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Bowles: Teacher shortage critical

The Associated Press

RALEIGH — The state's teacher shortage has become a crisis that needs more attention, according to University of North Carolina President Erskine Bowles.

So, he has told the 15 education deans at the state's public universities that he'll fight for more money and other resources they need to start producing more teachers. But first he wants them to evaluate their schools and start cutting out programs that aren't working. The money saved could be spent for initiatives to help increase the teacher pool.

"If you have a crisis, you have to treat it like one," Bowles recently told the UNC Board of Governors, the policy board for the 16-campus system. "We have to lead. We can't act like things are going just like they always have."

North Carolina has needed about 10,000 new teachers every year for the past few years. The state's universities — public and private — produce about 3,900 a year, said Kathy Sullivan, director of the division of human resources management for the state's Department of Public Instruction. Alternative programs added about 1,500 last academic year, but still the state had to look outside of North Carolina for about half of its teachers.

Cathy Barlow, dean of the education school at UNC-Wilmington, welcomed the challenge laid down by Bowles. "The focus is excellent," she said. "We all realize we've got a teacher shortage and we've got to work smarter with the dollars we have."

She has proposed a program that would let education students graduate within three years. Other education deans may also feel more confident about introducing ideas knowing that Bowles wants improved results, she said.

The challenge may be finding enough money for programs often given low priority by campus budget writers.

"It's not as if colleges of education are sitting around with coffers overflowing," Charles Duke, dean of the Appalachian State University education school, said.

Some of that money would have to go toward scholarships to help attract students put off by the image of teaching as a low-paying profession with difficult working conditions, UNC system vice president Richard Thompson said.

The schools will be particularly challenged to attract and graduate more math and science teachers.

The UNC system has produced just three physics teachers in the past four years, Bowles said.
Council: Project requires scrutiny

A blueprint guiding the west Greenville redevelopment is scheduled for a vote on March 9.

By T. Scott Batchelor
The Daily Reflector

Greenville City Council members said they would closely watch planned redevelopment efforts to ensure residents are treated fairly as the plan is carried out in the next two decades.

The council spent about an hour Monday hearing a presentation on the west Greenville portion of the proposed redevelopment blueprint and discussing elements of the plan.

Council members are scheduled to consider passage of the document March 9. The council has already signed off on a redevelopment plan that encompasses the traditional downtown district, called the Center City by planners.

Councilwoman Rose Glover on Monday urged city staff and others charged with executing the plan to “be sensitive” to residents in the targeted redevelopment zone who might be displaced as a result of activities designed to increase home ownership and eliminate blight.

“My concern is, I don’t want to see any little old ladies hanging from your backhoe,” Glover said.

If a home is taken under the plan, state and federal law require the city to pay the owner market value for it, Carl Rees with the community-development department said. Money is available for renters to make up the difference between their current residence and the rental housing they relocate to, he said.

The targeted 45-block area of west Greenville, roughly bordered by Martin Luther King Jr. Drive, has less than 20 percent home ownership, he said.

City planners say the goal of the proposed west Greenville plan is to increase that percentage to at least 50 percent.

It would be “a very rare case indeed that we dislocate a single-family home owner,” Rees said.

Councilwoman Mildred Council said her concern was that “the business-development piece (of the plan) does materialize.”

Rees in his presentation to the council outlined several methods by which commercial enterprises could be fostered under the plan, including “incubators” that would offer affordable leases to businesses.

Council said the proposed redevelopment plan is “a long-term project” and enjoined residents to monitor it and its effect on them.

“Because no one is going to work for you like you,” she said.

If it is approved, the redevelopment document for west Greenville, along with the one already in place for the Center City, will be carried out by the city’s redevelopment commission, which drafted both.

The plans have been reviewed by city boards and the public, and revised through a more than two-year process.

Ozie Hall, the leader of a focus group comprising residents in predominantly black west Greenville, has endorsed the plan after negotiating changes with city staff.

General obligation bonds passed by city voters will fund some of the multimillion-dollar project, combined with federal and state grant dollars.

“This is quite a map for us to follow in the next 20 years or so,” Mayor Don Parrott said.

In other business during Monday’s meeting, the council:

- Unanimously agreed for the city to be the sole sponsor of the Eastern Region Basketball Tournament under the N.C. High School Athletic Association. In the past, the association has conducted the tournament under an agreement with the Greenville-Pitt County Chamber of Commerce, East Carolina University and Pitt County Schools. Those entities and the athletic association asked that the city be the sponsor in order to streamline the process. Under the new agreement, University Health Systems of Eastern Carolina will provide $35,000 and the Greenville-Pitt County Convention and Visitors Bureau will kick in $10,000 in sponsorship funds.

- The council lauded retiring Deputy City Manager Bill Richardson during his last meeting as a manager.

City Manager Wayne Bowers called Richardson “one of the most positive people I’ve ever been around.”

“He’s done a real outstanding job,” Bowers said.

“Bill, you have been a true professional,” Parrott said.

“You’ve even been nice to (Councilman) Ray Craft, and that’s tough to do,” he joked.

Glover said she used to tease Richardson about his “Afro,” referring to the way his hair curled when cut short.

“I used to call him my blue-eyed soul brother,” she said.

Richardson, who, at month’s end wraps up more than 30 years in local government administration and more than four with Greenville, said, “It has really been a pleasure to work for this great city these past four years.”

“I hope in some small way I’ve helped to move this community forward.”

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Statue debate draws crowd

More than 40 people turned out at the Board of Commissioners meeting on Monday, most in opposition to a request to remove a Civil War monument from the Pitt County Courthouse grounds.

By Amanda Karr
The Daily Reflector

A grass-roots effort to remove a Confederate monument from the Pitt County Courthouse drew a crowd of more than 40 people to the Board of Commissioners' meeting Monday, most in opposition to the plan.

Leaders of the effort to have the memorial to Confederate soldiers removed from the courthouse grounds made their request official before the board Monday night.

"We're not asking it be destroyed, we're asking it be taken down and moved to a more appropriate location," Ozie Hall told commissioners, suggesting a museum might be a more appropriate location.

The monument, at the corner of Third and Evans streets in downtown Greenville, was erected in 1914. It features a soldier and reads in part: "Erected by the people of Pitt County in grateful remembrance of the courage and fortitude of her Confederate soldiers."

County commissioners did not discuss the proposal after Hall and another man spoke for removing the statue, and four people spoke against it.

For the board to consider the issue, it would have to be sponsored by one of the commissioners and put on an upcoming agenda.

The majority of those who packed into the commissioners' auditorium stood in opposition to the plan to have the statue removed, with about 30 people rising when asked about their feelings.

Approximately 10 attended the meeting in support of the memorial's removal.

Hall said the statue is a symbol of inequality and does not belong at the courthouse. When the statue was erected in 1914, blacks in segregated Pitt County were in no position to protest, he said.

Keith Cooper, who also spoke in favor of the statue's removal, called it a "relic representing slavery." He questioned why taxpayer dollars should be used to maintain what he said is a symbol of division.

Those who spoke in favor of keeping the memorial where it stands focused on honoring veterans, many who gave their lives. Many Pitt County residents can trace their roots back to those soldiers and should be allowed to honor that heritage, they said.

Jimmy Ward, a retired Marine, called the monument an enduring record of the soldiers' selfless devotion to duty. It represents a piece of history, he said.

"Sanitizing history only hurts future generations," he said.

Other speakers pointed to the role many blacks had as soldiers and in supporting roles in fighting for the Confederacy.

David Collins, a professor in the East Carolina University history department who is against the monument's removal, suggested putting up an additional monument to black Union soldiers.

"There shouldn't be any objection to honoring anyone who fought," he said.

Hall objected to the idea of adding an additional monument, saying no such monument is appropriate for the courthouse grounds.

Speakers on both sides said they would like to see more public education on the issue.

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Teaching deficit

The state university system needs to figure out how to better motivate top students into teaching programs.

Of the many roles North Carolinians expect their universities to play, service to the people ranks high in priority. Preparing students to teach future generations of Tar Heel children in public schools fits well within that mission.

Yet there is a dilemma: The University of North Carolina system is producing only about a third of the public school teachers that are needed to keep the state's classrooms properly staffed. It's encouraging that Erskine Bowles, the system's new president, is wasting no time in leading the campuses to improve.

Bowles says he is making the system's 15 education schools his top priority as he tries to secure additional resources for the system. But he has set one condition on that: The deans of those schools must evaluate how they are training teachers and discard approaches that aren't effective.

Certainly Bowles is on target in assessing the need for the state's young people to become better educated as low-skill jobs leave the state. As things stand, it's scandalous that nearly half of the state's students entering high school fail to earn diplomas. An ample corps of well-prepared and motivated public school teachers is a key requirement in making sure students are positioned to move ahead toward productive careers.

Yet it has proven very difficult for school systems to keep all the teachers they need on board. With turnover in the teaching ranks so high, the skill level of inexperienced teachers directly affects the quality of education that students receive. Pay and working conditions affect both the supply of teachers and their quality, and it's up to both the state and to local school districts to make improvements in those areas.

The teacher shortage works especially against schools in poor counties that can't pay top salaries to import teachers. The UNC system, together with the state's private colleges, graduates about 3,300 teachers a year. That's far short of the 10,000 teachers needed to handle growing enrollment and fill vacancies. It's typical of the troubling teaching deficit in math and sciences, but for the system to have produced only three new physics teachers in the past four years is appalling.

Skimpy supplies of teachers coming through the pipeline mean that too many whose qualifications are shaky — perhaps teaching out of their field, or long-term substitutes — are left to educate Tar Heel children. By raising the number of new, well-prepared teachers who are available, the UNC system could help raise the quality of public education. Imagine the good that could come from graduating more — and better — teachers.

Wisely, Bowles has left it up to the education deans to figure out how to meet his challenge. The answer may be more scholarships in some areas of the state. In other areas, it may be better professors or redesigned programs. Universities could simply make it a higher campus priority to tout the virtues and rewards of helping to carry the torch of learning in the public schools.

Bowles is providing leadership that inspires and empowers smart people to search out solutions. In the bargain, he is leading the public to a new level of respect for the work teachers do.
NO PACKAGE DEAL: A top official at East Carolina University has quit her post after just six months because her husband was not hired along with her.

Sallye McKee, assistant to the chancellor for institutional diversity, announced her decision in January. In her resignation letter to the chancellor, Steve Ballard, she wrote that conversations with him led her to believe that her husband would be able to join her in Greenville, N.C., through “spousal hire opportunities.” The letter went on to say, “You are aware that the verbal promise of employment for my husband was not met.” It was the only reason given for her resignation.

John Durham, a spokesman for the university, says flatly, “We did not promise a job for her husband.” He says that her husband, Michael McKee, did speak to the university about employment but was never hired.

Ms. McKee, who previously worked at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, did not return phone messages. In a settlement agreement, Ms. McKee, who earned $145,000 annually, will receive up to four months of severance pay in exchange for not taking legal action against the university.

—EUGENE MCCORMACK