

GOOD MORNING, LOUISIANA

FUN



Earth Day set to take flight in Baton Rouge

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PEOPLE

Home tour to raise funds for Hospice of Baton Rouge

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SPORTS

Tigers brace for potent Georgia pitching staff

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Early voting set for May 3 election

Early voting in East Baton Rouge Parish for the May 3 election will be at the Registrar of Voters offices beginning Saturday through April 26, excluding Sunday.

On the ballot is the general election for the 6th Congressional District seat.

Early voting hours are 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at the following locations:

GOVERNMENTAL BUILDING: 222 St Louis St., Room 201.

COURT PLAZA BUILDING: 10500 Coursey Blvd., Room 203.

MOTOR VEHICLE BUILDING: 2250 Main St., Baker.

Early voters should bring a Louisiana driver's license, a Louisiana special identification card or some other recognized photo identification and their voter registration card.

For information, call the East Baton Rouge Parish Registrar of Voters Office at (225) 389-3940.

Benedict meets with abuse victims

Pope Benedict XVI prayed with tearful victims of clergy sex abuse in a chapel Thursday, an extraordinary gesture from a pontiff who has made atoning for the great shame of the U.S. church the cornerstone of his first papal trip to America.

Benedict's third day in the U.S. began with a packed open-air Mass celebrated in 10 languages at a baseball stadium.

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83rd Year, No. 293, 138 Pages



Jury's verdict: Death

Bell killed five, wounded one in shootings



Advocate staff photo by DENNY CULBERT

Convicted mass murderer Anthony Bell walks to a prisoner transport vehicle at the Governmental Building after a jury late Thursday recommended he be sentenced to death. 'I'm innocent. Five times I'm innocent,' Bell insisted as he was led away in handcuffs and leg shackles.

BY STEVEN WARD

Advocate staff writer

Convicted mass murderer Anthony Bell deserves to die by lethal injection for killing his wife and four in-laws in a May 2006 shooting spree, a jury recommended late Thursday.

Jurors deliberated for just under two hours before returning with the verdict shortly before 9 p.m.

When state District Judge Todd Hernandez read the jury's recommendation, Bell — dressed in orange-and-white striped prison clothes for the first time in the trial — stood straight and stared in the judge's direction.

There were no outbursts in the courtroom during the reading of the

verdict, but many family members of the victims had smiles and tears on their faces when the word "death" was pronounced.

Bell, 27, was convicted a week ago on five counts of first-degree murder and a count of attempted first-degree murder in the shooting spree that began at the Ministry of Jesus Christ Church, where he killed four in-laws, and ended at an apartment parking lot where he fatally shot his wife, Erica Bell.

The same jurors who convicted Bell recommended he be sentenced to death. Jurors had a choice of whether to recommend a sentence of death or life in prison.

"There was only one just verdict in

this case and the jury had the courage to render it," prosecutor Mark Dumaine said in an interview late Thursday after the trial.

"And we had a family patient enough to wait for it," he said.

"I'm happy," Jeffery Howard, son of murder victims Gloria and Leonard Howard, said after the trial. "My father taught me to believe in the system, and the system worked. Mr. Bell is going to burn now."

Prosecutor Aaron Brooks said he felt satisfied for the victims and their families.

"This family can finally get a sense of closure," Brooks said.

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Advocate staff photo by TRAVIS SPRADLING

D. Wesley Moore II, of Cook, Moore and Associates, speaks Thursday in front of a projected image of a commercial building called a 'Big House,' so called because it resembles a family residence, during his presentation on 'Multifamily Trends' at the 2008 Trends seminar at Independence Park.

Expert says market to benefit Baton Rouge apartment renters

BY CHRIS GAUTREAU

Advocate business writer

The competition for apartment renters in Baton Rouge is about to heat up against a backdrop of an overbuilt market, a local expert said Thursday.

While that's good news for tenants, said D. Wesley Moore II, a commercial appraiser for Cook and Moore Associates, a looming glut of new multifamily housing projects could mark "a particularly tough, competitive period" for property owners and investors.

Moore was one of several presenters Thursday at the Greater Baton Rouge Realtors Association's annual "Trends"

event, a series of market overviews and forecasts.

While experts expressed confidence in the local market and economy, they generally acknowledged that the post-hurricane boom is over and that uncertainty will continue trickling down from a deepening downturn in the national industry.

Moore described his forecast for the apartment sector as the market's "hangover" after the party.

He said the sector will be swamped by the end of 2009 with new and recently completed projects:

■ 1,328 units have been completed since 2006.

■ 2,530 units are under construction.

■ 1,106 additional units have been announced for construction by the end of 2008.

Moore said the wave of construction has been fueled by Gulf Opportunity Zone financing. The federal program offers tax credits for new construction, but Moore said the projects must be complete by the end of 2008 for developers to take advantage.

The result is a total of nearly 5,000 new units built between 2006-2009 compared to the 700 to 800 that the market typically

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Critics call bill effort to teach creationism

Senate panel advances measure

BY WILL SENTELL

Capitol news bureau

A Senate panel approved a bill Thursday to revamp the way evolution and other topics are taught in public schools despite charges it could inject biblical topics into science classes.

Senate Education Committee Chairman Ben Nevers, sponsor of the bill, denied that his proposal was a bid to promote creationism — the view that life began about 6,000 years ago in a process described in the Bible's Book of Genesis.

Nevers and other backers said the bill would promote wide-open classroom discussions that students are hungry to hear.

"This bill does not promote religion or ask to introduce religion in any classroom," Nevers said.

Opponents said that, if the Legislature approves the bill, it will make Louisiana a target of national ridicule as an outpost of anti-evolution views.

"The committee needs to know that nearly all scientists

oppose passage of this bill," said William Hansel, a scientist at LSU's Pennington Biomedical Research Center.

The Senate Education Committee approved the bill without dissent.

The panel acted after a last-minute change designed to stem criticism.

The legislation, which is a substitute for Senate Bill 561, was first sought by the Louisiana Family Forum, which describes itself as a group that promotes traditional family values.

Nevers initially called it the "Louisiana Academic Freedom Act." The new version labels the measure the "Louisiana Science Education Act."

The next step is action in the full Senate, possibly next week.

The revamped bill would require the state to assist teachers, principals and others in encouraging students to pursue "critical thinking skills, logical analysis and open and

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Effort to stop drilling near interstates dies

Grosse Tete senator cites Ramah blaze

BY MARSHA SHULER

Capitol news bureau

An attempt to stop new oil and gas well drilling in close proximity to Louisiana's interstate highways died in a Senate committee Thursday.

Sen. Rob Marionneau, D-Grosse Tete, said a distance requirement needs to be put in place to stop interstate highway closures like the one prompted by a natural gas well blow out and fire along Interstate 10 near Ramah last year.

Oil and gas interests opposed the move, saying establishment of safety standards are the answer, not limits on drilling.

The Senate Natural Resources Committee killed Senate Bill 442, which would have stopped new drilling permits within 500 feet of an interstate highway.

Sen. Jody Amedee, D-Gonza-

les, voted for the legislation.

Voting against it were Sens. Nick Gautreaux, D-Meaux, Troy Hebert, D-Jeanerette, Mike Michot, R-Lafayette, Dan "Blade" Morrish, R-Jennings, and John Smith, D-Leesville.

Marionneau said the November blowout and fire caused traffic headaches, business losses and could have led to loss of life and damage to the heavily traveled roadway.

"People need protection," Marionneau said.

Conservation Commissioner Jim Welsh said his agency, with the help of an ad hoc committee of experts, is drafting regulations to address safety concerns. The committee was formed as a result of an order from former Gov. Kathleen

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