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State puts off purchases, hiring

New prison units and grass cutting may also be delayed as the state seeks to save money

ROB CHRISTENSEN, Staff Writer
Comment on this story

RALEIGH - State agencies have been cutting costs during the economic downturn by delaying the opening of prison units, cutting their own grass and driving Highway Patrol cars longer.

Faced with a $2.2 billion shortfall in this year's state budget, Gov. Beverly Perdue has ordered agencies to reduce spending by up to 9 percent.

As a result, officials with the Perdue administration said Thursday, state agencies have put a freeze on most hiring, reduced travel to professional conferences or training sessions and delayed the purchase of cars, computers, mowers and tractors.

Belt-tightening measures vary from department to department.

The Department of Correction has postponed opening new units at Orange Correctional Center in Hillsborough and Caldwell Correctional Center in Lenoir designed to house disruptive inmates. The postponement allows the agency to avoid hiring 26 new employees at each prison, according to Keith Acree, the department spokesman.

The agency has also delayed starting a planned substance abuse treatment program for women at a facility in Black Mountain, saving the cost of 35 positions.

The Highway Patrol has deferred the purchase of 100 vehicles, saving about $2.2 million.

The patrol cars "will stretch a bit longer," said spokesman Ernie Seneca. "Typically vehicles are replaced at 90,000 miles. The plan is to extend to 100,000 miles."

Several small state historic sites have canceled lawn maintenance contracts and are now cutting their own grass. Those include the Thomas Wolfe House in Asheville, Fort Dobbs in Statesville, Historic Stagville in Durham and Bennett Place in Durham.

Joe Newberg, a spokesman for the state Department of Cultural Resources, likened the move to a homeowner canceling his lawn service contract to save money.

The Department of Transportation has laid off 1,200 -- or 92 percent -- of its temporary workers. These are the workers that drivers typically see filling potholes, mowing grass or cleaning out drain pipes.

"We're having to prioritize all that work," said DOT spokeswoman Nicole Burris. "Folks won't see grass on the side of the road mowed as quickly as possible. Potholes -- we'll have to prioritize the busiest roads and the travel lanes."

The Revenue Department delayed by a month the hiring of its temporary workers who handle
the spring state income tax rush.

In some instances, people are simply not being hired at all. The Department of Environment and Natural Resources is hiring 200 fewer temporary seasonal workers this summer at state parks.

As a result, the "rest rooms and grounds ... may not be as clean as compared to past years," said Diana Kees, department spokeswoman.

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Staff writers Mark Johnson and Lynn Bonner contributed to this report.

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Rain, don't get in our way

The Daily Reflector

Thursday, March 12, 2009

Local organizations hope a rainy weekend won't dampen their plans.

There is a 70 percent chance it will start raining after 2 p.m. on Friday and continue into early next week, according to the National Weather Service's Thursday afternoon forecast.

Temperatures also are expected to be cooler with Friday's high predicted to reach 52 and Saturday's high reaching 44.

East Carolina University had scheduled a three-games series Friday through Sunday against UCLA. The Pirates announced Thursday the teams will try to play two games Friday afternoon, game one starting at noon and the second game following 45 minutes later.

The remainder of the schedule for the series will be determined as the weekend progresses, based upon the weather.

People who purchased a Saturday or Sunday ticket may exchange it for a Friday ticket, use it for Game 3 versus UCLA, or exchange it for a ticket to a game later in the season (excluding NC State and UNC). The ticket office will open up at 11 a.m. on Friday at Clark-LeClair Stadium.

Pitt Community College also has a game scheduled for Saturday. No word Thursday on whether it would be rescheduled.

The eight annual JAKES Day, co-sponsored by the East Carolina Chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation and the Pitt County Wildlife Club, will go on as scheduled Saturday, organizer Ken Moore said Thursday. The event, from 10:30-11:30 a.m. at the wildlife club near Falkland on N.C. 22., is held to teach children and teenagers 7-17 firearm safety and introduce them to other outdoor activities.

John Harer, an organizer of the fifth annual Challenger Baseball Game, scheduled from 2-3 p.m. at the Sarah Vaughn Field of Dreams, Elm Street Park, said it will be mid-afternoon Saturday before the organization makes a decision about playing the game.

"We try everything in our power to hold a game when it is scheduled," he said. Organizers want to see what the weather and field will be like before making the decision to stop the game.

Other events on Saturday's schedule, Pitt Partners for Health's nutrition and activity fair at Greenville Mall, a benefit yard sale at Eastern Psychiatric and an auto expo at the Greenville Convention Center are all inside and won't be affected by the rain, organizers said.

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Brass have lots to do at ACC

RYAN TEAGUE BECKWITH, Staff Writer
Comment on this story

The chancellors of UNC-Chapel Hill and N.C. State University are in Atlanta, but university officials say it's not just for the basketball.

Along with attending the Atlantic Coast Conference men's tournament, UNC-CH Chancellor Holden Thorp met with the CEO of a bank, gave a speech at an alumni reception and schmoozed with university donors.

N.C. State Chancellor Jim Oblinger has a similarly busy schedule.

Stephanie Parker, a spokeswoman for Oblinger, said many college events are scheduled around the basketball tournament, which draws college boosters from around the country and substantial media attention.

The heads of the ACC schools and their athletic directors also hold a three-hour annual meeting, alternating between the men's and women's basketball tournaments.

Thorp flew to Atlanta on Wednesday on a state jet usually used by the governor and other top state officials. Also on the flight were his wife, teenage son, pre-teen daughter and three employees who work in fundraising and university relations.

In e-mail about the travel plans, UNC-CH Vice Chancellor for Advancement Matt Kupec wrote, "Incidentally, the trip will cost less than if we had used commercial flights."

Lisa Katz, a spokeswoman for UNC-CH, said a university-affiliated foundation will reimburse the state for the flight. The Thorps will reimburse the foundation for their children's travel, she said.
The Thorps will fly home Sunday on a private jet owned by trustee Don Stallings, who is providing it free.

The state Department of Commerce charges $770 an hour for the use of the jet, or $1,025 an hour for athletics-related events. Atlanta is roughly an hour from Raleigh by air.

Katz said the state will charge the UNC-CH group the standard rate for two hours of flight time -- roughly $1,540. "He has two and a half days of university business before he sees his first basketball game," she said.

Parker said Oblinger and four staff members flew to Atlanta on a private plane at no cost to the university. He plans to remain as long as the Wolfpack remains in the tournament.

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Kerry to speak at UNC-CH

From Staff Reports
Comment on this story

CHAPEL HILL - U.S. Sen. John Kerry, the 2004 Democratic presidential candidate defeated by George W. Bush, will speak next Friday at UNC-Chapel Hill.

The free talk will be held at 2:30 p.m. in Hill Hall.

Kerry will deliver the Weil Lecture on American Citizenship, a product of UNC-CH’s Institute for the Arts and Humanities.

Kerry, of Massachusetts, is in his fourth term and is chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

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