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Butterfield: ECU, PCMH projects may not receive intense funding

By Tom Marine
The Daily Reflector

Thursday, February 19, 2009

Congressman G.K. Butterfield said health projects at East Carolina University and Pitt County Memorial Hospital may not receive intense funding from the federal government while the nation tries to rebound its failing economy.

Touring the East Carolina Heart Institute at ECU on Thursday, Butterfield said efforts to curtail the recession and create more American jobs will be the top priority for both the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives.

As a result, he said, technological advancements will continue to be funded, but not as intensively as he would prefer.

“At the federal level, we are trying to take a new attitude,” Butterfield said. “Our immediate challenge is to turn this economy around, so we are not going to be able to invest to the level we would like.”

In terms of universal health coverage, Butterfield said he expects a long debate about the state of the nation’s health care system. Hopefully, he said, Congress will put its words into action.

“Before (President Barack Obama’s) first term is over, we will have a serious conversation about universal health care, and you are going to be part of it,” Butterfield told ECU Chancellor Steve Ballard, PCMH President Steve Lawler and other local health care leaders.

Butterfield said regardless of the economic situation, health care specialists must continue to innovate and improve their services, to build on the tremendous progress already made.

“We’re all in this together, and I pledge to you I will do everything I can to help you succeed,” he said.

Several ECU officials made presentations about how the federal legislature could help the university, including Dr. Jim Hupp, dean of the new dental school.

Hupp asked Butterfield and his fellow representatives to reauthorize Title VII — a bill designed to support new dental residency programs and provide development funds. Butterfield voiced his total support for that bill.

Earlier in the day, Butterfield visited the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina to tour the facility and discuss hunger in Greenville.

In the 10 counties served by the food bank, more than 111,000 individuals are at risk of hunger, according to the U.S. Census 2006 Annual Total Population Estimates. About 10,000 are adults 65 and older and more than 40,000 are children.

The food bank serves a network of nearly 900 partner agencies such as soup kitchens, food pantries, shelters and programs for children and adults, its Web site states. In the fiscal year 2007-08, the food bank distributed nearly 32 million pounds of food and non-food essentials through these agencies.

Contact Tom Marine at tmarine@coxnc.com or (252) 329-9567.
Holland encourages community to give time, money

By Josh Humphries
The Daily Reflector

Thursday, February 19, 2009

Athletics is about building teams and so are successful community programs, East Carolina University Athletics Director Terry Holland told about 200 people at the annual Building Hope Community Life Center on Thursday night.

Holland gave the keynote address at the event held to celebrate the year's successes at Building Hope and encouraged the community to give time and money to the programs.

Building Hope, located on Ninth Street, is home to several services aimed at Greenville's youth including after-school programs, summer activities and programs on parenting.

Building Hope began in 2001 with 14 Sadie Sautter Elementary students coming to the center after school. Now it serves dozens of students through its various offerings.

Holland talked about the differences between what Greenville's young population is facing today compared to his childhood in Clinton in the 1950s.

"There weren't the kind of mixed messages we have today," Holland said.

"We knew that you started at the bottom and worked you way to the top. That is not the case now."

Holland said that Building Hope is recruiting against gangs to get teens involved in the 300 Men of Standards program, an initiative to teach Greenville's young men how to be mature, loving and responsible men.

Holland likened recruiting against gangs to recruiting ECU basketball players against University of North Carolina and Duke.

He said gangs offer relative wealth very quickly, but the payoff of prison time is very severe. Building Hope, he said, teaches teens to work for what they want and that real rewards do not come instantly.

Rob Lee, director of Building Hope, told the audience that nonprofit organizations are being hit hard by the current economic conditions but a little bit of help from everyone could meet the needs of Greenville's youth. He said programs all over the state are looking to Building Hope for ideas, and the program is likely to expand to Farmville very soon.

"This season has not been easy for nonprofits," Lee said.

"We see multitudes in need and we see out waiting lists growing."

Building Hope operates for around $300,000 per year, with a large percentage of funding coming from private donations.

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Lou Holtz to lead Notre Dame legends against Japan

By JIM ARMSTRONG
The Associated Press

Friday, February 20, 2009

TOKYO — When Notre Dame asks you to coach, you don’t say no, so Lou Holtz will fly to Tokyo in July to coach the Fighting Irish legends team against Japan’s national American football team.

The former Notre Dame coach was in Tokyo on Friday to promote the Notre Dame Japan Bowl on July 25 at Tokyo Dome. Former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Joe Montana, a Notre Dame graduate, will also make the trip to Japan as a celebrity ambassador but won’t suit up for his alma mater.

"The love that people have for Notre Dame can’t be explained," Holtz said at a press conference. "Notre Dame asked me to coach and you don’t say no. We asked Joe to come over because we felt it was important for a guy like Joe to come over and represent Notre Dame."

Holtz said that over 100 former Notre Dame players volunteered to make the trip, so he and his coaching staff will hold tryouts to narrow the team down for the trip. The final roster will be announced in April.

Holtz listed several players who were sure to make the team, including quarterback Tony Rice, running back Travis Thomas and center Tim Ruddy.

Holtz has been in Japan four times in the past as a coach of the U.S. team in the Japan Bowl and said his players will be able to experience a new culture.

"We wanted the players to experience Japanese culture and we think it will be a great experience for them," said Holtz. "I coached here in four Japan Bowls and enjoyed every one of them."

Heisman Trophy winner Tim Brown will be a member of the coaching staff. Brown joins fellow former Notre Dame players Chris Zorich and Reggie Brooks on the staff.

Holtz wasn’t worried about his players overwhelming the Japanese team.

"The players are older and haven’t played for a few years," said Holtz. "Football is a team game and it doesn’t always go to the best athlete."

Holtz watched video of the Japanese team during his trip and said he was very impressed with the coaching of the players and the discipline.

Holtz, who had a 100-30-2 record in 11 seasons at Notre Dame, was elected to the College Football Hall of Fame in May.
Opera vocalist visits ECU

The Daily Reflector
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Nathan Gunn is a versatile vocalist. The Indiana native has performed throughout the world as an opera singer, but his recorded albums include work with contemporary musicians like Tom Waits and Sting.

The baritone will perform at 7:30 p.m. today at East Carolina University's Wright Auditorium.

The concert is part of the S. Rudolph Alexander Performing Arts Series, which brings premier performers to eastern North Carolina.

Gunn and accompanist John Wustman will perform "Die schoumlmé Müllerin," a song cycle by Franz Schubert based on a collection of poems by Wilhelm Müller.

Gunn has appeared in internationally renowned opera houses such as the Metropolitan Opera, San Francisco Opera, Seattle Opera, Houston Grand Opera, Paris Opera, Bayerische Staatsoper, Glyndebourne Festival, and the Theatre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels.

His many roles include the leads as Billy Budd and Hamlet, Guglielmo in "Così fan tutte," the Count in "Le Nozze di Figaro" and Ottone in "L'incoronazione di Poppea." He also created the role of Clyde Griffiths in the world premiere of Tobias Picker's opera "An American Tragedy" at the Metropolitan Opera.

Gunn also starred as Buzz Aldrin in "Man on the Moon," an opera written specifically for television and broadcast on the BBC in the United Kingdom in December 2006, and was awarded the Golden Rose Award for Opera at the Montreux Festival in Lucerne, Switzerland.

Gunn's most recent solo album, "Just Before Sunrise," was released on the Sony/BMG Masterworks label in August 2007. Songs from the album include Billy Joel's "And So It Goes," Joe Thalken's "Time" and "I Have Loved Hours at Sea," and Sting's "Secret Marriage."

Other recordings include "Peter Grimes" with Sir Colin Davis and the London Symphony Orchestra, which was nominated for a 2005 Grammy Award. His debut album, released in 1999, is a collection of American songs titled "American Anthem."

Wustman, Gunn's accompanist, has been described as the "dean of American accompanists."

He was pianist for the rehearsals of the American Opera Society's presentation of Bellini's "Il Pirata" at Carnegie Hall in 1969, which featured Maria Callas. Wustman later served as a member of the jury at the Fourth International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow with Callas.

He has appeared in famous concert halls on five continents with some of the greatest singers including Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, Birgit Nilsson, Régine Crespin, Christa Ludwig, Nicolai Gedda, Carlo Bergonzi and Luciano Pavarotti.

Since 1968, Wustman has been professor of music at the University of Illinois, where he founded the vocal coaching and accompanying program in 1973.

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"Fired Up"

Rated PG-13 (crude and sexual content throughout, partial nudity, language and some teen partying)
Albemarle Health added to University Health Systems

By Tom Marine
The Daily Reflector

Thursday, February 19, 2009

University Health Systems of Eastern Carolina has expanded to include an eighth local hospital, adding Albemarle Health to the not-for-profit corporation.

After seven months of negotiations, the two organizations reached a five-year management agreement that will take effect May 1. Albemarle Health will pay $500,000 annually to UHS for its management services — operating the Albemarle Hospital and other Albemarle facilities — and UHS will draft an annual budget and management plan.

“We believe this agreement adds value for UHS, Albemarle and the region itself,” said Dave McRae, chief executive officer of UHS. “It reaffirms Albemarle’s commitment to serving its community and our commitment to making sure eastern North Carolinians can stay close to home and still get high-quality health care.”

McRae and Sonja Hibbard, Albemarle Hospital Authority Board of Commissioners chairwoman, signed the contract Tuesday night after unanimous approval from the board. The Pasquotank County Board of Commissioners voted Monday in favor of the agreement.

“This management agreement between UHS and Albemarle Health will ensure the residents of our seven-county service area have access to compassionate, high quality health care well into the future,” said Sharon Tanner, chief executive officer of Albemarle Health.

Albemarle Health is the largest health and wellness provider in northeastern North Carolina, according to UHS, with a full-service medical center in Elizabeth City and a regional medical center in Kitty Hawk.

McRae said he was pleased with the outcome of the process but the hard work begins now, starting with the development of an action plan during the next two months. He said the process is detailed, expensive and generally takes a full year to get into a rhythm.

“We’ve learned a lot and made our share of mistakes, but if there is any key lesson, it’s to not rush things,” McRae said. “Health care is very important to every member of a community.”

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Overweight N.C. workers may pay a price

Insurance could cost them more

DAN KANE, Staff Writer

North Carolina -- a state where tobacco and barbecue have long reigned -- may soon hit state employees who smoke or are seriously overweight with higher health insurance costs.

Legislative leaders introduced a bill Thursday that seeks to keep the State Health Plan solvent by reducing some benefits and raising premiums less than 8 percent each year over the next two years. Smokers or obese people would be forced into the coverage option that carries the highest deductibles and co-payments.

Jack Walker, the plan's executive administrator, said those employees are the most costly and therefore should shoulder more of the burden. The average additional cost to the plan for each smoker is $2,000 a year, he said, while it takes a $2,360 hit for each employee who weighs 35 percent or more over what is considered fit.

Those costs are a major problem for the plan, which covers roughly 660,000 state employees and their dependents. The plan is free for employees; insuring a family costs $489 a month.

The plan is relatively expensive, and therefore unattractive, for healthy families, but a bargain for the ill. That, and the relatively old state work force, means that the chronically or catastrophically ill compose half the membership; the plan spends nearly 90 percent of its money serving them. Trends show that population exceeding half the membership in future years.

Smokers would have to quit or join a cessation program by July 1, 2010, to stay on a less expensive plan. The seriously overweight would need to get in better shape by July 1, 2012, to stay on a less expensive plan. There would be no exceptions for smokers, but the overweight, judged by the 35 percent standard, might get a waiver if they could show they don't fit the standard or they cannot drop their weight for medical reasons.

At least two other states, Alabama and South Carolina, charge more for public employees who smoke or are obese, Walker said. The legislation would let Walker suggest to lawmakers possible sanctions for those who lie about smoking.

Walker said the plan also needs to attract younger members and their dependents. The average age of members not on Medicare, the federal insurance for seniors, is 46.

The typical plan has an average member age of about 33, Walker said. "The younger people are not here," Walker said.

Pain all around

The legislation carries pain for nearly all members. It eliminates a popular option that had the lowest deductibles and co-payments, but played a major role in causing the plan to run
out of money. The plan needs roughly $250 million in the next few weeks just to keep paying its bills.

The total cost of the legislation to taxpayers would be roughly $580 million over the next two years. A little less than half -- $250 million -- would come from the state’s rainy-day fund to cover the current shortfall.

The legislation would end subsidized basic eye exams, raise co-payments from $5 to $40 and increase deductibles to anywhere from $300 for network providers to $600 for providers outside the network.

Premiums would increase from 7.3 to 7.9 percent each year for the next two years.

Walker said he is also looking for savings by establishing a new pharmacy initiative for chronic care drugs and by encouraging more use of cholesterol reducing drugs. Many members who should be taking the drugs aren’t, and that typically leads to far more expensive maladies such as strokes and heart attacks.

Workers encouraged

Representatives of three major public employee groups said they were encouraged.

"I think this is a reasonable approach from what I’ve heard so far," said Cecil Banks, the government relations manager for the N.C. Association of Educators, which represents teachers.

Chuck Stone, who represents the State Employees Association of North Carolina on health care issues, praised the plan for seeking to curb smoking, though he was not ready to sign off on that proposal or the one affecting overweight members.

The legislation is sponsored by Senate Majority Leader Tony Rand of Fayetteville and House Majority Leader Hugh Holliman of Lexington, two Democrats who lead the committee that oversees the health plan. Rand said the legislation would be run through the Senate and then taken up by the House.

He said it needs to pass by April 1.

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BY THE NUMBERS

50: percentage of state health plan members who are chronically ill
87: percentage of the plan's spending devoted to the chronically ill
21: percentage of adult North Carolinians who smoked in 2007

Related Content

- Read the proposed standard health benefit plan (PDF)
- Read the proposed basic health benefit plan (PDF)
Treasurer warns lawmakers on pensions

GARY D. ROBERTSON, The Associated Press
Comment on this story

RALEIGH - North Carolina's state employee pension fund needs an additional $359 million from the legislature during the next two years to keep it financially sound, State Treasurer Janet Cowell said Thursday.

The news from Cowell, who became treasurer just last month, further burdens lawmakers drawing up a state government spending plan for the next two years by quantifying the retirement system's needs.

"We're giving them a heads up way early because it's a big number," Cowell said.

The retirement system, comprising several funds covering 820,000 state and local government employees, teachers, emergency responders and retirees, is cited regularly as among the healthiest in the country. But the funds lost $17 billion in value in 2008 as the nation entered a recession, falling to $60 billion.

Cowell said recently she would ask the General Assembly for $29 million more in the next fiscal year than the roughly $400 million the pension funds already receive annually from the state. But she said a steeper increase probably would be necessary for the year that begins in July 2010 because of the recent losses.

With Thursday's announcement, she is setting the need for additional state funding for fiscal 2010-11 at about $329 million. The estimate follows an actuarial review of the plan by an outside consultant.

The legislature will have to agree to make the contribution, which would go to the fund for state employees, teachers and retirees.

The state makes annual pension payments to retirees of about $4 billion, and is in no danger of being unable to meet its pension promises. But Cowell made clear that failure by state officials to keep the pension funded to meet 100 percent of obligations would be viewed by investors as a troubling departure from North Carolina's record of fiscal prudence.

Bond ratings agencies could sour on the state's decision to let its pension fund fall to the national norm of underfunded accounts, and downgrade the state's creditworthiness, a move that could cost taxpayers millions of dollars a year in additional borrowing costs.

"As with all pension funds, they are long-term-horizon plans, so you could fudge a little one year and make it up the next year," Cowell said. "You could overcompensate and then do a little less later. But over the long haul, you've got to come up with money to keep the system sound or lose a bond rating, which could cost you money."

The request doesn't change the amount the 535,000 public employees covered by the plans must contribute to the pension.

They are required by law to put 6 percent of their pay into the retirement system. If
lawmakers decide to keep the pension funds fully funded, the state will be kicking in about 6.63 percent of pay beginning in mid-2010. The state’s share hasn’t been that high in a decade.

Cowell said a lengthy recession could increase the demands for state contributions.

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