big claims, insiders and a sludge plant

How the Chicago sanitary district bought into a company's dubious track record

By David Jackson
Tribune staff reporter

TRIBUNE INVESTIGATION

Eight stories tall and sheathed in corrugated steel, the windowless tower juts above the umber lagoons of the world's largest sewage treatment plant, in west suburban Stickney.

Its outer walls are painted white, but Chicago sanitary district officials use a dark nickname for this structure.

They call it "the Black Box."

Its four 60-foot-tall ovens are designed to each day swallow about a quarter of the district's sludge and churn out 150 tons of fertilizer. The dry pellets, small as mustard seeds, are supposed to be safe enough to spread on farms where food is grown for human consumption.

District officials say the \$217 million project will help protect a vital public trust: the Midwest's "inland ocean" of freshwater lakes, underground aquifers and sun-splashed rivers.

But the company that won the lucrative contract did so based on questionable assurances about its executives' track record at a similar facility, government records show. At the very time one of those executives was persuading Chicago officials to hire his company, Seattle authorities were cutting short its contract. They complained about noxious fumes, fires and unreliable output.

Chicago sanitary district officials never reviewed government files in Washington state to verify the claims made by the company, Metropolitan Biosolids Management LLC.

"I only recall one telephone conversation with the people from Chicago to discuss the

PLEASE SEE **BLACK BOX**, PAGE 18

Weller reportedly will leave House

He faces questions on foreign land deals

By Jim Tankersley and Rick Pearson
Tribune staff reporters

tions about his re-election intentions all month, following a Tribune investigation that revealed he failed to disclose several land transactions in Nicaragua on his congressional ethics forms.



Weller

WASHINGTON — Rep. Jerry Weller, dogged by ethics questions surrounding his Nicaraguan investments and his wife's finances, is set to announce his retirement in the near future, Republican sources said Wednesday.

One of the sources said the announcement could come as soon as Thursday. Others said it would be early next month. A spokesman for the Illinois Republican did not return messages seeking comment.

Weller, a seven-term incumbent who boasts the most extensive foreign land holdings of any House member, has faced ques-

On other sales, he reported vastly different purchase prices for the land in American and Nicaraguan records.

The Tribune also reported last week that a charity formed by Weller's wife—Zury Rios de Weller, a member of the Guatemalan Congress—raised questions about whether Weller could legally exclude her assets from his congressional filings.

Weller has not been officially

PLEASE SEE **WELLER**, PAGE 7

Defeat in Senate dashes hopes of Iraq war foes

Lawmakers reject plan to require more troop time at home

By Jill Zuckman
Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON—Following a heated all-day debate on the Senate floor that pitted combat veterans against combat veterans and one former secretary of the Navy against another, lawmakers rejected a proposal to require giving U.S. troops as

much time to rest at home as they spend in theater overseas.

It was a significant defeat for critics of the Iraq war, who have been trying for months to withdraw troops over President Bush's objection.

Democratic leaders had believed that the amendment, offered by a former Navy secretary, Sen. Jim Webb (D-Va.), was the best path for ending the war in Iraq and forcing the administration to quickly bring the troops back home.

But the Bush administration put intense pressure on Republican senators to reject the pro-

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■ Iraqi prime minister tells U.S. to replace Blackwater. **PAGE 14**

■ Army testing brains of troops bound for Iraq. **PAGE 14**

posals, threatening to veto the legislation and warning that it would inexorably harm the ability of military leaders to run the war.

The amendment failed to get 60 votes, the threshold agreed to by both sides of the aisle, even as

the Senate voted 56-44 in favor of it, quashing Democratic hopes of bringing the war to a close. The Senate then similarly failed the 60-vote test, 55-45, to pass a non-binding "sense of the Senate" resolution that also called for more rest time for the troops.

Sen. Chuck Hagel (R-Neb.), a staunch critic of the war who co-sponsored the Webb amendment, said Wednesday's outcome means Republicans will continue to stick with Bush for at least the rest of the year.

"It's stay the course, Part 2,"

PLEASE SEE **WAR**, PAGE 15

Chris Young has a passion for golf. He has talent. And now, six weeks into the Chicago Public League season, he might get to play.



Tribune photo by Charles Cherney
Chris Young, who belts 280-yard drives, is a team of one at ACE Technical Charter School on the South Side of Chicago. He usually practices alone at Harbor International Golf Course.

Lonesome fairway

By Alan Sutton
Tribune staff reporter

This is Chris Young's scorecard:

Sixteen years old. A John Daly-esque 5 feet 8 inches, 260 pounds. African-American. The one (and only) varsity golfer at ACE Technical Charter School. And nearly six weeks into his season, zero matches played.

That's a hole in none for those of you keeping score. Why hasn't Young teed it up?

Illinois High School Association rules permit athletes to

compete in tournaments as individuals if their school doesn't field a team in a given sport.

But Young hasn't had the opportunity to play, in part because ACE Tech doesn't have a golf coach to coordinate matches and in part because the Chicago Public League has been without a permanent golf coordinator since J. David Hughes left the position last month.

Considering Young's showing in junior tournaments played this summer (he shot a 76 to place third Aug. 21 in the Chicago Junior Amateur at

Jackson Park), he is likely one of the most competitive golfers in the Public League. And his emergence could be a sign that a decade in, programs like First Tee finally are hitting their handicap in their search for the next Tiger Woods.

Hughes discovered Young through the Chicago branch of the First Tee, an instructional program sponsored by various golf organizations that is designed to introduce urban youngsters to golf. While waiting to play in his

PLEASE SEE **GOLFER**, PAGE 13

TRIBUNE EXCLUSIVE

Surgeon left trail of fatal errors

Doctor in Downstate death was barred in Massachusetts

By Deborah L. Shelton
Tribune staff reporter

A surgeon barred last year from practicing in Massachusetts after he was accused of providing "grossly substandard care," resulting in deaths and life-threatening complications, was operating on veterans at the Marion VA Medical Center as recently as last month.

Dr. Jose Veizaga-Mendez resigned from the Downstate hospital on Aug. 13, three days after one of his patients there bled to death after routine gallbladder surgery. Shortly after, inpatient surgeries were suspended at the hospital because a computer analysis had uncovered a spike in its number of post-surgical deaths.

On Tuesday, the wife of Robert Shank III, the man who died last month, filed an administrative claim against the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, the first step in a lawsuit.

"My husband did not get the care that he should have gotten," said Katrina Shank, who lives in Murray, Ky., about 50 miles southeast of Paducah. "We put our trust in the medical profession. Whether it be a VA or a private hospital, we put our trust and our lives in their hands. For somebody not to come out of a simple surgery, it's

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INSIDE

NATION

Gay-bishop stance put to the test

Dispute in Anglican Church highlighted in Chicago. **PAGE 7**

Weather: Sunny; high 78, low 59
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