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Perdue says 'hard, painful decisions' ahead for NC

By GARY D. ROBERTSON
The Associated Press

Monday, March 09, 2009

RALEIGH, N.C. — Facing what she calls North Carolina's greatest challenges since the Great Depression, new Gov. Beverly Perdue told lawmakers Monday night they would have to make "hard, painful decisions" with state spending, but remain committed to public education.

"We all must have high expectations for ourselves and for North Carolina's futures," Perdue said in her first State of the State address to a joint session of the General Assembly. "We all must exhibit extraordinary leadership and courage and determination, and make the tough, but right decisions."

Already closing a projected $2.2 billion shortfall this fiscal year and preparing for an initial spending gap of $3.6 billion next year, Perdue said she would release a two-year spending plan next week that is the result of difficult choices.

"We will reduce and cut state government programs and services that many, including me, know have been effective but which, in these times, we simply cannot afford," the Democratic governor said in a 30-minute address.

She didn't mention directly the option of raising taxes — some legislators have suggested raising alcohol and cigarette taxes, and others to tighten corporate tax reporting to generate new funds. She suggested she was open to change.

"Starting today, it is no longer business as usual for North Carolina's budget. I want all our citizens to know it is a new day," Perdue said. "Everything is on the table. We don't have time for talk-show political posturing or petty partisan games. Not on my watch."

Perdue, who took office Jan. 10, continued to boost her profile as both a responsive and reform-minded governor. She tried to connect with her television audience by talking about how she had visited an unemployment office recently and talked with the jobless. The state's 8.7 percent jobless rate is the highest since the early 1980s.

"Families all around the state are anxious. Many have lost their jobs. Many have lost their homes," Perdue said. "And as elected officials, it is our moral responsibility to work together and help our citizens restart their lives."

Republicans, the minority in both House and Senate, said they were pleased to hear Perdue's commitment to cutting government spending, and would support her efforts provided she didn't raise taxes and protected core state functions.

"We can not allow the government budget to further stress already stretched families," Senate Minority Leader Phil Berger, R-Rockingham, said in a GOP statement after Perdue's address. "The way to do that is to frankly and realistically appraise how much money the state has coming in, and spend that much and no more."

House Speaker Joe Hackney took issue with Berger's comment that the average North Carolina resident won't feel the impact of expected spending cuts. Berger said Democratic leaders have passed budgets that have raised spending by nearly 50 percent over the past half-dozen years.

"There will be cuts that will affect every North Carolinian, and they will know it," said Hackney, D-Orange.

Perdue also mentioned her efforts to change how the Department of Transportation approves road projects and create methods for the public to access information online about how federal stimulus funds are spent
and about state contracts and grants.

"We will be open, ethical, and put the public's interest first," Perdue told lawmakers, adding that they must do their part "to stand up to the sweet seductions of special interests, the temptations of politically popular pork barrel spending, and end the practice of back-room dealing."

Perdue, a former legislator and the lieutenant governor since 2001, has heard many State of the State addresses, but none like this one given the economy and history. She was elected the first female governor in November, a feat she mentioned in her speech. Also in attendance was her husband Bob Eaves, the first so-called "first gentleman."

Perdue focused less on seeking significant programs and budget items, except that she vowed to increase per-pupil spending in the public schools. She also called on school testing reform and getting the business community involved in training workers.

The governor did say she wanted to expand a college-affordability program started by her predecessor, Gov. Mike Easley. She has said she ultimately wants to help children as early as fifth grade with the pledge of a debt-free college education.

"She certainly laid down the dominant need as she sees it for prioritizing education," said Senate leader Marc Basnight, D-Dare, who has been the most prominent voice to suggest raising some taxes. "You can't do it with the present revenue you have. ... Tonight was a speech made to set the table."

Among those attending Perdue's speech was Donna Dent, one of the flight attendants aboard US Airways Flight 1549, which splashed down in the Hudson River in New York on Jan. 15. All 155 passengers onboard the aircraft survived.

A 1975 graduate of Winston-Salem's Reynolds High School, Dent received standing ovations from an audience that included members of Perdue's Cabinet, Council of State members and appellate court judges.

"She did her job," Perdue said. "She was willing to give her life to help others."

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City to pursue stimulus avenues

By Kathryn Kennedy
The Daily Reflector

Monday, March 09, 2009

Greenville officials have targeted a variety of stimulus funds that they’d like to bring into the city, ranging from hiring more police officers to improving storm drains.

Greenville will receive certain funds under the American Economic Recovery and Reinvestment Act without having to compete with other communities, City Manager Wayne Bowers explained to the City Council at its Thursday meeting. Those include a $216,580 Community Development Block Grant and the Edward Byrne Justice Assistance Grant, which could generate more than $490,000 for the Greenville Police Department to spend on equipment, software and programs.

The city will receive a $1.4 million Transit Capital Grant, which Bowers said would be used to buy two new GREAT hybrid buses, improve the transfer point on Reade Circle and install a device that would separate oil from water run-off in the bus lot. He noted the buses were already in the next fiscal year’s budget, so those could be potential savings.

Dollar amounts aren’t determined for an Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant the city hopes to receive, but it would fund efficiency audits on city buildings, energy improvements for traffic signals and streetlights, and developing greener building codes.

Other grants could come directly to the city for distribution on a competitive platform. Greenville earned the Lead Hazard Reduction city grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, which included $1.9 million to improve and expand a program removing lead paint from city homes. Officials also plan to apply for a Community-Oriented Policing grant that would bring funds to hire additional officers and an Assistance to Fire Fighters Grant Program to build a seventh city fire-rescue station.

Additionally, Greenville will be vying for funds dispersed throughout the state. Bowers said staff submitted project requests totalling more than $3.4 million to improve drainage in Moyewood, the Dickinson/Chestnut area, the Lynndale neighborhood, and Beatty, Skinner and Howell streets. The city has also submitted a list of numerous areas around Greenville in need of highway infrastructure funds.

Officials are still waiting to hear from a Neighborhood Stabilization Program they applied for in February, which would enable the city to buy vacant foreclosed homes after a certain time period to rehabilitate and resell them to low- to median-income buyers.

“We are pursuing every available funding source,” Bowers said. “We want to get those jobs.”

Agencies outside city hall are throwing their hats into the ring for stimulus funds, too. The Greenville Utilities Commission is hoping for $1.8 million to widen water mains and improve the flow used in fighting fires. The Greenville Housing Authority expects to get more than $1.6 million, which Executive Director Don Rogers said would go toward improving energy efficiency in their housing units and addressing the “most urgent needs.”

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2 ASU football players are arrested

Associated Press
Posted: Tuesday, Mar. 10, 2009

Two Appalachian State football players have been arrested on assault and burglary charges, though details of the incident haven’t been released.

Watauga County district attorney’s officials said Monday that 22-year-old Travis Dowda of Julian and 24-year-old Robert Simpkins of Danville, Va., also are charged with property damage.

Athletic department spokesman Mike Flynn said Dowda, a junior defensive back, has been suspended indefinitely from the team. He said Simpkins, a senior tight end, finished his final season last year.

Both men were arrested last week and are scheduled to appear in court April 1. The District Court clerk said it wasn’t clear whether they had attorneys. Another student also was arrested but a name hasn’t been released.

A phone message left with the sheriff’s office wasn’t immediately returned Monday.
March 8, 2009

In Shifting Era of Admissions, Colleges Sweat

By KATE ZERNIKE

As colleges weigh this year’s round of applications, high school seniors are not the only anxious ones.

Just as nervously, colleges — facing a financial landscape they have never seen before — are trying to figure out how many students to accept, and how many students will accept them.

Typically, they rely on statistical models to predict which students will take them up on their offers to attend. But this year, with the economy turning parents and students into bargain hunters, demographics changing and unexpected jolts in the price of gas and the number of applications, they have little faith on those models.

“Trying to hit those numbers is like trying to hit a hot tub when you’re skydiving from 30,000 feet,” said Jennifer Delahunt, dean of admissions and financial aid at Kenyon College in Ohio. “I’m going to go to church every day in April.”

In response, colleges are trying new methods to gauge which applicants are serious about attending: Wake Forest, in North Carolina, is using Webcam interviews, while other colleges say they are scrutinizing essays more closely. And they are making more vigorous appeals to try to convince parents and students who will be offered admission in April that theirs is the campus to choose. But mostly, they are guessing: Will pinched finances keep students closer to home? Will those who applied in December be feeling too poor to accept in May — or show up in August?

Colleges have been in the catbird seat for the past decade or so. As the number of high school students swelled, applications rose, allowing colleges to be more selective. And families benefiting from a flush stock market seemed willing to pay whatever tuition colleges charged.

But all that has changed. For students, the uncertainty could be good news: colleges will admit more students, offer more generous financial aid, and, in some cases, send acceptance letters a few weeks earlier. Then again, it could prolong the agony: some institutions say they will rely more on their waiting lists. But there is no question, admissions officers say, that this year is more of a students’ market.

“It’s like the dot-com bubble burst for higher ed,” said Barbara Fritze, vice president of enrollment at Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania. “We’ve been in this growth mode for a period of time. Now there’s a real leveling going on.”

Colleges consider an amalgam of factors, comparing them to past trends, to predict whether a student will attend, including, for example, what high school he went to; the strength of his grades, scores and recommendations; how much financial aid he has been offered; and whether he plays the cello or wants to study ethnobotany or economics. (If he is a she, the equation looks different still.)
They consider how many phone calls, Web hits, campus visits and applications they have received. They look at how many students put down a deposit in May, then assume a bit of “summer melt.”

If it sounds complicated, it also works. Kenyon, for example, has hit the magic hot tub each of the last five years.

But with high gasoline prices last summer, many campuses reported fewer visits, throwing off one of the better indicators of which applicants are serious.

Applications, too, have been unpredictable. Some public institutions have seen increases of 30 percent. But with almost every state cutting budgets, it is unclear how many applicants those institutions will accept — California and Arizona, for example, are capping enrollment. And private colleges are waiting to see how much public institutions raise tuition; most do not set rates until state budgets are firm.

Meanwhile, applications are down at many private institutions. Colleges and high school guidance counselors say more students are applying to so-called financial safety schools, where they are confident of getting scholarships, even if it means attending a less selective institution.

Officials say parents are reluctant to commit to four years of an expensive private school, worried that their companies might be restructuring. At Kenyon, one mother, after e-mailing to say that the family could not afford the college’s early decision offer, e-mailed two hours later to say they were reconsidering, then e-mailed again two hours after that to say that her son would attend, after all.

“It’s a consumer confidence issue,” said Steven Syverson, vice president for enrollment at Lawrence University in Wisconsin. “Families are feeling like they can’t afford it even if they’re in the same financial position they were three months ago.”

The Internet has thrown off another marker: applicants used to have to call or write for a catalog, giving the college an early signal of their interest. Now, many campuses say 25 percent to 30 percent are “stealth applicants” — the first the college hears of them is when they apply.

Some enrollment officials theorize that applications are down because cost-conscious applicants have made their choices more carefully. Then there is the glass-is-half-empty view, more common at private institutions where applications are up: students set their hearts on where to apply last summer, before the big crash, but will be choosing less expensive schools this spring, as economic indicators plummet.

Institutions had been trying to cut back on the number of students they accept early, believing they would end up with a more economically diverse freshman class; those who are admitted early forfeit the right to shop around for financial aid offers, so are frequently wealthier. But this year, many said they had accepted more early decision applicants, trying to lock in as many students as they could in December.

Still, that may not be a guarantee. Colleges say more and more early decision applicants are circling back to bargain for better financial aid packages, or asking to be released from their agreements so they can consider more generous offers.

So as public institutions say they will accept fewer students, many private schools say they will accept more. The 13 members of the Associated Colleges of the Midwest, which includes Carleton, Macalester, Grinnell and
Colorado Colleges, plan to accept 10 percent or 11 percent more applicants, said the group's president, Christopher Welna, to make up for about a 10 percent decline in applications. Hamilton and Gettysburg, among other campuses, also plan to accept a slightly bigger proportion of applicants. And Marquette University, in Milwaukee, said it would accept up to 600 more students to its class of 1,900, even though applications are up 17 percent.

Campuses, meanwhile, are trying to determine — and encourage — applicants' intentions. Kenyon will write to the parents of accepted students, to reassure them that financial aid will not dry up over the coming years.

And at Gettysburg, Ms. Fritze plans to send out acceptance offers a bit earlier, hoping to generate loyalty.

Barmak Nassirian, the associate executive director of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, says the first real indication of who is coming could be in May, when students put down their deposits.

“But even that,” Mr. Nassirian said, “may be an overestimation.”
College newspapers face weak ad revenue

Cuts could limit training for students

By Drew FitzGerald
USA TODAY

Students working on college newspapers across the USA are learning an all-too-real-world lesson. Their papers face the same advertising revenue declines and expense cutbacks as their professional counterparts.

Since the start of the current school year, daily newspapers at schools including Syracuse University, New York University, the University of California-Berkeley, Ball State, Boston University and Georgia Southern have cut one edition a week — usually Friday's — because of weak advertising.

"We have to break even this year, otherwise we're not going to make it," says Bryan Thomas, 22, editor of Berkeley's Daily Californian, which stopped printing Wednesdays starting in August.

The Hilltop at Howard University stopped printing entirely last March as print expenses mounted amid declining revenue.

It resumed daily publication in the fall as student managers aggressively courted local advertisers, says Johnson Sattiewhite, the paper's graphic design manager.

"We're basically keeping our head above water, but I think we're going to be OK this year," Sattiewhite says.

College papers typically depend on national, local and college-sponsored ads for most of their revenue, says Andrew Sawyer, executive vice president of the youth-targeted ad agency Alloy Media + Marketing.

"What appears to be happening this year is a trifecta where all three of them are down," Sawyer says.

Cuts could hurt efforts to educate young journalists, says Frank LaMonte, executive director of the Student Press Law Center.

"Just like in any other business, one of the first targets to get cut is employee training," he said. "What are students there for if not training?"

Some papers, including The Daily Californian and New York University's Washington Square News — have cut back the stipends they've traditionally paid senior staffers.

Most see that measure as a "last resort" because talent is so valuable, says Eric Jacobs, general manager of the University of Pennsylvania's Daily Pennsylvanian, which pays editors $100-$300 a month.

College newspapers boast strong readership. About 79% of students said they read their daily campus newspaper at least once a week in a 2008 survey by MORI Research. By comparison, 64% of adults said they'd read their local paper in the past five days in a 2008 Scarborough Research survey.

American University senior Amanda Glensky, 21, says she pays attention not only to stories but to coupons and advertisements in her student newspaper, The Eagle.

"They have their niche audience right there that they can market to," Glensky says.
Ala. admits to athletes' infractions with textbooks

From wire reports

The University of Alabama has appeared before the NCAA's Committee on Infractions regarding self-reported violations involving textbooks and other materials for athletes, and the school acknowledged that athletes broke rules.

Notes

The university said Thursday that the hearing was Feb. 20. The violations were reported after the school uncovered them during the 2007 football season, when five players were suspended.

The university admitted in its 67-page response to the NCAA's notice of allegations that infractions occurred in several sports and that it didn't adequately monitor its distribution of textbooks to student-athletes.

The NCAA letter, dated May 19, 2008, said the allegations against Alabama were potentially major violations.

The violations allegedly occurred from the 2005-06 school year through fall 2007, which means the school could be punished as a repeat violator.

The football program was placed on five years' probation Feb. 1, 2002.

Alabama suspended five football players for four games two seasons ago for using their athletic scholarships to get free textbooks for others. The names of the football players and other athletes and sports involved were blacked out in the version made public Thursday because of federal privacy laws. The school said some athletes intentionally broke rules.

The university said none of the textbooks or materials were used for profit or to get items not related to academics and the athletes involved who have eligibility left had to pay restitution.

Slive extended: Southeastern Conference Commissioner Mike Slive has agreed to a contract extension that will keep him at the helm for at least another three years.

Slive, 68, will have presided over the league for 10 years when the deal ends July 31, 2012.

The SEC, which announced the extension Thursday, has recently signed lucrative 15-year deals with CBS and ESPN to broadcast games in various sports.

Another run: SEC Commissioner Mike Slive's contract goes until 2012.

Slive also has served as coordinator of the Bowl Championship Series and is chairman of the NCAA Division I Men's Basketball Committee.

Briefly: Connecticut's Renee Montgomery, a 5-9 senior, was named Thursday as the 2009 winner of the Frances Pomeroy Naismith Award for women's basketball. The honor, presented by the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame, goes to the college women's player 5-8 or shorter who excels on the court and in the classroom. She is second on the top-ranked Huskies (30-0) in scoring at 16.6 a game and leads the team in assists at 5.2 a game. Montgomery joins Jennifer Rizzotti (1996) as UConn players to win the award. ... Stan Widmann, starting shortstop for Clemson when it reached the 2006 College World Series, has left the team. He had battled injuries, including being diagnosed in 2007 with a benign tumor in his neck. He had one appearance this season, as a pinch-runner. Widmann had received his degree in sports management in December. ... Defensive back Maurice Langston, a junior college transfer who enrolled at Mississippi State in January, has been suspended from the team by coach Dan Mullen for what he called an unspecified violation of team rules. Langston was arrested last week on a felony charge of possessing a controlled substance over an ounce with intent to distribute.