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Early College program delayed

Education leaders say ECU doesn’t have space to house high school students.

By Josh Humphries
The Daily Reflector

Officials announced this week there is no room for an early college in Pitt County right now.

Officials from Pitt County Schools, East Carolina University and Pitt Community College announced the opening of the Early College High School on the ECU campus will be delayed.

The school, which would become Pitt County’s seventh high school, is now slated to open in the fall of 2008, if all goes as planned, said Marilyn Sheerer, interim provost at ECU.

 Officials cited a lack of space and booming populations at all three institutions as the reasons for the delay.

“The harsh reality is that our enrollments have increased dramatically,” Sheerer said.

“We took a look at the whole thing and realized that if we want to be an early college model we have to address the space issue.”

The university was set to offer 40 high school freshmen college courses along with their high school classes during their high school career.

The free school will operate as would any other high school in the county.

Students will participate in mentoring sessions, job shadowing and other extracurricular activities but they will not be able to play sports. Students will take a combination of honors high school classes, Pitt Community College classes and East Carolina University classes.

The students will begin taking college courses right away in small groups and eventually they will be enrolled in regular classes with ECU students.

According to the joint state-

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In addition, the three institutions need additional planning time to develop what is expected to become a national model. All three institutions are dealing with explosive growth and are exploring space options for accommodating existing programs while launching new educational opportunities like the Early College High School.

Pitt Community College is the most crowded of all 58 North Carolina community colleges and has been for more than 10 years, officials say.

Pitt County Schools is growing by 400 students a year.

East Carolina University, the fastest-growing university in the University of North Carolina system, is projected to add as many as 4,000 campus-based students in the next few years in addition to an even larger number of distance-education students.

“We would like to see it open this fall, but it is just not in the cards,” said Ronda Sortino, Pitt County Schools spokeswoman.

“We don’t want to disappoint the parents or the students or the concept.”

Sortino said school officials received between 60 and 70 applications for the school when it was slated to open this fall. Forty students would have been accepted.

“We are all committed to the concept of the Early College High School and have committed countless hours to the planning stage, we are also in agreement, that without a long-term space solution, it is not fair to students to begin this program in the fall of 2008,” reads the joint statement from the three institutions.

Welcome Middle School Principal Jeff Theus was hired earlier this year to serve as the new school's principal. He will remain at Welcome for now, Sortino said.

Josh Humphries can be contacted at jhumphries@coxn.com and 339-5565.
Wisconsin governor to campaign for Obama in Greenville

The Daily Reflector

Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama's campaign announced today that Wisconsin Governor Jim Doyle will campaign for Obama on Thursday in Greenville.

Doyle, one of the first governors to endorse Obama, will speak at 10:15 a.m. in the Obama headquarters, 414 Evans St.

The speech is expected to highlight several key economic issues facing middle-class families.

Doyle also is campaigning Wednesday in Raleigh, and heading to Goldsboro and Wilmington on Thursday after his Greenville stop.

Political Notes

ECU kicks off registration drive

Students for Barack Obama and the ECU College Democrats kicked off a campuswide voter registration on Tuesday. The effort continues through Friday and picks up again Monday. The group will maintain a table in front of Wright Place to help students learn more about voting in Pitt County.

The organizations also are looking for volunteers to canvas dining halls, courtyards, College Hill and other parts of campus.

For more information, contact Nathan Lean, ECU Students for Barack Obama coordinator, at (919) 738-1851 or Grant Heuer, Obama for America ECU organizer, at (963) 940-5641.

Smith campaign promotes concert

GOP candidate for governor Fred Smith dispatched a mailing to voters in Pitt County inviting them to attend concerts by country singer Lee Green.

Online: Keep up with and post your comments on the 2008 campaigns at our Political Notes blog on the home page reflector.com.

wood to raise funds for his campaign.

The packages arrived Monday in some area mailboxes and included a copy of state senator's autobiography, "A Little Extra Effort." Greenwood is scheduled to appear at Wimpie's Steam Bar in Winterville on April 8.

The noon event is one of 17 See NOTES, B3

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rallies the Smith campaign is holding with Greenwood, best known for his song "God Bless the USA."

Greenwood is set to appear at 7 p.m. today at Orringer Auditorium at Craven Community College in New Bern.

The concerts are free but campaign organizers are asking for a $25 donation.

Coming up

- Precinct 4 Democrats are registering voters 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Friday in the Selvia Chapel Free Will Baptist Church, 1615 Halifax St. For more information, or to volunteer, call Linda Reid at 752-4341.

- The Iota Kappa Omega chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority is hosting a meet and greet and voter registration drive Friday in Room 143 of Pitt Community College's Leslie Building. Citizens can speak with local elected officials and candidates during the event. For more information, call Norma Warren at 917-1585.

- The Pitt County Get Out The Vote Coalition, a non-partisan collaboration of community leaders and organizations working to get people out to the polls, is holding a rally on April 12 at Epps Recreation Park at Fourth and Nash streets. For more information, call 1-888-OUR-VOTE.

- Candidates for the state Senate and House are scheduled to attend the Greater Greenville Enviro-Happy Hour from 6-8 p.m. Thursday at Ham's second-floor private bar area. About 6:30 p.m., the N.C. Conservation Network also will give a brief presentation and answer questions.

- Ham's Restaurant and Brewhouse is at 701 Evans St., Greenville. Call 830-2739.

- Citizens to elect Clifton B. Hickman to District 1, Seat B on the Pitt County Board of Education will hold a voter registration drive from 2:30-5 p.m. Sunday at Jackie Robinson Field, Thomas Foreman Park, 400 Nash St.

Hickman will attend the event; refreshments will be served.
ECU sets course for massive food drive

The university's Volunteer and Service-Learning Center aims to collect 100,000 pounds of food for donation by spring 2009.

The Daily Reflector

In honor of the 100th year since students first graced East Carolina University's campus, the Volunteer and Service-Learning Center is asking for help to donate 100,000 pounds of food to the Food Bank of Central & Eastern North Carolina by the end of the spring 2009 semester.

And they've got a good head start. The Center began collecting during the fall 2007 semester and has already donated about 32,000 pounds of food.

"Anything that we collect, we're more than happy with," said Shawn Moore, community partner coordinator with the center. "I didn't think we'd be this far along now."

Even though holiday canned food drives and events like "Hoops For Hunger" are over, Moore said there will be many more opportunities to give. The Center is planning another drive in August and plans to work with tailgating events and homecoming to reach the 100,000-pound goal by the end of the spring 2009 semester.

Contact the Volunteer and Service Learning Center at 328-2735.
Group takes first steps to solve chronic homelessness

By Brock Letchworth
The Daily Reflector

Members of the task force responsible for developing a 10-year plan to end chronic homelessness got what they wanted Tuesday night.

Nearly 30 people turned out for the first of four public forums on issues facing the homeless held at the Pitt County Community Schools and Recreation building. They provided what members of the Pitt County Blue Ribbon Task Force called valuable information for how to handle the topic of the night — improving the mental and physical health of the chronically homeless.

The forum included presentations from Dr. John Morrow, Pitt County Public Health director, and Cham Trowell, East Carolina Behavioral Health access lead clinician, before those attending broke into groups and offered their own ideas.

The groups reported their ideas back to the task force representatives, who said they will use them to develop the 10-year plan to end chronic homelessness due in October.

"It sounds as if the discussions were extraordinarily productive," Marilyn Williams, United Way president and task force member, said.

Much of the groups' discussions hinged on how to maximize current treatment and prevention, services needed in the county and on changes to service delivery system.

Lauren Welsh, an East Carolina University medi-

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cal student, said she thinks addressing mental and physical health was a top priority for ending homelessness.

"The only way we can reel them in, and get them to trust us is by taking care of their health," she said.

Some recommendations included providers taking programs to the homeless, better communication and coordination among providers and consumers, getting faith communities more involved and teaching better life skills for managing money and dealing with the temptations of drugs.

Morrow said national stats show 50 percent of the homeless suffer from some sort of mental illness, 46 percent have problems with alcohol and 38 percent battle other drug addictions.

Preventing and treating physical illnesses among the homeless is also vital, he said.

"I want to stress to people that this issue of homelessness is a public health issue," Morrow said. "If we have a lot of homeless people who aren't receiving proper care, then we're putting our whole community at risk."

Trowell discussed mental illnesses among the homeless, focusing on schizophrenia and bipolarism. She said both are very treatable with proper medication, but it requires continued support and the willingness of someone to get treatment.

The task force's next public forum is scheduled for Tuesday at Jarvis Memorial United Methodist Church. It will examine effective community re-entry and transition planning for the homeless.

To learn more about how to get involved with the task force or to offer input, visit www.pittcountync.gov/endhomelessness, or contact endhomelessness@pittcountync.gov.

Brock Letchworth can be contacted at 329-9574 or bletchworth@coxnc.com.
Easley unsure ‘cryptic’ notes prove his office ordered destruction of public-record e-mails

Media attorneys and several gubernatorial candidates say it appears the governor’s office is violating the state’s public records laws.

The Associated Press

RALEIGH — Gov. Mike Easley said Tuesday he’s not convinced that notes scribbled by public information officers within his administration prove that his office ordered the destruction of public records.

Speaking after the regular monthly meeting of the Council of State, Easley said that interpretation bothered him.

Notes released last weekend by Easley’s attorney to The News & Observer of Raleigh appear to show that Easley’s press office instructed public information officers at two state agencies to delete e-mails sent to and received from the governor’s office.

Easley said the notes weren’t clear.

“When you get cryptic notes, sometimes you don’t get all the information and that’s why it’s important to get in there and talk to these people,” Easley told The News & Observer.

E-mails are a public record, and throwing them away without following the guidelines set by the state is a misdemeanor. An investigation by Easley’s office found that there was no systematic deletion of e-mails.

Media attorneys and some gubernatorial candidates have said it appears Easley and his staff are failing to meet the standards of North Carolina’s public records law. And the notes appear to support accusations made by Debbie Crane, a former spokeswoman for the Department of Health and Human Services, who was fired after a recent series of stories by the newspaper about the mental health system.

Easley said he asked members of his staff to examine further what the public information officers were told to do. He said he would have a problem if his staff told others to delete records.

According to Easley, the instructions to delete messages identified in the notes weren’t followed, or perhaps public information officers were told to print and save e-mails that are public records before deleting them from their computer.

Easley created a panel in part to give state employees improved guidance on when to retain or dispose of e-mail.

“People look at e-mails differently than they do paper, and they cannot do that,” Easley said.

“They want to do their jobs, and they want to follow the public records laws at the same time, and I want to make sure they understand they’re both important.”
NCCU gives an old house a chance

Preservationists may prevail in bid to save what they consider a landmark

BY ERIC FERRERI
STAFF WRITER

DURHAM — The Rivera House, the one-time home of noted civil rights era photojournalist Alexander Rivera, may yet be saved. Officials with N.C. Central University, which owns the rundown home at Fayetteville and Lawson streets, said Tuesday morning they will consider saving the home rather than tearing it down.

The pronouncement, at a meeting of Durham's historic preservation commission, suggests a change in direction for NCCU. For about a year the university has sought to demolish the 83-year-old house, which is partially wrapped in yellow caution tape, its foundation cracking and its windows boarded up.

Ultimately, NCCU hopes to build a convocation center on that and other nearby properties.

Local preservationists, including the Preservation Durham organization, have fought the demolition, claiming the house has historic significance because Rivera once lived there.

"I would say it's a step in the right direction," Carrie Mowry, Preservation Durham's community development specialist, said of Tuesday's request by NCCU that the preservation commission put off a decision on whether the university can demolish the home.

In delaying its decision, the commission gave the university more time to find an alternate fate for the property.

Last summer, a State Construction Office report called for the university to renovate the home at a cost of $445,000. According to county records, the house's current tax value is $83,342.

A subsequent report, dated March 17, suggests either renovation, demolition or relocation. The report calls demolition a "less desirable" option but acknowledges that the home is decaying rapidly and would have to be renovated soon.

Relocating the home would be the most expensive option, coupling the price of the move with the renovation costs.

The recent state report suggests a partnership among NCCU, the city, historic preservation groups and private developers.

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Stumping for Obama

The political surrogates are coming.

Sen. Barack Obama's presidential campaign announced Tuesday that Wisconsin Gov. Jim Doyle will campaign on Obama's behalf today in Raleigh and Thursday in Greenville, Goldsboro and Wilmington.

Obama's campaign also announced that actors Shawn and Marlon Wayans will be visiting North Carolina colleges this weekend. Their mission — to get students registered to vote.

Obama's campaign said the Wayans brothers will be part of a larger effort to get people registered by North Carolina's Tuesday's deadline.

The actors are scheduled to visit N.C. State, N.C. Central, UNC-Chapel Hill, Duke, N.C. A&T, UNC-Greensboro, Winston-Salem State and Wake Forest.
Easley says meaning of e-mail notes unclear

He doesn't agree that state workers' notes reflect instructions to destroy public records.

BY BENJAMIN NOLET
STAFF WRITER

Gov. Mike Easley said Tuesday that he is not convinced that recently released notes jotted by state employees are clear evidence that officials in his office instructed others to destroy public records.

The notes, taken by two public information officers in a May 29 meeting with the governor's press secretary, appear to state that public records requests are increasing and that the spokeswomen should delete e-mail exchanges with the governor's office every day.

HEAR MORE

Hear Gov. Mike Easley comment about the state's policy on e-mail messages at newsobserver.com/news.

Easley, in an interview after a meeting of state officials Tuesday morning, said that is one interpretation of the notes.

Another interpretation, Easley said, is that the public information officers were told to avoid taking up too much space on computer servers and that they should print out e-mail messages that are public records and keep them in a file before deleting them.

The notes from one public information officer read, "Public records request — increasing — careful of email — delete emails to/from gov. office everyday."

Another public information officer wrote, "emails — more and more public records requests (blogs?) be careful w/emails; delete emails to & from gov office every day."

Easley said the meaning of those notes, released to The News & Observer on Saturday after a public-records request, is unclear.

"When you get cryptic notes, sometimes you don't get all the information, and that's why it's important to get in there and talk to these people," Easley said.

The governor's office has declined to allow interviews with the officials, citing the possibility of a lawsuit.

The Easley administration's handling of e-mail messages became a matter for public debate last month. A fired spokeswoman for the Department of Health and Human Services said...

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Vanore said the note-takers seemed to think they were being told to kill all e-mail exchanges with the governor's office. Vanore said he is satisfied that is not what Hoffman intended.

"It very well may be that she said that," Vanore said. "I have spoken with Renee Hoffman. I am convinced that whatever she said at that May 29 meeting, she did not intend to advise any PIO to delete daily any and all e-mails sent to the governor's press office or received from the governor's press office. If that were her intention, then why would she keep e-mails?"

Under state law, it is a misdemeanour to destroy a public record without consent of the state Department of Cultural Resources.

Vanore said this weekend that a third public information officer remembers being told to kill e-mail messages. Vanore has declined to name the person.

No talk of e-mail

He said Tuesday he would reconsider if Hugh Stevens, a lawyer for The N&O, would promise not to sue over e-mail messages. Likewise, Hoffman and the two public information officers who took the notes have been instructed not to discuss e-mail issues.

"Any lawyer worth a bucket of spit who is under a threat of lawsuit, if any talking is going to be done, the lawyer is going to do the talking," Vanore said.

Stevens has written a letter on behalf of The N&O to the governor's office stating that the newspaper might take legal action to enforce the state's public records law. Stevens said Tuesday that he is not inclined to make any promises about the newspaper's intentions.

"I certainly don't have any authority from my clients to say that, even if I were inclined to," he said.

Easley has convened a committee to study the executive branch's policies toward e-mail and other forms of electronic communication. One goal of that group is to give public employees clearer guidance on how to handle e-mail.

"People look at e-mails differently than they do paper, and they cannot do that," Easley said.

The committee will hold a public hearing Thursday.

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Loan details unfold in Wright trial

Former state legislator Thomas E. Wright expects to testify himself, his attorney said after a second day in court ended.

By Estes Thompson

RALEIGH — The alleged crimes of former state Rep. Thomas E. Wright were aired publicly for the third time Tuesday, as detailed testimony began at his trial on criminal fraud charges.

Among the witnesses were a former state health official and a bank loan officer, both of whom testified at a hearing last month before a special House ethics panel that went on to recommend that Wright be kicked out of office.

That panel considered the same evidence that led the State Board of Elections last year to refer Wright’s case to prosecutors.

But Wright’s lawyer said late Tuesday that he expected at least one new witness in the trial: Wright himself.

Wright is accused of fraudulently obtaining a $150,000 loan and pocketing $8,900 in corporate contributions meant for a health foundation he led in Wilmington. The Wilmington Democrat could be sentenced to nearly 10 years in prison if he is convicted on all four counts of felony fraud.

Last month, the full House voted 109-5 to accept the ethics panel’s recommendation and boot Wright from office.

The former state official, Torlen Wade, testified again that while chief of the state Office of Rural Health in 2002, he wrote a bogus letter on Wright’s behalf. Prosecutors argue that Wright, an eight-term lawmaker, used the letter to take out a loan.

Wade testified that he was pressured by Wright, whom he had known for some time, to write that the state was provid-

ing a $150,000 grant to help Wright buy a building through his Community’s Health Foundation. The building was to house a museum commemorating the 1898 Wilmington race riots. No such grant existed, Wade said.

Wade said he only wrote the letter because Wright was a member of the General Assembly.

“It was a very important project to Representative Wright,” Wade told Wake County District Attorney Colon Willoughby. “He was very, very insistent about it.”

Ronnie Burbank, who worked at the Wilmington bank that approved the loan, also repeated testimony originally offered to the ethics panel. Burbank told the court it was fair to say the bank would not have made the loan if he had known the letter was false.

The loan was based on the assurance that Wright would receive grant money of some kind to pay it off, Burbank said.

The grant money never arrived, and the loan went into default.

During cross-examination, Wright attorney Douglas Harris pointed to the loan closing statement, which noted that Wright didn’t receive anything personally from the loan. Harris also said the bank got its money back when it foreclosed on the building.

Willoughby said he expected to wrap up his case today.

Wright has denied the allegations and is challenging his expulsion from the House.

Harris said after court Tuesday that Wright would take the stand in his own defense.