



Keeping you connected

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Keeping up with the 2017 legislative session

A flurry of new state laws are being proposed as Arkansas representatives and senators go back to the Capitol for the 2017 legislative session. Trying to keep up with hundreds of potential laws can seem overwhelming, but there are several ways the average Arkansan can follow along during the session.

“Becoming engaged can be as easy as calling or tweeting your legislator, or as sophisticated as creating an online account to track specific bills,” said Kristin Higgins of Extension’s Public Policy Center.

More than 2,000 bills were proposed in the last session, making it impossible for media outlets to explain every proposed law, Higgins said. Many

newspapers instead publish lists of proposed laws and resolutions filed for consideration.

“Television and newspaper reporters attend committee meetings and regular sessions of the Senate and House, reporting on the hot topic items. But these lists provide bill numbers and titles that you can then look up online or contact your local legislator about,” she said.

The Arkansas Legislature website, www.arkleg.state.ar.us, is the best place to find information about proposed laws, said John Reed, the Senate’s information officer. (See *Legislature*, page 4)

ExCEL program, Vines Center earn top honors from Arkansas Business

Grass, sunshine and water balloons aren’t the usual management tools for building a better workforce, but those very ingredients are what helped lift the ExCEL program and the C.A. Vines Arkansas 4-H Center to “Best Team Building Center” status for the eighth time among readers of *Arkansas Business*.

Not bad for a program that’s been in business since 1986. ExCEL also earned the honor in 2007, 2008, 2009, 2011, 2013, 2014 and 2015.

“We’re very excited about winning ‘Best Team Building Center’ in *Arkansas Business*!” said Luke Nipper, 4-H ExCEL coordinator.

“The readers of *Arkansas Business* magazine vote for the Best of Biz awards, and it means a lot to the 4-H Center and ExCEL program to be selected as the winner of this category,” he said. “We work with many



Teams compete in team building activities at the 2015 ExCEL Challenge.

organizations across the state, and it is such a privilege to have the opportunity to work with them all.” Nipper said.

(See *Excel*, page 2)

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Social Security changes to impact retirees

New rules for 2017 could affect your bottom line

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February garden shows in Pine Bluff and Little Rock will get you in the mood for spring

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Bobby Hall retires

Social Security changes to impact retirees

Here's a look at the new Social Security rules affecting retirees for 2017 according to *U.S. News*:

A modest increase in payments. Social Security payments will increase by 0.3 percent beginning in January 2017. This cost-of-living adjustment is estimated to result in the typical Social Security beneficiary receiving an extra \$5 per month. The average monthly payment for retired workers is expected to be \$1,360 in 2017. Retired couples will receive an average of \$2,260 per month in 2017, up from \$2,254 in 2016.

A higher tax cap. The maximum taxable earnings amount will increase from \$118,500 in 2016 to \$127,200 in 2017, due to an increase in average wages. Earnings above this amount are not taxed by Social Security or used to calculate Social Security payouts in retirement.

Increased earnings limit. Retirees who work and collect Social Security at the same time might have part of their benefit temporarily withheld if they earn too much. The Social Security earnings limit for people age 65 and younger will increase from \$15,720 in 2016 to \$16,920 in 2017. Social Security beneficiaries who earn more than this amount will have \$1 in benefits withheld for every \$2 in earned income over the limit. For those who will turn 66 in 2017, the earnings limit increases by \$3,000 to \$44,880, and the payment reduction declines to \$1 withheld for every \$3 earned in excess of the earnings limit. However, once you turn age 66, Social Security payments are no longer withheld if you work and receive benefits at the same time, and your payments will be increased to give you credit for any part of your benefit that was withheld in the past.

An increase in the maximum possible benefit. The maximum possible payout for someone



retiring at his or her full retirement age of 66 will increase by \$48 to \$2,687 in 2017. However, a higher monthly payment might be possible for those who delay starting payments until after their full retirement age.

No more double claiming. Dual-earner married couples who are 66 or older have the option to collect spousal payments worth half of the higher earner's benefit amount and then later switch to payments based on their own work record, which will then be higher due to delayed claiming. However, people who turn 62 on Jan. 2, 2016, or later will no longer be able to claim both a spousal payment and an individual payment at different times. Married retirees will now automatically receive the higher of the two benefit options and can no longer claim both types of payments at different times.

Dependents can't receive benefits if you suspend payments. Social Security beneficiaries can voluntarily suspend their payments between ages 66 and 70 in order to earn delayed retirement credits that will result in a higher monthly payment when benefits are resumed. However, a new rule that applies to benefit suspensions requested on April 30, 2016, or later will additionally stop payments to family members that are based on your work record during the period of the benefit suspension. However, there is an exception to this new rule for divorced spouses, who can continue receiving a divorced spousal benefit if the ex-spouse suspends his or her retirement benefit.

– Kim Magee 




4-H Center's Feland Hall renovated, rededicated – Will Feland, CEO of Pinnacle Structures, addressing the crowd at the rededication of Feland Hall at the C.A. Vines Arkansas 4-H Center. The hall was named for his father. Feland, who also served as a member of the Arkansas 4-H Foundation Board, was the donor behind the \$475,000 building renovation.

New retiree

Bobby Hall, director of LeadAR, retired Nov. 30, 2016.

Hall became head of the LeadAR program in 2015 on the retirement of Joe Waldrum. He is a graduate of LeadAR Class 7.

Previously, he had served as a program associate in Community Development and as a county agent. 

To our Extension retirees

January started off with a cold weather blitz and we had to close the office on Friday, Jan 6, due to really dicey weather, horrible road conditions early that morning, and the incredibly talented drivers of Central Arkansas in these conditions. But this is Arkansas, so a week later it is 70 degrees.

Again, I extend my thanks to our Extension retirees who continue to support our efforts to improve Arkansas and complete our mission as part of the land grant University system – one of the great ideas of modern civilization. As part of that appreciation, we invite you to the annual Extension Retiree Luncheon, to be held at the Arkansas 4-H Center near Ferndale on March 16, 2017, starting at 11 a.m. This will be a great fellowship, and I encourage you to invite retirees that you know so all are aware and can come. The lunch is free and we will have a short program. More details will be forthcoming before the event.

I also want to mention that Dr. Bobby Wells will be inducted posthumously into the Arkansas Agriculture Hall of Fame on March 3 in Little Rock. While Dr. Wells was not technically an Extension employee in his career with the Division, he did an awful lot of Extension work in rice – serving as a resource for agents, verification coordinators and specialists on rice fertilizers, nutrition and “amendments,” which he often called “snake oils.” Many of us worked with Dr. Wells extensively and remember his honesty, dedication and passion for helping rice farmers. I cannot tell you how many rice plots and demonstrations that he and I walked and talked through together, but it was a bunch. And I know this is true for many specialists and agents of the day. Clearly, this recognition of Dr. Wells is extremely well-deserved and somewhat overdue.

We remain hopeful that our request for an increase in the Division budget this legislative session will be approved so we can continue to progress and honor the legacy you imparted to us. Please keep your fingers crossed.

Highest regards and have a great January.

– Rick Cartwright



ExCEL (Continued)


Updated facility

“The center staff has put a lot of time and effort into the recent facility updates,” said J.J. Pitman, 4-H Center director. “One of our goals is to win the Best of Business in the Best Place for a Company Retreat category and to be a finalist this year is one step closer.

“We are also very proud of the program staff for winning the Best Teambuilding Center for its eighth time,” Pitman said. Having various companies, schools and other organizations send personnel for teambuilding is part of the efforts to “introduce the Vines 4-H Center to new clients.”

Follow the center on Twitter at @ar4Hcenter and on Facebook at www.facebook.com/arkansas4hcenter/.

For the results of the 2015 ExCEL Corporate Challenge, see <http://uaex.edu/media-resources/news/june2015/06-05-2015-Ark-ExCEL-Results.aspx>.

For more information about the ExCEL program, visit <http://www.uaex.edu/4h-youth/activities-programs/excel-leadership/default.aspx> or contact the C.A. Vines Arkansas 4-H Center at 501-821-6884. 

Garden shows kick off spring gardening season

In February, two central Arkansas garden shows are set to welcome the state's flower and garden lovers.

At 9 a.m. on Friday, Feb. 3, the 29th annual Home and Garden Show opens at the Pine Bluff Convention Center and will end at 3 p.m. on Saturday, Feb. 4. Admission is free. Speakers include Jane F. Hankins, artist, author and humorist; Pulaski County Staff Chair Randy Forst; and the Bromeliad Guy, Michael Seal, The Funny Farm. The show will also include how-to sessions, exhibitor booths, a quilt show and childrens' and teens' activities. For more information, contact the Jefferson County Extension office at (870) 534-1033.

At 10 a.m. on Friday, Feb. 24, the state's largest annual botanical show, the Arkansas Flower and Garden Show, will begin and will continue until 4 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 26, at the Statehouse Convention Center in downtown Little Rock.

The show will feature speakers, vendors and experts focused on providing attendees an unforgettable learning experience.



Scheduled events include four indoor demonstration gardens, a Landscape Challenge exhibit where local landscapers will create unique foundation plantings live at the show on Friday, floral displays, two seminars on Saturday by Dr. Doug Tallemey, ecologist and sustainable landscaping advocate, a "Rock in the Garden" special event on Friday evening with a live band and cooking demos from local chefs, educational speakers and workshops and hands-on activities for kids.

Admission is \$10 for adults, children 12 and under free and a 3-day pass for \$15. Proceeds support college scholarships in horticulture-related fields in Arkansas and fund "The Greening of Arkansas" program, which provides beautification grants to communities throughout Arkansas. To learn more about the AFGS and to see a full schedule of events, visit www.ArGardenShow.org.

Legislature (Continued)

The website is updated daily to show what bills are filed and by whom. Users can download the complete wording of bills and check back later for changes. The website is also where people can find committee meeting agendas, session start times and mailing addresses and phone numbers for every state legislator.

If you don't have time to constantly check the website, Higgins said you can sign up for the free "personalized bill tracking" tool on the General Assembly website. After creating an account, users identify bills of interest and receive daily emails updating them on the status. Users can also log into the account and click on bills to see where they're at in the committee process.

Higgins says social media is also growing popular with reporters and state legislators. The leaders of the House and Senate are both active on Twitter. Senate President Pro Tem Jonathan Dismang's Twitter handle is @dismang and House Speaker Jeremy Gillam's is @JeremyGillamAR. If you have a social media account, you can search for the hashtags #arleg or #arpx to find posts about political happenings in the state (#arleg means Arkansas legislature and #arpx is Arkansas politics).

Finally, people can watch legislators in action discuss, debate and vote on bills. The public can attend committee meetings at the Capitol and view sessions from the galleries. The House also streams online live video of its sessions at www.arkansashouse.org/.

There's no video in the Senate, but people can listen in to a live audio stream at www.arkansas.gov/senate.

Legislators officially convened at noon on Jan. 9. They have until Feb. 8 to file bills to change the state constitution, Feb. 27 to file funding bills and March 6 to file any other proposed laws, according to the General Assembly's website.

For more information about policy and government, visit <http://uaex.edu/business-communities/government-policy/default.aspx>.

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