

## THIS WEEK

## MONDAY

- Leonard Pitts
- Zing!
- (671-6560)



## TUESDAY

- Eben Goodman
- Jonathan Goldbert

## WEDNESDAY

- David Broder
- Zing! (671-6560)



## THURSDAY

- Bill Cotterell
- Kathleen Parker



## FRIDAY

- Bill Burlew
- Suzanne Fields
- Zing! (671-6560)



## SATURDAY

- Matthew Miller

## SUNDAY

- Mary Ann Lindsey
- George Will



## COMING UP

- Monday: Gilmore on modern-day Devil's Island

## Seeking more Voices, better balance on citizen panel

The relentless parade of polls conducted during last year's election season leads many to believe that politics has become nothing but a horse race complete with front-page headlines focusing more on who's ahead of the pack than what the candidates actually stand for.



**MIZELL STEWART III**  
EDITOR

That's a valid criticism, but I'd argue that the work of pollsters is important — even necessary — in an era when the caterwauling of the print and broadcast punditocracy tosses fast-baked opinions at the populace from all sides.

As a journalist, my responsibility and that of the newspaper's staff is to tap into as many sources of information as possible to fully reflect the issues facing our community.

As a social scientist, Phillip E. Downs gets a charge out of using research tools to determine the

will of the people.

His company, Kerr & Downs Research, has worked with dozens of corporate, association and government clients on market research and strategic initiatives. And for more than 20 years, Kerr & Downs has worked with the city of Tallahassee on an annual survey of how citizens feel about city services.

But that survey doesn't go far enough, Downs said, particularly when vexing public policy issues confront our government leaders.

"I want my community to be run with some knowledge base rather than decisions being based on the wishes of those who scream the loudest," he said.

That is why Kerr & Downs has worked with the *Tallahassee Democrat* over the past two years to establish Voices, a citizen panel that receives and responds to online surveys on local issues.

In addition to being an experiment in community democracy, Voices represents what will become the next wave of market research. Downs said that just as telephone polls replaced mail surveys in the 1960s, busy schedules

and the advent of do-not-call lists means the telephone will soon give way to the Internet.

### 3,000 participants so far

To date, more than 3,000 people have signed up to become a part of our Voices panel. Participants have taken surveys ranging from views on the downtown Community Redevelopment Agency to the prospect of consolidating the governments of Tallahassee and Leon County.

We've had some fun with the panel as well, such as Saturday's story by staff writer Jeff Burlew reflecting some of your New Year's resolutions.

But we're not yet treating the survey results as "news" in the traditional sense. Despite the fact that our panel is more than 3,000 members strong, it is older, more affluent and less diverse than our community as a whole. That restricts its usefulness as a true barometer of community opinion.

Young people, people of color and those with lower incomes — folks who at times believe their opinions don't matter to the

people in the corridors of power — are precisely the folks we need to make the Voices panel representative of the place we all call home.

To be sure, one factor may be the lack of Internet access at home, particularly among the low-income. We plan to take steps to promote Voices in the coming weeks, particularly at community computer labs and other locations where free access is available.

Downs' dream is that community leaders and policy-makers use Voices as a tool to help ascertain how citizens feel about the issues of the day. We share that dream, as we believe it will help us fulfill our mission to be your first and best source of local news.

Voices is an exciting concept that is moving ever closer to reality. I'd be happy to speak to your community or civic group about what we are doing — and I urge you to take a moment to add your voice to our growing citizen panel.

■ Contact Mizell Stewart III at (850) 599-2177 or [mstewart@tallahassee.com](mailto:mstewart@tallahassee.com).

### MAKE YOUR VOICE HEARD

- What is it? Voices is an on-line survey conducted by Kerr & Downs Research and the Tallahassee Democrat.
- How can I become a part of it? To join our panel, please go to <http://www.voices2004.com>. You will be asked to complete a brief demographic survey.
- How will the surveys be used? A sample of the panel representing the population of Leon County will be invited to participate in one or two surveys each month. With your permission, we may also interview you as part of a news story.
- What is your privacy policy? Information you provide will be held in strict confidence by Kerr & Downs Research and will not be released in any way to any other party.
- Where can I get more information? Visit the survey Web site at [www.voices2004.com](http://www.voices2004.com).