As part of the MATCH program, students at Roanoke Middle School in Robersonville run to music for as long as they can. A teacher frustrated by misguided federal health messages started the program five years ago.

Hardison started MATCH.

Weight-loss ideas that work

Last of five parts

BY SARAH AVERY - Staff Writer

GREENVILLE – There is no shortage of solutions to solve obesity.

Asked by The News & Observer to share their weight-loss success stories, people across North Carolina swore by Weight Watchers or Jenny Craig diet programs, $162-a-month fat-busting elixirs, gym memberships, inexpensive walking regimens, $10,000 gastric bypass surgeries, "The Biggest Loser" television show, avoidance of sweets and snacks, weeks at a residential weight-loss clinic, workplace health challenges.
All have worked.

Yet 65.2 percent of North Carolinians remain obese or overweight, a percentage that has only worsened since the 1970s.

More troubling, people are growing fatter at an earlier age. Researchers at UNC-Chapel Hill reported this past fall that obese teens not only stay obese, but also pack on an average 80 more pounds to become severely obese adults, foretelling an onslaught of diabetes, heart disease, arthritis, cancer and other ailments in younger adults instead of seniors.

Barry Popkin, an author of that study and a national leader of a push to tax sugared drinks, said the issue goes beyond personal responsibility and must be tackled with major public policy changes.

The United States, he said, "talks the most and does the least" toward making changes. For example, a broad consensus exists among health leaders that sugar consumption should be scaled back, said Popkin, a professor of nutrition at UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health. But powerful beverage manufacturers and sugar producers have worked to kill efforts to tax sugary drinks. He contends higher prices for sodas and fruit drinks would make them less appealing, much like tax hikes on cigarettes can prompt people to quit smoking.

And it's not just that high-calorie foods are cheap and abundant. Other subtle influences have diminished physical activity. Over the decades, schools quit offering daily physical education, towns built neighborhoods without sidewalks and desk jobs increasingly replaced manufacturing and physical labor.

Our culture is "obesogenic," meaning it's as good at creating obesity as Angelina Jolie is at making pretty photographs. Big changes are needed, health leaders say.

"We have had diets for years - I think the Romans had diet books," joked Mark Dessauer, communications director with Active Living by Design in Chapel Hill. The program, affiliated with the UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health, last year funded $33 million in grants for sidewalks, garden projects, greenways and other infrastructure changes throughout the United States aimed at encouraging physical activity and health.

"When people say we need to eat right and exercise more, this is not a lightning bolt - 'Oh my gosh! What were we thinking?'" Dessauer said. "But we've created systems where the unhealthy choice is the easy choice, and solving the problem is not going to be done with one standard solution, nor overnight. We have to see change on the community level."

Where people live
When it comes to fighting obesity, the interventions that work best tend to arise from an intimate understanding of the people they're targeting.
That's how Tim Hardison, a middle school science teacher in Eastern North Carolina, became a leading warrior in the obesity battle.

Hardison, whose easy drawl announces his Martin County roots, was appalled that obesity rates in his community were among the state's highest. So five years ago he quietly began teaching his seventh-graders about the body mass index and how to read food labels, while encouraging them to exercise.

A funny thing happened.

"I lost 12 pounds!" exclaimed former student Kabrina Woolard, who is now in 11th grade and helps manage her high school football team.

She wasn't alone. Lots of kids lost weight - 42 percent went from overweight to normal during the school year. Many saw their blood pressure and other health measures improve long term. Some actually posted higher math scores on end-of-year exams, a finding that has been noted in other studies as health leaders have argued for more school-based physical education.

The assertion is simple: As bodies improve, minds improve.

"But I couldn't get anyone to listen to me," Hardison said.

He became frustrated that the federal government invested millions of dollars in a multistate intervention in middle schools that has produced mixed results, while his effort had great effect using $50 donations from area civic clubs and whatever he could spare from his own paycheck.

Now backed by scientists at East Carolina University, his MATCH program has won grants from the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation. Last fall, the program received a $100,000 check as part of the foundation's anniversary.

"They're showing so much promise with the outcomes they're achieving," said Kathy Higgins, president of the BCBSNC Foundation. "We hope they can elevate their work in a way that can be a model for all of North Carolina and at the national level."

Hardison's initial success has been repeated as his program spreads to more of the state's eastern counties, where obesity and the illnesses it causes are more prevalent than in most other places in North Carolina.

He theorizes that his intervention works because of his intrinsic knowledge of the communities he serves - his kids, his school, his county, his region.

"We've got too many programs developed by people on the outside who don't understand our priorities," Hardison said.
Targeting teens
Tailoring programs to unique populations or individuals speaks to the complexity of solving the obesity problem.

Efforts aimed at young people are among the most urgently needed, offering hope along with a hint of desperation.

That's because once the weight is on, it's hard to take off and harder still to keep off - as anyone who has tried can attest.

"There are huge environmental pressures that make it difficult to keep the weight off," said Dr. Laura Svetkey, director of clinical research at the Sarah W. Stedman Nutrition and Metabolism Center at Duke. "We've done a bunch of research on how to help people make lifestyle changes to achieve and sustain weight loss in a healthy way, and there's really excellent data that weight loss can prevent the development of further disease."

Svetkey said intervening early, before bad habits become ingrained, has become a state and national priority. The National Institutes of Health, the government's primary source of medical research dollars, will dedicate an estimated $784 million to obesity studies this year, much of it aimed at young people.

Two projects in the Triangle are getting under way: one at Duke and one at UNC-CH, both seeking ways to incorporate cell phones and other new media into diet and exercise interventions for young adults.

"It's challenging to think how to approach prevention in this age group," Svetkey said, noting that people gain the most weight between the ages of 18 and 34, when their lifestyles change with new jobs, families and priorities.

Finding the right tools and the right way to communicate with people is key.

Svetkey's team will try using cell phones, enlisting 300 young people in the Triangle.

Participants will be given Android phones specially equipped with a highly interactive application, developed at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The phones will connect the participants with one another and with researchers, transmit data such as weight or food consumption and send reminders, pep talks and other messages. If someone is going to a party and doesn't want to stray off a diet, for example, the phone might send a text message offering words of encouragement.

"Kooky, corny stuff might be helpful," Svetkey said. "We're getting input from people in this age group - do they want this? Would that be annoying or helpful? We're in the process of building this programming to be fun and engaging, and have it not be irritating."
Social media motivation
Similar efforts are under way at UNC-Chapel Hill. Deborah Tate, an associate professor of nutrition at UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health, specializes in using technology and media in weight-loss programs. She has employed podcasts, Twitter messages, Internet tutorials, chat groups, video games. All help keep people motivated. Shane Hudson, a participant in Tate's current study - called PODS-II, an acronym for Pounds Off Digitally II - said the social media applications, especially Twitter, have been helpful in his efforts to lose weight. If, for example, he's having lunch at a Mexican restaurant, he can Tweet his fellow dieters for advice on menu selections that fall within his caloric range.

"It's immediate and real and gives you moral support," said Hudson, who lost 70 pounds last year.

A 35-year-old professional fundraiser from Durham, Hudson said the ongoing exchanges on his iPhone demand he be accountable to his dieting friends at all times.

"Regardless of what kind of hand you've been dealt, we're trying to set up in your own social environment and support the changes you're trying to make," Tate said, adding that keeping young people from gaining weight in the first place could keep them on a healthy track for the remainder of their lives.

"It's a toxic environment we live in," Tate said. "If we don't pay close attention to what's happening every day, these small gains are going to occur."

sarah.avery@newsobserver.com or 919-829-4882
Ailing, in love, upbeat, Basnight quits Senate

BY MICHAEL BIESECKER - Staff Writer

RALEIGH With Republicans taking control of the state legislature, the Democratic political boss many considered the capital's most powerful politician says it is time for him to fade from public life.

First elected to his Senate seat in 1984, Marc Basnight served the last 18 years as president pro tempore, a position that allowed him to set the agenda for new laws while bottling up bills he didn't like.

In a hastily called sit-down with reporters in his office Tuesday morning, Basnight cited his declining health and burgeoning love life as the reasons for his departure.

His ability to speak impaired by a degenerative nerve disease, the Manteo Democrat said it would not be fair to the voters of his eight-county district for him to remain in office as a less-than-fully-effective representative.

"I leave because of my health, not being able to speak on the Senate floor," said Basnight, 63. "If a politician can't debate, he is not much, not worth his salt."

Basnight's decision comes two months after the Republicans won a majority in the chamber for the first time in more than a century. The new GOP majority means Basnight wouldn't have kept the top leadership post he's held since 1993.

His resignation takes effect Jan. 25, the day before Republicans take control of the legislature. His departure, which follows that of Tony Rand in 2009 and David Hoyle last
year, ends an era where the three Democrats left their mark on every major piece of legislation of spending decision.

Basnight, who won reelection to a 14th term in November, had previously said he would serve out his remaining two-years and retire in 2012. But on a recent road trip to Deep South historical sites with his new fiancée, Basnight said he came to the realization that it is time to focus on personal priorities while he still can.

Basnight said doctors have never given him an exact diagnosis or name for his condition, a motor neuron disease that causes the slow death of cells that control balance, walking and talking.

His already lengthy Eastern North Carolina drawl has slowed noticeably in the last few years, because of the careful concentration required for him to speak. Before he told the public he was sick, Basnight had to contend with persistent rumors that he was dying.

The senator said Tuesday that doctors have no idea how much time he might have left.

"You never know what the future holds," Basnight said. "Obviously, if the disease gets aggressive, that will not be good for me."

A widower who lost his wife of nearly four decades to illness in 2007, Basnight said he recently became engaged to Sue Waters, a librarian for the Dare County schools. The couple met in the bar of Basnight's Nags Head restaurant. He said she buttonholed him over a glass of wine about the need for better pay for educators.

"She's a wannabe redhead," he said, smiling broadly, after he was asked to describe her. Basnight said he first informed his two daughters and key staffers of his impending departure on Monday.

Sen. Phil Berger, the Eden Republican who will replace Basnight as the top leader in the Senate, praised him as a formidable champion for the causes he supported, especially the state's public universities.

"Sen. Basnight's respect for the institution has never been more apparent than during the current transition process," Berger said. "The grace, respect and cooperation he and his staff have shown Republicans will be the standard by which all future transitions are measured."

**GOP skeptics**

Some other Republicans quietly cried foul Tuesday, alleging that Basnight put his name on the ballot with the full intention of stepping down. Within an hour of Basnight's resignation becoming public, a blogger for the conservative John Locke Foundation wrote that the senator had "disenfranchised" voters.
By leaving early, Democratic Party officials in Basnight's coastal district will nominate a successor for appointment by Democratic Gov. Bev Perdue to serve his full two-year term.

Basnight firmly denied any such scheme, saying he fully intended to serve out his term when he ran, even with his health problems. But after Democrats lost big on Election Day, Basnight said he reconsidered. Not being able to effectively speak or debate on the Senate floor would be a bigger handicap with his party in the minority, he said.

Hoyle, a longtime legislative ally who now serves as Revenue Secretary, said he was surprised by Basnight's decision.

"I would have bet he would finish his term and then ride off into the sunset," said Hoyle, who is from Gastonia.

Basnight said Tuesday he had not spoken to Perdue or anyone else about who might be named as his successor in the state's 1st Senate district. For her part, the governor said she had never met another man like Basnight, who was one of her mentors when she served in the Senate.

"He is a man of principles, of dignity, and with a truly generous spirit," said Perdue, a Democrat from New Bern. "He stood up for the people of this state - all people - regardless of money or titles. A Dare County oyster fisherman was as important to him, maybe more so, than the CEO of a Fortune 500 company."

**UNC system champion**

Though he never got a college education himself, Basnight will likely be remembered for boosting the UNC system and securing billions in funding for new facilities. He was also outspoken on environmental issues, saying Tuesday that global warming and rising sea levels present a clear threat to North Carolina's coastal communities.

Basnight said he nearly always tried to lead by consensus, but he acknowledged there were times he used his political muscle to sway minds and move stalled legislation. One example was the approval of the state lottery. Another was the ban on smoking in bars and restaurants, a law which he said gave him personal satisfaction as the owner of an eatery.

A voracious reader of books on such weighty topics as history and economics, Basnight was famously resistant to the Internet age. Members of his staff tell the story of the day they tried to teach him to use e-mail. Instructed to use the computer's mouse to point and click what he wanted to do, the senator reportedly picked it up from the desk and tapped it on the screen.

On Tuesday, Basnight dismissed any notion he might accept some cushy post on some government board or sign on with a lobbying firm, saying he expects to simply fade away.
"You won't see me back here," he said of the legislature he helped run for so long.

michael.biesecker@newsobserver.com or 919-829-4698

**Legislative highlights**

• Helped set up the Highway Fund and the Trust Fund and the equity formula that helped rural communities get their share of road funding

• Helped create the Golden LEAF Foundation to promote economic development in rural areas.

• Instrumental in passage of the $3.1 billion higher education bond issue in 2000 to help universities and community colleges with their most critical facility needs.

• Pushed for yearly investments in university facilities to improve campuses' ability to teach and do research, especially in the areas of science, education, and medicine. Expanded out-of-state scholarships for outstanding scholars and athletes to draw new talent to North Carolina.

• Created the University Cancer Research Fund, a $50 million annual investment in research to improve diagnosis, treatment and outcomes of cancer, a disease that will affect one in three North Carolinians. Championed the construction of the recently-opened UNC Cancer Hospital and the Biomedical Research Imaging Center (BRIC) in Chapel Hill.

• Pushed for a new dental school at East Carolina University that includes 10 rural outreach clinics.

• Instrumental in passage of state lottery and smoking ban in bars and restaurants

**Projects secured for his district**

• $16 million state aquarium outside Manteo
• $12 million museum in Elizabeth City
• $1 million bike trail for the town of Manteo
• A pharmacy school at Elizabeth City State University

Compiled by N&O researcher Peggy Neal
Pirates on right track

BY EDWARD G. ROBINSON III - Staff Writer

Done answering questions, Ruffin McNeill sat quietly for a moment at the end of a postgame news conference following East Carolina's lopsided loss to Maryland in the Military Bowl last week.

Remaining in his chair at the podium, ECU's first-year coach closed his eyes and released a heavy breath, reflecting on a long football season he called a "whirlwind." As he recalled a season with major swings - from a 5-2 winning record to losing five out of the final six games - McNeill thought ahead to the future.

"We have a chance to do some special things here," McNeill said.

Maryland handed the Pirates a dispiriting 51-20 loss on Dec. 29, bringing the 2010 football season to a close. It marked the end for star receiver Dwayne Harris - the first in school history to collect 3,000 career receiving yards - as well as 17 other ECU seniors.

With a roster shortened by injuries to several key starters and depleted of other standouts who moved on to the NFL, McNeill's team achieved an unexpected 6-7 record in his first year and earned an invitation to the school's fifth consecutive bowl game.

"I think the blueprint is laid," McNeill said. "We've got to recruit. I know that." McNeill plans on appearing in the living rooms of recruits throughout the month of January, selling ECU's brand of high-energy defense and pass-first offense. The goal is to bring in a full class of 18 to 20 recruits, including some possible junior college players.

No recruits have signed a national letter of intent with the Pirates, but the program anticipates several early enrollees for the spring.

"We are going to bring in some players who are going to make a difference next year," said ECU defensive coordinator Brian Mitchell, whose inexperienced unit struggled as it learned the base defense and failed to apply pressure up front.

Meanwhile, the Pirates will also look internally at the nucleus of a young team that experienced some necessary growing pains this season. They used the 15 extra practices for the bowl game to evaluate players who spent the entire season on the practice squad.

"We have a few freshmen and redshirt guys who are going to step up and take us into the next year," junior transfer Dominique Davis said.
Davis, who earned Conference USA's newcomer of the year, is the central player ECU will build around next season. The 6-foot-3, 225-pound quarterback will have a chance to improve with a spring football schedule, summer workouts and another fall preseason camp.

He transferred to the school last season, missed spring camp and didn't hit the field until Aug. 6, though he picked up offensive coordinator Lincoln Riley's offense without trouble.

Davis, who passed for 3,967 yards, a school single-season record, accounted for 46 of the team's 60 offensive touchdowns.

In doing so, Davis often connected with Harris, but also built chemistry with junior transfer Lance Lewis - a possible go-to receiver next season. Lewis finished with a single-season record 14 touchdown catches.

Junior defensive back Emanuel Davis should anchor the defense next season, partnered with junior safety Bradley Jacobs, who transferred in this season and made an immediate impact in the secondary.

As winter turns to spring, questions will arise about the Pirates' depth, and it's likely the same doubters who picked them to win two games will again count them out.

They will need to answer serious questions on defense and shape their passing game around the next group of playmakers.

Headed into the Military Bowl game, there were outside concerns that ECU might lose key members of its coaching staff, namely Riley, whose name surfaced as a possible candidate for head coaching positions. Those concerns have quieted, though change can happen quickly in college football.

"When you have good coaches, it's always a chance you might lose some," McNeill said. "As a coach you always have guys in your hat. You know that could happen. You hire good coaches, people are going to come after them.

"I hope I provide enough of a well-adjusted environment at East Carolina that coaches want to stay there with me and be a part of what we're getting ready to achieve and accomplish here."

robinson@newsobserver.com or 919-829-4781
Unemployment rises, but job seekers hopeful

Charlotte region's jobless rate climbs to 10.8% in November, mirroring the state and nation.

By Kirsten Valle Pittman
kvalle@charlotteobserver.com
Posted: Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2011

Alphonso Potts was already dressed for his interview, in a tan shirt and dark tie, Tuesday morning when he stopped by the Center for Community Transitions for some last-minute practice.

He felt prepared. He had completed a two-week job readiness course at the North Davidson Street facility, which helps people with criminal records find work; he'd polished his resume; and he planned to catch a bus to the interview an hour early.

Still, he was nervous. The job search isn't easy these days, especially for candidates like Potts, who has gone to prison twice on drug charges and is struggling for another chance. "It's going to be hard, but you've got to stand your ground," said the former forklift driver and restaurant cook, 45, who has been looking for work since 2009. "You're going to hear 'no' a lot, but you've got to get out there and keep knocking on doors."

The Charlotte region's jobless rate climbed to 10.8 percent in November from 10.2 percent the month before - the highest level since August and the first monthly increase since last spring, government data released Tuesday show.

Statewide, unemployment rates rose in 99 of North Carolina's 100 counties and stayed flat in one, Davie. Many local rates, including Mecklenburg's, remained well above the 9.9 percent state average, the N.C. Employment Security Commission found.

Experts warn it could take years for the jobless rate to drop to pre-recession levels. Recent declines have been due, in part, to discouraged job-seekers dropping out of the hunt - and the latest increase might be a result of that trend reversing, some say.

"I don't think a higher unemployment rate really surprises anybody," East Carolina University economist James Kleckley said. "Until the national economy really starts revving up, the North Carolina economy or any of its counties probably won't, either." He predicts some job growth this year, but he and other economists worry that many workers, particularly with blue-collar backgrounds, will need extensive retraining to land the higher-tech jobs that return.

The situation is grimmer for workers without upper-level education and minorities, who have seen jobless rates rise over the last year even as the national average fell. The
jobless rate for workers without a high school diploma was 15.7 percent in November, far above the 9.8 percent national average, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. The rate for workers with bachelor's degrees or higher, by comparison, was 5.1 percent in November.

For blacks, the November jobless rate was 16 percent, and for Hispanics, 13.2 percent - both up from November 2009, the BLS found.

Staff members and job-seekers at the Center for Community Transitions say it's tougher still for candidates with a criminal background. About 20 new students gathered Tuesday morning in a shabby classroom there, scribbling notes as instructor Erik Ortega talked about creating a personal brand.

"How many of you want a better way of living?" he asked. Hands shot up. "Right now you have an opportunity to take your brand to a better life."

Ortega acknowledged after class that many companies, particularly larger, better-established ones, are hesitant to hire convicted criminals, no matter how strong their brand. But he said the class, which also offers lessons on resume writing, interviewing and other skills, gives job-seekers the confidence to keep searching.

"Their outlook is more positive when they complete the program," he said. "They can take 'no' in stride now."

Elizabeth Ayyub, 39, graduated from the center's class in May, shortly after leaving prison, and found work managing a Halloween store soon after. Now, Ayyub, who has a degree in computer-aided design, is looking for a permanent job.

She said the center has helped - their mock interviews, for one, are "way tougher" than any real one she's experienced. But it's been discouraging, the way interviews turn after discussing her background.

"I know that when they tell you no, it's not me, it's my criminal record," she said.

Fellow graduate Anthony Gardner served seven years in prison after holding drug money for his brother, he said. After his release in 2002, he went to school for surgical technology and has been looking for jobs in the field since. Despite his good grades, he's had a hard time finding work at a major hospital and has been forced to take lower-paying jobs as a nursing assistant at small home health care companies. When the last one closed, he was out of a job.

Now Gardner, 39, focuses on staying positive, and always sends a thank-you note after interviews, even if he's turned down because of his background. Ultimately, he hopes to find a job and work hard enough to convince his employer to consider others with a record.
"I know a door is going to open for me, and when it does, I'll give it my best," he said.

Potts, who was preparing for his interview Tuesday morning, settled into a chair by the door, waiting for his bus. He said the center's classes have helped him own up to his past and apply for jobs with confidence. He's no longer sad when he goes out looking for work.

The interview he'd lined up was his first in more than a year - after 120 applications.

Potts grinned: "I'm proud of myself."
UNC-CH hangs onto No. 1 rank

BY ERIC FERRERI - Staff Writer

CHAPEL HILL UNC-Chapel Hill, where tuition for most students went up 18 percent last year, has once again topped a ranking of the nation's best educational values. Kiplinger's Personal Finance magazine has named UNC-CH the nation's best deal among public four-year colleges for the 10th straight year. UNC defended its title this year in spite of a two-pronged tuition increase that raised costs nearly $1,000 for in-state undergraduates.

The top ranking indicates both the university's continuing investment in academics and the lousy economic shape that most of American higher education is in right now. "Everybody else had a similar situation, and these rankings are relative," said Jane Bennett Clark, a senior associate editor at Kiplinger. "Most schools raised tuition, and some really raised it considerably. So on that, UNC is maintaining its position."

The University of Florida placed second in the ranking.

At UNC-CH, tuition and fees for an in-state undergrad run about $6,665 this year, with the total cost - factoring in room, board, books and other incidentals - tallying about $19,764.

Nationally, the average total annual in-state sticker price of a public college is $16,140, according to Kiplinger.

The rankings are in the magazine's February 2011 issue, which is available on newsstands and at www.kiplinger.com/tools/colleges.

The magazine weighs a university's costs against its academics, and that's where UNC-CH excelled. The magazine specifically cites recent moves to hire junior faculty members, expand the university's honors program and create an enrichment program for top freshmen, all while cutting $36 million in operating costs.

Clark, the Kiplinger editor, said UNC-CH's push to add junior faculty suggests a forward-thinking institution with a long-term vision.

"It sends a message to students and faculty that they're growing and planning for the future," she said.
The university's hiring push demonstrates the importance of private money at public universities.

Funds for many of the junior faculty members hired in the past year came from a $5 million private gift last March from the William R. Kenan Jr. Charitable Trust. That gift, coupled with a $500,000 anonymous gift for the same purpose, freed the university to hire 18 new junior faculty members.

In fact, even with tight budgets, universities across the region are looking to add young faculty members. Given the nation's economic problems, universities that do have some money to spend are finding they have the pick of a talented crop of budding academicians.

"It was exactly the right time to be hiring," said Bruce Carney, UNC-CH's provost. "The people we've hired do deserve to be named 'cream of the crop.'"

eric.ferreri@newsobserver.com or 919-829-4563

**N.C. colleges**

Several other UNC-system schools did well on the Kiplinger list of the nation's best educational values:

No. 15: N.C. State University
No. 27: UNC Wilmington
No. 35: Appalachian State
No. 48: UNC School of the Arts
No. 58: UNC Asheville
Outgoing Senate leader Marc Basnight speaks to reporters in Raleigh, N.C. on Tuesday, Jan. 4, 2011. Basnight, the longest-serving head of a legislative body in North Carolina history, announced Tuesday that he will resign his seat before the new session begins because of a chronic health condition that affects his speech. (AP Photo/The News & Observer, Shawn Rocco)

Reflector.com

Basnight leaving N.C. Senate
By GARY D. ROBERTSON
Associated Press
Wednesday, January 5, 2011

RALEIGH — Senate leader Marc Basnight, the longest-serving head of a legislative body in North Carolina history, announced Tuesday that he will resign his seat before the new session begins because of a chronic health condition that affects his speech. Basnight had said he would complete the two-year term he won in November, even after the GOP won control of the Senate for the first time in more than a century, then retire.

But the Dare County Democrat said he changed his mind.

"Not being able to clearly speak on the Senate floor is an incredible disadvantage. If a politician cannot debate, he's not much, not worth his salt," he told reporters. "I believe it would be wrong to just sit here and not be able to represent the people who voted for me. That would be wrong."

The 63-year-old Basnight has been a legislative powerhouse involved in enacting every significant state policy of the past two decades, including passage of the state lottery, a ban on smoking in restaurants and bars and improved public education and ethics reforms.

Now Democrats in Basnight's northeastern district will choose a successor to serve the next two years. "They'll find someone who will represent our area well," he said. Basnight said he's resigning from the Senate effective the day before the Legislature reconvenes, Jan. 26, when Republicans officially take control.

It's been known for years that Basnight has been struggling with a degenerative nerve disease that affects his balance and that has slowed his already unique speech patterns stemming from his Outer Banks accent. He said his prognosis is unclear but that his condition — doctors give it no name — should worsen over time.
While speaking on the floor wasn't as important while Basnight was Senate leader for the past 18 years, Basnight said it would have been harder with his speech difficulties to serve as a rank-and-file member representing the 1st District, which covers eight northeastern counties.

After Democrats lost the majority on Election Day, ensuring Basnight wouldn't keep the president pro tempore's job he's held since 1993, he had said he would serve this term. But he said he changed his mind over the holidays, having had more time to think during an automobile trip through the Deep South. He didn't make his decision known to his two adult daughters and new fiancee until Monday.

Basnight's departure effectively ends a Democratic political machine that had extended the party's grasp of power in the Senate, even as Republicans controlled the state House in the 1990s and held more federal offices in North Carolina. Through prolific fundraising and a strategy that frustrated GOP efforts in his chamber for a generation, Basnight held back the trend.


Basnight was appointed to the Board of Transportation in 1977 after supporting Democrat Jim Hunt for governor. Basnight joined the Senate in 1985, became leader eight years later and was re-elected to the post a record eight more times.

Though he never went to college himself, Basnight made it a mission to keep the University of North Carolina system a national leader in higher education. Basnight was perhaps proudest of passage of a $3.1 billion higher education bond package in 2000 that was approved later that year in a statewide referendum. The money has been spent over the past decade as system enrollment grew by 100,000 students. "In large part because of Senator Basnight's leadership and efforts, the University of North Carolina is the best public university system in the country," Sen. Phil Berger, R-Rockingham, Basnight's expected successor as Senate leader, said in a news release. Basnight's machine declined over the past two years as liberal Democrats chafed under the leadership of more moderate and business-oriented colleagues and as aging chief lieutenants retired. Senate Majority Leader Tony Rand left for the state parole commission and Sen. David Hoyle, D-Gaston, chose not to run for re-election this year. "He has a passion for this state, a love for this state," said Hoyle, his voice breaking with emotion about Basnight, whom he met when they both served on the transportation board. "He's somebody that's provided leadership that is unmatched."
Upon leaving the Senate, Basnight said he doesn't plan to return to public life in Raleigh but instead will spend more time at his Lone Cedar Cafe on the Outer Banks and with his fiancee, Manteo High School librarian Sue Waters. The two met at his restaurant's bar, he said. Basnight is a widower — his wife Sandy died in June 2007 after being treated for leukemia.

Spending a few days a week in Raleigh daily for a quarter-century made it difficult for him to keep up with his business. That will change, he said. "I never made money," he quipped. "I think I'm going to do that now."
At some point over the last few months, something new popped out of the ground next to East Carolina's Clark-LeClair Stadium. In fact, things are sprouting up all around the Pirates' five-year-old baseball home, but the most striking is the object which looks like a smaller, more streamlined version of Clark-LeClair itself.

That's part of the idea behind the university's massive athletic facility upgrade — to make ECU's sports venues part of a modern, aesthetically-pleasing sports complex that now includes a brand new softball stadium.

“I love the aesthetics of it. I love how our stadium looks like a miniature Clark-LeClair,” said ECU softball coach Tracey Kee, a two-time Conference USA coach of the year selection who will enter her 15th season this winter, and do so with a stadium that's just now getting its finishing touches. “I think when it's all said and done, it's going to be one of the best around.”

Looking good is one thing, but in the case of Kee, her team and its new stadium, winning more games is paramount.
After saying she got all of her wishes granted with the new facility, Kee said there is no question that better equipment and surroundings will equal better results.

In fact, the addition of covered batting cages alone will afford the ECU team more hitting time and a much more predictable schedule.
“We've always had to hit outside in the rain and the cold,” Kee said of the new covered cages, one of many upgrades in the 1,000-seat stadium. “The size at which they built them allows us to put our entire team in those cages at one time. In the past, we were always juggling trying to get in the baseball stadium.”

In addition to that, Kee said the new stadium's completely padded wall takes a page from the best stadiums in the Southeastern Conference, as well as the turf between the playing field and the dugouts, and inside the bullpens. Kee thinks a new stadium can create exposure opportunities through hosting conference tournaments — right on cue, ECU will host the Conference USA tournament this May — and also high school camps.

“Being able to host the Conference USA tournament this year is huge, and we as a coaching staff would love to get the high schools involved in our new facility,” Kee said. “We have not been able to host camps because our facilities would not allow us to. The entire thing is going to help us with in-state recruiting.”

After opening the 2011 season at the Red and Black Showcase at the University of Georgia on Feb. 11, the new ECU stadium will be christened Feb. 16 against UNC Wilmington.

Other notable home dates include a doubleheader against N.C. State on March 30 and Conference USA series against UCF (April 9) and Houston (April 30).

“People say, ‘You've got the pressure now, you've got an unbelievable stadium,' but we've always put that pressure on ourselves to be successful,” Kee said.

The new softball stadium comes on the heels of a major upgrade at Dowdy-Ficklen Stadium last year, which bowled in the end zone facing Elmhurst Elementary School and added 7,000 new seats, bringing the football stadium's capacity to an even 50,000. The new seats are cloaked by an 84-foot wide high-definition video scoreboard.

By the time the entire facilities project is complete, ECU will also have a new track and field facility, a soccer stadium and a new Olympic sports support building, all in the space adjacent to Clark-LeClair and Dowdy-Ficklen stadiums and the Cliff Moore football practice facility.

Contact Nathan Summers at nsummers@reflector.com or (252)329-9595.
During an 18-year period, a strong argument could be made that Marc Basnight was the most powerful elected official in North Carolina. The governor might be the state's chief executive, but those familiar with how Raleigh operated knew that winning Basnight's support was crucial to seeing a project or initiative through the Legislature.

Having so much influence invested in one member of the N.C. Senate was not always best for North Carolina, and some projects that failed to find favor with Basnight languished for years without proper consideration. Still, in announcing his resignation from the General Assembly on Tuesday, Basnight concludes an unrivaled career in state government and a generally laudable record of public service.

On Jan. 25, one day before the start of the General Assembly's first session in more than a century under Republican control, Basnight will formally resign from the Senate after 25 years in Raleigh. The Dare County resident cited health problems for his decision, which was speculated for months since the degenerative nerve condition that slowed his pace in recent years was evident.

It will be an abrupt change for one of the most influential politicians in North Carolina history. Since ascending to Senate president pro tem in 1993, Basnight has been the seat of power in Raleigh, determining which legislation would progress through his chamber and collecting a cadre of loyalists that enforced his decisions. Without his support, it was
virtually impossible to win passage for any bill, as many senators and even the governor learned during Basnight's time in that leadership post.

While some were reasonably frustrated by one man wielding such power, especially those in the opposition party, Basnight's favor shone on eastern North Carolina with great frequency. Aside from projects that served his district, Basnight consistently advocated on behalf of East Carolina University, from which he received an honorary degree in 1996. Initiatives like the School of Dentistry that will serve eastern North Carolina for decades would still be a dream without his stamp of approval.

The timing of Basnight's resignation, so soon after the election, means his successor will be selected by Democratic officials and appointed by the governor rather than chosen by voters. That may be undemocratic, but hardly a surprise given the tight grip on power he held during his time in office. On balance, however, North Carolina was served by Basnight's time in office and should hope the best for him as he moves on.
Roger Conner, executive director of Go-Science, left, and City Planner Carl Rees talk about the eventual purchase by his non-profit organization of the old Pugh's Tire and Service Center at 729 Dickinson Avenue Tuesday, Jan. 4, 2011. The city's Redevelopment Commission closed on the purchase of the former Pugh's Tire and Service Center in late December. Paid for by bonds for center city revitalization, the city intends to lease it back for eventual purchase to Go-Science. (Justin Falls/The Daily Reflector)

Science center project is a GO
By Kathryn Kennedy
The Daily Reflector
Wednesday, January 5, 2011

Greenville's Redevelopment Commission closed on the purchase of a Dickinson Avenue building in late December for use as a regional science center. The acquisition of the former Pugh Tire facility at 729 Dickinson Ave. was announced during the board's monthly meeting Tuesday. The Pugh family was paid $378,000 for the property.

Pitt County's online parcel information system lists its market value at $115,270. Funding came from the 2004 general obligation bond for center city revitalization. Educational nonprofit GO-Science intends to lease the building for a period to be determined. It will undergo extensive rehabilitation paid for by GO-Science before exhibits are installed in three phases. The final phase includes a Challenger Learning Center, which simulates space travel.

“People are excited not only in Pitt County and Greenville but all the way to the coast,” GO-Science Executive Director Roger Conner said. “They can come to Greenville instead of driving to Raleigh or Charlotte.”

Conner said his organization looked at approximately 30 properties. The Pugh building was appealing because of its high ceilings — needed to accommodate certain displays — and ample parking.
Its central location also was appealing, Conner said. The site is in walking distance from downtown, East Carolina University, and west Greenville and university-area neighborhoods.

“It's kind of this juncture or intersection for Greenville,” Conner said. Negotiations were under way for nearly a year, City Planner Carl Rees said.

“When the city buys property ... we go through a lot of steps,” he said. Those include an appraisal and ongoing environmental testing. Rees said that testing was paid for by a $200,000 grant from the Environmental Protection Agency.

Conner and Rees said the project could help jump-start revitalization along the Dickinson Avenue corridor.

“Private investment often follows strategically placed public investment,” Rees said. GO-Science leaders will draft design plans for the interior of the facility and develop a fundraising plan during the six months it may take to conclude environmental testing. Conner said he was unsure how much it will cost to adapt the building for GO-Science's purposes.

“We want to hit the ground running and get phase one open as soon as possible,” Conner said. “We can move as fast as the funding is available.”


Contact Kathryn Kennedy at kkennedy@reflector.com or (252) 329-9566.
Mark M. Brinson

Dr. Mark M. Brinson, 67, died Monday, Jan. 3, 2011. A professor at East Carolina University, he served as technical consultant, providing feedback and advice to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Smithsonian Institute.

There was one enlightening piece of information to come out of Monday's crime forum. I have always felt in my 45-year span here that there were never enough policemen to ever investigate anything. They just make records.

A former mayor said you have to have two and a half officers per 1,000 population. There are 186 officers on our police force. Mayor Pat Dunn said 82,000 people live here. That, times two and a half equals 205. Hmmm, that's odd. But wait, what about the 28,000 college students that get in wrecks, get robbed or get arrested downtown? Where's the 70 officers to cover them?

All this time there has never been any budget to cover the college students because they really don't count. I guess they're ... uh ... invisible, like illegal aliens. I would love to really know how many 911 police calls are university student related. I wouldn't be surprised if it was 40 percent. In any case, it's time the city elders quit living in denial and learn how to add.

VAN BROWN
Greenville