



5 DAYS TO GO

Washing away Chicago

Tuesday was wash day for the Panthers' uniforms. The blood, grass, mud, field paint and sports drink stains from the Chicago game will be memories come Sunday. "We want them to look like they're going to church; not like they just came from a football game," said Bill Fowler, owner of the Spartanburg cleaners that have laundered the Panthers' uniforms since the team's inception. Though the cleaner is 70 miles down Interstate 85, team officials say they stick with Fowler because he's so thorough. Uniforms are washed in cold water to remove stains and then washed again in warm water. Some tough stains, such as field and helmet paint, must be scraped off with a knife. The hardest to remove: Pink sports drink on white jerseys.



Fowler
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Hawaii for the losers

If the Panthers win, they - of course - go to Detroit for Super Bowl XL. If they lose, the team's coaching, equipment and training staffs go to Hawaii to work for the NFC in the Pro Bowl. "I never thought I would choose Detroit over Hawaii," Panthers equipment manager Jackie Miles said. Conference championship losers typically travel to Honolulu; the Panthers did it in 1997 after losing in Green Bay. "It was nice because it was our second year," Miles said. "No way I want to go again."

White rest of the way

The Panthers will wear white jerseys Sunday, keeping alive a streak of donning white in every playoff game. Carolina is 6-2 in the postseason. If the Panthers reach the Super Bowl, they likely will wear white again. The AFC winner gets first pick on uniforms. The Broncos and Steelers favor their dark jerseys. This season, the Cats are 7-3 in white, 5-1 in black and 1-1 in blue.



Julius Peppers in white

Cat Scratches

Bank of America turned the top of its Charlotte headquarters building blue Tuesday night in a nod to the Panthers. ... Conference championship T-shirts should be available at the Panther Team Store on Monday. ...Two more travel packages announced: Carlson Wagonlit (two nights for \$1,149 to \$1,249; www.cwtstonecrest.com) and Pro Sports Tours (three nights for \$1,299 to \$1,599; www.prosportstours.com).

— COMPILED BY ANDREW SHAIN

Got a story or question? E-mail panthers@charlotteobserver.com

Panthers Coverage

IC | QB Jake Delhomme thrives under pressure.

Online Extras

Scott Dodd's postseason blog http://panthertracks.blogspot.com/

Doug Smith talks about topping current height in uptown

A look at Charlotte's skyline



THE NEXT BIG THING IN BUSINESS

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Natural gas rates to fall again

Warm weather, below-normal demand push wholesale prices lower

BY ANDREW SHAIN
Consumer Writer

Charlotte-area natural gas rates will fall for the second time in as many months thanks to warm winter weather.

The rate changes proposed Tuesday by the region's two biggest natural gas providers would save customers an average of \$30 a month. February rates would be down 25 percent from all-time highs in November and December.

Wholesale prices nationally have dipped as above-normal temperatures led to below-normal demand.

"The month of January has looked like the month of May," said Aubrey Hilliard, president of Charlotte trading firm Texican Horizon Energy.

Gas prices soared last year after a pair of Gulf hurricanes cut production and left analysts wondering if there would be enough gas to go around.

Piedmont Natural Gas and PSNC Energy raised rates three times late last year.

They cut them in January, and now have asked state regulators to let them lower rates again because of falling wholesale prices - which account for two-thirds of customers' monthly bills. State approval is expected by month's end.

Compared to this month, Piedmont Natural Gas wants to cut rates by 16 percent on Feb. 1,

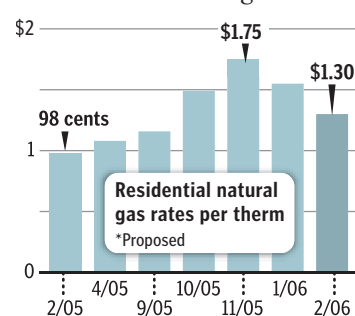
while PSNC Energy wants to trim them 13 percent.

Gwendolyn Leak of Charlotte said she's still waiting to see the January rate decrease after her natural gas bill jumped to \$373 from \$86 in one month: "Yeah, that's what they say. Let's see."

Piedmont's proposed rate starting Feb. 1 would still be one-third higher than a year earlier, while PSNC Energy's proposed rate is 14 percent higher. — STAFF WRITER STAN CHOE CONTRIBUTED

Power Down

Piedmont Natural Gas wants to lower rates starting Feb. 1.



SOURCES: N.C. Utilities Commission, Piedmont Natural Gas
JASON WHITLEY - jwhitley@charlotteobserver.com

"I done wrong... And now I'm a criminal. But someone had to stop that man before he hurt someone else."



Two years after killing her father, Janice Clark Smith of York County, S.C., has been paroled. And today she and family members will fly to L.A. to tell "Larry King Live" why she put a gun to her father's chest - to stop decades of abuse.

Parole brings her peace after killing abusive dad

CATAWBA, S.C. — Down a dirt road named Copperhead lives a woman who had good reason to kill the man who gave her life.

But Janice Clark Smith, who was paroled from prison last week for fatally shooting her father, George Manley Clark - decades after he sexually abused his daughters and assaulted his grandchild, executed family pets and held a shotgun to his wife's head - said it still wasn't good enough.

"I done wrong; I should not have shot him in the chest like I did," said the 51-year-old grandmother of eight as she held her squirming 3-year-old grandson Austin Lamb in her lap. "And now I'm a criminal. But someone had to stop that man before he hurt someone else."

Smith is flying this morning to Los Angeles to tell her story tonight on "Larry King Live." Along with her today, will be her husband, Jerry, her mother, two sisters, three brothers and York County's public defender. The show may air to-

IN MY OPINION



Dan Huntley

night, or later, depending on the day's news.

Smith, whose story has also been told on Oprah, said she wasn't nervous.

"I spent most all of my life being scared to death of my own daddy, that he was gonna grab me, beat me or worse," she said, her clear brown eyes glinting in the winter sun. "He can't grab me no more, I'm free. Afraid of getting on TV and telling the truth? That ain't nothing."

During five hours of testimony from SEE HUNTLEY | 9A



Janice Clark Smith received hundreds of letters while in prison. Receiving her mail unopened is one of her favorite things since her release.

Observer Exclusive

FORECLOSING ON THE AMERICAN DREAM | PART 3 of 3

Council to act on loss of homes

Funding for Charlotte foreclosure aid more than halved in 4 years

BY BINYAMIN APPELBAUM
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Members of the Charlotte City Council said Tuesday they were surprised to learn the extent of the city's foreclosure problems, and they promised to look for legislative remedies.

Mayor Pro Tem Susan Burgess, chair of the committee on housing and neighborhood development, said she would ask the council Monday to add foreclosures to the committee's agenda, a formal step necessary to put the issue in play.

Council member James Mitchell and several others said they would raise the issue at the council's scheduled retreat in early February. "We didn't know the problem was that severe," said Mitchell, responding to an Observer series this week showing foreclosures have more than quadrupled in Mecklenburg County since 1999.

Over the last four years, as loans failed in record numbers, the city cut more than half its funding for its sole initiative to reduce foreclosures.

In 2001, Charlotte gave \$361,000 to United Family Services, a local nonprofit, to counsel people who fell behind on their mortgage payments.

By 2005, the city had cut back to \$170,000.

SEE HOMES | 8A

Online Extras

See how many homes have foreclosed in your neighborhood at www.charlotte.com/news.

INSIDE

8A | Experts suggest changes to combat foreclosure.

INSIDE

Partly sunny
High: 50. Low: 26.
Windy and colder this afternoon. Clear and cold tonight. **Forecast, 8B.**

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Nation | 5A

Top court upholds assisted suicide law

The Supreme Court upheld Oregon's assisted-suicide law Tuesday, saying the Bush administration had exceeded its authority in trying to undo the statute by punishing doctors who help people end their lives.

Nation | 4A

U.S. hostage in Iraq shown on video

Hostage American reporter Jill Carroll appeared in a silent video Tuesday. Abductors threaten to kill her unless U.S. releases female prisoners in Iraq within 72 hours.



Also in the News

- Police say man shot into Charlotte houses | 1B
- Mother charged in fire, deaths appears in court | 3B

Exclusive in Local & State | 1B

Opera Carolina cries theft

Opera Carolina has accused its former finance director of siphoning off nearly \$50,000.

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