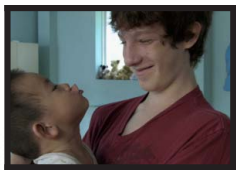
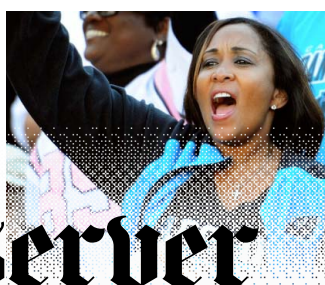


12 COUNTRIES
12 MONTHS
TEEN TRAVELS THE
WORLD TO HELP OTHERS.
YOUNG ACHIEVERS, 4-5D



Panthers' quest:
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Sports



The Charlotte Observer

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“The Marine Corps was advertised as the most elite military organization, and I wanted to be part of the best to prove, given the chance, that we can do whatever anybody else can do.”

OSCAR CULP



GREGORY BULL - AP

Oscar Culp, who grew up in Charlotte, poses in front of an early 1950s image of him among a sea of white Marine faces. Nearly 70 years after the Marine Corps accepted segregated black units, the Corps' top general wants to honor the Montfort Point Marines.

First, fearless, forgotten. But ‘like a brotherhood’

Effort under way to honor
Montfort Point Marines,
teach their painful history.

BY JULIE WATSON
Associated Press

OCEANSIDE, Calif. — Oscar Culp does not like to remember. His mind has erased the harshest details.

But the pain still stings for the 87-year-old World War II veteran, who was raised in Charlotte and endured boot camp in a snake-infested North Carolina swampland near Camp Lejeune as one of the first blacks admitted to the Marine Corps.

He wipes a tear. Black Marines were barred from being stationed with whites at Lejeune back then. But what hurt worse, he says, was returning from the battlefield to a homeland that ordered him to sit at the back of the bus and drink out of separate fountains from the white Americans he had just put his life on the line to protect.

“Excuse me,” says the West Charlotte High graduate. “Sometimes we get a little emotional about it.”

The story of the first black Marines is a part of history few Americans — and even

SEE FORGOTTEN, 4A



1945 FILE PHOTO — U.S. MARINE CORPS VIA AP

Montfort Point Marines train with artillery in New River in April 1945. Congress votes today on whether to give these Marines the Congressional Gold Medal.

Refinance plan gets a reboot

Changes to home-loan program may help
some homeowners save on mortgages.

BY KEVIN G. HALL
McClatchy Newspapers

WASHINGTON — The Obama administration on Monday rebooted a failing effort to help some homeowners refinance their homes, making it easier for some who owe more than their house is worth to get a new loan.

INSIDE
Read a Q&A
on the plan's
updates. 4A

The new effort, however, stops far short of tackling broader problems weighing down the housing sector. “If you meet certain requirements, you will have the chance to refinance at lower rates, which could save you hundreds of dollars a month, and thousands of dollars a year in mortgage payments,” President Barack Obama said in Las Vegas as he unveiled the changes coming to the Home Affordable Refinance Program, launched two years ago to great fanfare. “Second, there

SEE MORTGAGE, 4A

EpiCentre lenders sue developers, say books were altered

Suit alleges records were falsified
before complex filed for Chapter 11.

BY KERRY SINGE
ksinge@charlotteobserver.com

The EpiCentre's new lender has sued the project's developers, accusing them of wrongfully diverting money from the troubled entertainment complex before filing for bankruptcy protection.

Blue Air 2010 filed a lawsuit Sunday in federal bankruptcy court claiming Afshin Ghazi, George Cornelison III and others “manipulated and falsified” bookkeeping records and transferred assets to “various insider companies” before the project filed for Chapter 11 last year.

The lawsuit also claims the debtors made “numerous false statements” in their pleadings and court filings. Blue Air is arguing that Ghazi and Cornelison are responsible for returning the EpiCentre's assets, according to court documents.

Ghazi did not immediately respond to requests

SEE EPICENTRE, 4A



JASON E. MICZEK

Among other claims, Blue Air has accused the defendants of changing or backdating leases to eliminate obligations owed by affiliated firms.

Ask Army7D
Business2B
Classified7C
Comics6-7D
Editorial6A
Health1D
Horoscope6D
Lottery1B
Obituaries4B
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7

FEDEX TO HIRE 20,000

FedEx plans to hire 20,000 seasonal workers, 18 percent more than last year, to handle an expected surge in holiday deliveries. 2B

A preschool phenomenon

It's like “Sesame Street” with a hipster twist. “Yo Gabba Gabba! Live!” (including Plex, right) is coming to Charlotte. 1D

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Today: Sunny skies and dry conditions. 10C



Worms to turn out compost at airport

Wriggling waste-eaters
are at heart of planned
\$1.1M recycling center.

BY ELY PORTILLO
elyportillo@charlotteobserver.com

Charlotte/Douglas International Airport is about to get a whole lot creepier. Crawler too, in fact.

The airport is installing a worm-based composting system as part of a new \$1.1 million recycling center, expected to open in February. Soon, hundreds of

pounds of worms will be munching away on a ton or so of travelers' trash a day, according to airport officials.

“We generate a lot of garbage here, and it's incredibly expensive to collect it, haul it off and pay to dispose of it,” said airport director Jerry Orr.

The new composting system will be built to handle up to two tons of waste daily — enough to keep up with eventual airport expansion, officials said. The airport plans to spread the worms' waste as fertilizer on its 6,000

acres, and package and sell the excess.

The compost materials, including food scraps, meat, bones, paper waste, bathroom towels and plant waste, will first be fed into a 1,600-square-foot pre-composter. There must be a system installed to control the odor, the airport's bid documents say.

Once it's partially broken down in the pre-composter, the waste will be loaded into the worm composting system.

The airport's initial plan is to

SEE WORMS, 4A



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FORGOTTEN

■ from 1A

few Marines – have learned. Unlike the Army's Buffalo Soldiers or the Army Air Corps' Tuskegee Airmen, the Montford Point Marines have never been featured in popular songs or Hollywood films, or recognized nationally.

The Corps' new commandant intends to change that.

Nearly 70 years after becoming the last military branch to accept blacks under orders from President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1941, Congress will vote today on whether to grant the Montford Point Marines the Congressional Gold Medal, the nation's highest civilian honor.

The Corps up until now has not actively broadcast the painful chapter in the 235-year-old history of an institution that still is largely white, especially in the higher ranks where less than 5 percent of officers are black.

But Commandant Gen. James Amos – whose 2010 appointment made him the first Marine aviator named to the Corps' top job – has made diversifying the staunchly traditional branch a top priority.

Amos has ordered commanders to be more aggressive in recommending qualified black Marines for officer positions. The Corps this summer named the first black general, Maj. Gen. Ronald Bailey, to lead its storied 1st Marine Division at Camp Pendleton, Calif.

The Marine Corps also plans to teach all Marines about Montford Point, the base near Jacksonville, about 240 miles east of Charlotte, that the Corps set up for blacks to keep them separate from whites. It operated from 1942 to 1949.

"Every Marine – from private to general – will know the history of those men who crossed the threshold to fight not only the enemy they were soon to know overseas, but the enemy of racism and segregation in their own country," Amos said.

Amos has spent the year lobbying Congress to grant Montford Point Marines the civilian medal, given to the Tuskegee airmen in 2006.

Unlike the Tuskegee pilots – featured in films, including the upcoming "Red Tails" – the Montford Point Marines were not officers in the war. The Corps gave those promotions to whites, said UNC Chapel Hill historian Melton McLaurin, whose book "The Marines of Montford Point" is being considered by Amos for his must-read list for Marines.

"The Corps did not want these guys," McLaurin said. "The commandant of the Corps at the time said if he had a choice between 250,000 African-Americans – he used the



1945 FILE PHOTO – U.S. MARINE CORPS VIA AP

The story of the first black Marines is something few Americans know. Unlike the Army's Buffalo Soldiers or the Army Air Corps' Tuskegee Airmen, they have not been recognized nationally.



1945 FILE PHOTO – U.S. MARINE CORPS VIA AP

In this 1945 image, Montford Marines are seen in an unnamed location of the war in the Pacific during World War II. After the war, the Corps discharged all but 1,500 of the men.

term Negroes – and 5,000 whites, he would rather have the whites."

Culp had just graduated at 18 when he volunteered to join in 1943 at the height of World War II.

Culp, whose family moved to Charlotte when he was a baby, said he didn't want to stay in the city because he felt there weren't many opportunities for blacks. The military offered an alternative.

"The Marine Corps was advertised as the most elite military organization, and I wanted to be part of the best to prove, given the chance, that we can do whatever anybody else can do," he said.

He and other black recruits were dropped at a shed with a guard who led them into the woods to huts that would serve as their barracks.

The white drill instructors let it be known they did not agree with the new policy forced on the Corps. Some called it a disgrace.

The Montford Point recruits were not allowed to enter Camp Lejeune unless accompanied by a white officer. The few times they went for a training exercise they had to wait to

eat until the white Marines had finished.

"Montford Point was hell, really," Culp said. "The water was bad. The barracks were made out of some kind of cardboard. It was cold in the winter. There was ice on the deck where we would sleep."

He was sent to the Pacific where his all-black ammunition company dodged gunfire as they ferried supplies to the front lines and carried back the dead and wounded. He oversaw the care of white Marines in the brig.

Montford Point Marines participated in the seizure of Okinawa and came under heavy fire at Iwo Jima, winning praise from some white officers for their actions. They were sent to Japan to clean up the ash after the atomic bomb was dropped over Nagasaki.

But after the war, the Corps discharged all but 1,500 of them.

Culp remained, driven by the injustice that "they wanted us to get out."

Carrel Reavis, 88, was among those discharged. But he took a bus from Camp Pendleton across the country to Baltimore, where he signed up again.

The Corps continued to resist desegregation. It wasn't until the Korean War that black Marines fought alongside their white counterparts.

Moving up the ranks remained difficult. Reavis stayed the same rank for 10 years while he watched the Corps promote white corporals over him to staff sergeant in a couple of months.

"The perseverance we had was all the same," said Reavis, who stayed in the Corps for 21 years and whose oldest son fought as a Marine in Vietnam. "We were like a brotherhood."

Culp left in 1966 as a master gunnery sergeant at Camp Pendleton and settled in Oceanside.

He's returned to Charlotte just a few times since because he still had family here. But he says he's kept up with Charlotte over the years. A cousin, James Dawkins, and his wife, Rita, both teach here. And some friends have ties to the city.

Culp said that while he had a "kind of a bitter taste in my mouth" about Charlotte when he was younger, he's proud of how the city has changed over the years.

In Oceanside, a Pacific coast military town bordering the base, Culp opened a furniture store with another Montford Point Marine. Their business card reads: "Two people you can trust."

Their offices are adorned with black-and-white Marine Corps photos, including one of Culp among a sea of white faces at Twenty-Nine Palms Marine base in the 1950s.

Joining the Corps, he says, was his life's "proudest" accomplishment.

"If all of the Montford Point Marines had to go through what they had already gone through again to protect our country, they would," he said.

— OBSERVER STAFF WRITER APRIL BETHEA AND STAFF RESEARCHER MARIA DAVID CONTRIBUTED

the air rights arrangement.

Blue Air names 210 Trade Investments as a defendant, along with EpiCentre Theater Partners, EpiCentre Preferred Parking, Sunset Management Group and The Ghazi Co.

"The charges are really quite serious," said attorney Dennis O'Dea, who oversees the committee of unsecured creditors.

O'Dea said the new lender and the creditors had been on track to approve the EpiCentre's reorganization plan at the end of this month, releasing the EpiCentre from bankruptcy protection.

The latest court filings, however, have "put the confirmation of the (reorganization) plan and what the future of the EpiCentre is in question," he said.

Single: 704-358-5085

EPICENTRE

■ from 1A

for comment.

The popular uptown entertainment complex has been mired in court battles since the original lender, Regions Bank, started foreclosure proceedings in July 2010 after the loan came due. And it's not the first court filing to allege self-dealing by Ghazi and Cornelison.

Shortly after Regions started to foreclose on the property, the two limited liability companies that own the EpiCentre, Pacific Avenue and Pacific Avenue II, filed for bankruptcy protection, stalling the foreclosure. Regions Bank then filed documents questioning how Ghazi and Cornelison spent their loan money and kept records. "The integrity of the

Debtors' financial records, and the earning power of the EpiCentre itself, must be established," Regions Bank wrote. Ghazi and Cornelison denied claims of self-dealing.

That case was dropped after Regions in November sold the \$939 million construction note to Blue Air, a limited liability company. Since then, a new company has been hired to manage and operate the 302,000-square-foot entertainment complex at Trade and College streets. Ghazi has agreed to transfer assets owned by the EpiCentre to Blue Air.

Among other claims, Blue Air has accused the defendants of changing or backdating leases to eliminate obligations owed by affiliated companies. Blue Air, for example, says in its filing the defendants wrongly removed from the books

\$800,000 in back rent owed by Ghazi-controlled EpiCentre Theaters Partners LLC.

Blue Air also claims valuable contracts were transferred to a Ghazi-affiliated company on the eve of the bankruptcy filing. The complaint names as defendants five employees of The Ghazi Co.: Mark Hanna, Jason Hood, Emily Huggens, Ali Lopez and B. Scott Cook. Cook, a former Regions official, worked on the EpiCentre loan while at the bank.

Also at issue are the air rights over the complex. In November, a Ghazi-affiliated company, 210 Trade Investments LLC, paid \$6 million at foreclosure auction for the rights. Original plans called for a condo tower to be built there, but construction stopped in 2008 because of problems with the city's code enforcement department over

plan was tried about 15 years ago, Orr said, but discontinued because it wasn't economically feasible. Disposal costs have risen enough to make the project cost-effective now, Orr said.

Plan not without skeptics

Ron Danise owns Union County-based Southern Organics, which produces more than 8 tons of worm castings a day. He's not bidding on the project, and said he's skeptical it will be as manageable as the airport thinks.

"It sounds good on paper, but I'm telling you, it's not going to produce much," Danise said. He's skeptical of any system that gives worms food waste, and said that even under the best conditions, it takes worms nearly a month to process a load of feed.

"Worms are herbivores. ... They don't like a North Amer-

ican diet," he said.

Airport officials said they're confident the pre-composting process will break down the material enough for the worms to process food scraps.

Danise also cautioned that a large-scale worm-composting system comes with unexpected complications.

For example, Danise said that during strong thunderstorms he's seen worms wriggling free from their bins en masse – what he calls a "crawl event."

Orr admits that airport officials aren't worm-composting experts yet, but said he believes the program will work.

"When you can do something that is good for the environment and make it self-sustaining, that strikes me as something we should pursue."

Portillo: 704-358-5041

A guide to the updated mortgage-refinance plan

By DEREK KRAVITZ

Associated Press

Here are some of the major questions and answers about the Obama administration's initiative to help troubled homeowners:

Q. What is the program?

The Home Affordable Refinance Program, or HARP, was started in 2009. It lets homeowners refinance their mortgages at lower rates. Borrowers can bypass the usual requirement of having at least 20 percent equity in their home.

Q. Why did so few benefit?

Mainly because those who'd lost the most in their homes weren't eligible. Participation was limited to those whose home values were no more than 25 percent below what they owed their lender. That excluded roughly 10 percent of borrowers, CoreLogic says. In some hard-hit areas, borrowers have lost nearly 50 percent of their home's value.

Q. What changes is the administration making?

Homeowners' eligibility won't be affected by how far their home's value has fallen. And some fees for closing, title insurance and lien processing will be eliminated, so refinancing will be cheaper. Banks won't have to buy back the mortgages from Fannie or Freddie, as they previously had to when dealing with some risky loans. That change will free many lenders to offer refinance loans. The program will also be extended 18 months, through 2013.

Q. Who's eligible?

Those whose loans are owned or backed by Fannie Mae or Freddie Mac, which the government took control of three years ago. Mortgages that were refinanced over the past 2 1/2 years aren't eligible. Homeowners must also be current on their mortgage. One late payment within six months, or more than one in the past year, would mean disqualification.

MORTGAGE

■ from 1A

will be lower closing costs, and certain refinancing fees will be eliminated – fees that can sometimes cancel out the benefit of refinancing altogether."

Independent economists say HARP has overwhelmed, but they generally supported the president's HARP 2.0 because it'll boost borrower cash flows, thus freeing them to spend more in a sluggish economy.

"While HARP won't live up to the initial expectations ... the program will ultimately provide a meaningful boost to the broader economy as financially stressed households will benefit from much lower mortgage payments," said Mark Zandi, chief economist for forecaster Moody's Analytics.

HARP was supposed to be the simpler part of a two-pronged plan to tackle the nation's housing crisis when launched two years ago. It was established to help borrowers whose mortgages are owned or guaranteed by Fannie Mae or Freddie Mac to take advantage of historically low lending rates and refinance.

The other prong sought to provide incentives for modifying delinquent loans, but it too has fallen far short of expectations. Fannie and Freddie were quasi-governmental entities until seized by the Bush administration in 2008 and put into receivership. Together they own or guarantee about half of the nation's \$10 trillion in outstanding mortgages. They also serve as a secondary market, where lenders sell the home loans they make, enabling the lenders to lend more.

HARP never quite took off, helping about 800,000 homeowners, well below the 4 million-plus originally targeted. Among the reasons for its lukewarm performance are

numerous fees, high closing costs, bureaucratic hassles with appraisals in a declining market and liability issues tied to the former loans. All are addressed in HARP 2.0, which will operate until the end of 2013.

The biggest problem, however, was the continued decline in home prices. That left more and more borrowers underwater, the term for owning a home worth less than the value of its mortgage. Anywhere from one-quarter to one-third of all homeowners are now believed to be underwater on their mortgages.

The changes announced Monday by the Federal Housing Finance Agency, which regulates Fannie and Freddie, lift a cap that had limited the HARP program to borrowers whose homes had lost no more than 25 percent of their value relative to their outstanding mortgage. That limit is now removed.

Additionally, while borrowers must be current on their loan, there's no longer disqualification if they had at some earlier point been delinquent on mortgage payments.

"This gets potentially more people eligible to qualify," said Paul Leonard, vice president of government affairs for the Housing Policy Council, the trade group for mortgage servicers, who collect payments on behalf of mortgage lenders and investors.

Industry groups greeted the changes with qualified support.

"It's a good tool in the toolbox," said David Stevens, president of the Mortgage Bankers Association.

While the changes help, he cautioned, they won't do anything for the 4.2 million delinquent homeowners. They also don't apply to millions of mortgages held outside Fannie and Freddie.

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