Obama bringing economic policy to ECU

The Democratic presidential candidate will speak Thursday at Minges Coliseum.

By Brock Letchworth
The Daily Reflector

East Carolina University will play host to Democratic presidential hopeful Barack Obama on Thursday, with a campaign event at Minges Coliseum.

Doors for the free event open at 4 p.m., but the time of Obama's appearance has not been announced.

Tickets are not required, but campaign officials recommend going to the candidate's Web site to RSVP.

Entrance will be granted on a first come, first serve basis, Katherine Lyons, campaign spokeswoman, said.

"We strongly recommend that anyone planning to attend RSVP on our Web site," Lyons said. The Web site is www.nc.barackobama.com.

Obama's message will focus on economic issues facing hard-working families, campaign officials said Saturday.

The Illinois senator will hold a town hall meeting in the Triangle area before traveling to Greenville. Details about that appearance have not been announced, either.

Keep up with the 2008 campaign online with the Political Notes blog.

Thursday's trip to the state will be Obama's third this year. On March 19, he delivered...
OBAMA
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ered a speech on Iraq and national security in Fayetteville before traveling to Charlotte for a town hall meeting. Obama also held a town hall meeting March 26 in Greensboro.

"I'm proud that Senator Obama is the first candidate to hold a major event in eastern North Carolina this year," Congressman C.K. Butterfield said in a release. "It shows Obama's commitment to the eastern part of the state and to addressing the unique challenges that hardworking families in the region face. He is proving once again that he's a unifying leader who will speak for all of us, from the mountains to the coast."

Citing security concerns, campaign officials are asking that people do not bring bags to the event.

No signs and banners will be permitted, the campaign said.

The trip to Greenville comes on the heels of Saturday's speech by former President Bill Clinton at South Central High School. Clinton was campaigning for his wife, Sen. Hillary Clinton, Obama's rival for the Democratic presidential nomination.

Obama's appearance will come less than a week after he released his economic plan for North Carolina — a 47-page book that includes proposals to eliminate unfair tax loopholes for N.C. companies that move overseas, relief for homeowners affected by the housing crisis and a tax cut for the middle class.

His visit will be the first by a major political figure at Minges Coliseum since President George W. Bush spoke there in April 2001.

Bush's visit was the first ever to ECU by a sitting U.S. president.

Obama campaign officials said more details about Thursday's visit will be announced as they become available.

WANT TO GO?
Who: Sen. Barack Obama, Democratic candidate for the presidency
What: Campaign event to discuss economic policy
When: June 12, 9 a.m.-1 p.m.
Where: Minges Coliseum, ECU, 2024 Dr. Dish Drive
How: Go to http://www.barackobama.com and RSVP. It is not required, but recommended by his campaign staff.

DON'T BRING: Bags, back packs, signs or banners.

Chamber hosting forum today

The Greenville-Pitt County Chamber of Commerce is hosting a luncheon today featuring the six candidates of the District 5 Democratic state Senate race.

Don Davis, Charles Johnson, Tony Moore, Chuck Stone, Kathy Taft and Ed Wilson are scheduled to attend the Power '08 Luncheon at noon at Brook Valley Country Club.

The registration fee is $12 for chamber members and $17 for non-members.

The candidates also will take part in an April 28 forum in Farmville, sponsored by the Ayden-G riffon Times- Leader, the Farmville Enterprise and the Standard Laconic of Snow Hill.

Hagan to visit

Democratic U.S. Senate candidate Kay Hagan plans to visit Greenville at 7:30 a.m. today.

Hagan will host a meet and greet with voters at Boulevard Bagel, 327 E. Arlington Boulevard, just west of Greenville Boulevard.

She is inviting voters to come for coffee and a bagel and learn more about her campaign.

Hagan, a 10-year Democratic state senator from Greensboro, is among the five Democrats vying to run in November for the seat held by Republican incumbent Elizabeth Dole.

Other Democratic candidates for the seat include Duskia C. Lassiter of High Point, Jim Neal of Charlotte, Howard Staley of Chatham County and Marcus W. Williams of Lumberton.
Pitt County is on track for 48 traffic deaths in 2008 after averaging 22 per year since 1998.

By Michael Abramowitz
The Daily Reflector

When 8-year-old Callie Grace McKinney was killed in a collision on N.C. 903 outside Winterville on April 5, she was transformed from someone with a vital future into a vital statistic — the 12th life claimed in a car wreck in Pitt County in 2008.

Emerging from the first quarter of the year, the number of traffic fatalities is on pace to surpass record highs set over the last 10 years. Pitt County averaged slightly more than 22 fatalities per year during the past decade, with highs of 29 in 2003 and 30 in 2007, according to records.

At the current rate, the total would rise to 48 by year's end.

Analysis shows several factors played a role in the deaths: inattention, impairment, speed and seat belt use, among others. But law enforcement, emergency workers and safety advocates can point to no dominant cause they can address, such as a dangerous stretch of road, that would have an immediate downward impact on the trend.

That leaves them using the recent deaths to remind drivers to be careful and follow the rules of the road.

"We concentrate our efforts on individual aspects such as child passenger safety, elderly and teen drivers and the local law enforcement campaigns for seat belt use and sober driving," said Herb Garrison, professor of emergency medicine at the Brody School of Medicine at East Carolina University and director of the Eastern Carolina Injury Prevention Program.

But some of the factors most commonly associated with fatalities have been rare or absent in the most recent wrecks:

- Two of the 12 deaths involved impaired drivers, and one of those was a single-vehicle wreck.
- None of the 12 wrecks involved multiple fatalities, and McKinney was the only passenger.
DEATHS
Continued from A1

In 2008, 13 people were killed. The drivers ages ranged from 17 to 73, with no predominant age group among the fatalities. A common cause of crash-related accidents is the presence of other passengers in the car, but all of the younger drivers killed were alone in their cars or trucks.

Only one wreck occurred in the rain or what traffic experts would consider dangerous weather-related road conditions.

Two people were not wearing a safety restraint.

The most common phrase among law enforcement officers is “Speed Kills.” However, only the two impaired drivers were determined to be speeding when their wrecks occurred.

None of the fatalities involved unlicensed drivers.

All 12 wrecks thus far have occurred between 7 a.m. and 7:30 p.m., none in the darkness of night.

The raw facts and figures can be numbing to many drivers and sometimes misinterpreted, experts said.

“When you think about the number of vehicles and miles driven, traffic accidents are a rarity and fatalities are considered random events,” said Brian Mayhew, a traffic engineer at the state Department of Transportation.

The state Department of Transportation continually wrestles with decisions about where to spend safety-related money on roads throughout the state, he said.

“There are no easy decisions. If we spend money on one road that had a really bad year, then there are other roads in the state we can’t spend money on. Statistically, the road that had the bad year won’t have any more fatal crashes, but then we do nothing and it does have a fatal crash,” Mayhew said.

Ultimately, Mayhew said, NCDOT relies on a data-driven process, through the Highway Safety Improvement Program. Highways that meet certain criteria, including fatalities and persistent preventable crash patterns, receive priority attention, he said.

Data collected by the Pitt County Sheriff’s Office in 2008 on wrecks and fatalities could put a very different spin on this year’s fatality picture, said Melissa Larson, of the sheriff’s traffic safety unit.

“The numbers from the 1970s are really not very different than those of today, and in the 1980s the numbers were also in the low 20s,” she said. Because the county was less populated, with fewer cars on the road, the data says that the ratio of fatal wrecks is lower now than in past decades, Larson said.

“Maybe that means someone — drivers, law enforcement officers, car manufacturers or all — are doing a good job. And we can’t forget about the increased quality of (emergency) health care, too, including faster responses,” Larson said.

Then she quickly added a warning:

“We shouldn’t see these numbers as good news and just ignore them. Each fatality number represents human life. If we have the data, we owe it to ourselves as drivers and citizens to identify the reasons for fatal wrecks,” Larson said.

Pitt County driver Connie Davenport knows that firsthand, she said.

She was uninjured when her Volkswagen bug hit a ditch and overturned on N.C. 903 on March 29, within sight of her home on a sunny day.

“I just looked down for a second when I was coming through the curve and couldn’t correct in time,” Davenport said.

The soft plowed soil on which her car roof landed — and her seat belt — might have been what saved Davenport’s life, she said.

Larson said that safe driv-
N&O sues Easley over records law

Suit demands that e-mail deletion stop

BY MATTHEW EISLEY
STAFF WRITER

The News & Observer and nine other North Carolina news organizations sued Gov. Mike Easley on Monday over his administration's deletion of e-mail, which they say violates the state's Public Records Law.

The news media coalition accuses Easley's administration of "the systematic deletion, destruction or concealment of e-mail messages sent or received by the Governor's Office" in violation of the law, according to the lawsuit, which was filed in Wake County Superior Court.

The practice was meant to stop North Carolinians from seeing information and records to which they are entitled, the suit alleges.

The lawsuit also accuses the state Department of Cultural Resources, which oversees government records, of establishing an illegal policy permitting government workers to delete e-mail messages that they decide are of "short-term value" or "when they no longer have reference value to the sender or receiver."

The Public Records Law, which trumps administrative policies, does not allow the destruction of public records for those purposes, the plaintiffs say.

The lawsuit accuses Easley and his administration of failing in their legal duty to install adequate electronic storage systems to preserve public-record e-mails.

And the lawsuit accuses Easley himself of violating the law last month by discarding a handwritten note from Carmen Hooker Odom, former state secretary of health and human services, concerning her views on the failure of state mental-health reforms her department implemented.

In a meeting last week with several newspaper editors, Easley said Hooker Odom's letter was "a personal note" to him that "didn't have any news in it."

"If it needed to be saved, I would have saved it — if it had any kind of value to it at all," he said.

Under the Public Records Law, Easley lets workers decide when to kill messages.

SEE LAWSUIT, PAGE 6A
LAW SUIT
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3A

Law, that's not Easley's call, the news organizations argue.

"Hooker Odom's note concerned public business and therefore was a public record, so destroying it was illegal, they say. Based on Easley's other public statements, the governor probably has discarded additional public records, they say.

The news organizations seek a judge's ruling that Easley and his administration's policies violated the law and will follow it in the future. The media groups also seek reimbursement of their legal expenses in pursuing the lawsuit, as the law allows.

"They are taking this step reluctantly after not getting any indication from Governor Easley that he is willing to admit that the law has been violated, or to fix the violations," said the lead attorney in the lawsuit, Hugh Stevens of Raleigh.

"We have not seen the lawsuit." Easley's term ends in January, likely before the case will end. But Stevens said he'll ask the courts to expedite it. And the results should give the next governor useful legal guidance, he said.

"The issue of the scope of the governor's authority is never moot," Stevens said.

The controversy arose last month as a result of an N&O series reporting on the failure of mental health reforms that the state enacted in 2001, during Easley's first year as governor.

Days after the series ran, the Department of Health and Human Services, which implemented the reforms, fired its top spokeswoman, Debbie Crane. Franklin Freeman, Easley's senior assistant for governmental affairs, said he ordered Crane fired in part for dissuading Hooker Odom from giving the N&O an interview on the subject.

The day Crane was fired, she told the N&O that Easley's press officials had told subordinates to destroy e-mail messages to destroy e-mail messages to evade the Public Records Law.

At first the Governor's Office denied the charge, but the administration later produced notes from two other agency spokespeople that support Crane's assertion. Their records from a meeting with other public information officers last May, led by Easley press secretary Renee Hoffman, included notes to delete e-mail messages to and from the governor's office every day.

In last week's meeting with newspaper editors, Easley said Hoffman's deletion instruction "never should have happened." But the governor said that everyone involved followed the administration's policy to save important e-mails anyway.

Easley defended the policy that allows employees to discard official e-mails and written documents if they decide the communication holds no lasting "administrative value."

"Everything doesn't get saved," he said. "We've got two rules: One, if it's of administrative value, save it. Two, if it's of no value, you have the option to delete it or save it, whatever you want to do. But you're not required by law to."

The Public Records Law, however, says that, with some exceptions, all government e-mail concerning public business is a public record, and must be retained and provided upon request.

Easley said last week that he hopes a commission he appointed to study e-mail retention will develop a clearer policy.

"People who work for the state are very honest, and they try to do the right thing," he said. "But they need to know what that is, and the guidelines are going to have to be much more specific."

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The Paper Trail
By Alison Go

Tibet Tops This Week's Protesting Schedule
April 11, 2008 04:42 PM ET | Alison Go | Permanent Link

This week, students demonstrated against sweatshops, sex trafficking, the Iraq war, and meal plan rollover. But, most of all, students across the nation have caught the "Free Tibet" bug—holding rallies and vigils to protest human-rights abuses in Tibet. At East Carolina University, the religious studies department held a teach-in, while the Amnesty International chapter at the University of Southern Mississippi led a candlelight vigil Tuesday. In New York, Columbia and New York University students flooded Union Square to join a larger mob of protesters. And at Duke University, a quiet vigil turned into a large pro-Tibet march, which then spawned an equally large pro-China counterprotest—a tumult filled with anthems, chants, flags, high-minded rhetoric, and lots and lots of wasted paper (aka fliers).

Reader Comments

holding rallies and vigils to protest human-rights abuses in Tibet? How many of these students have been to China? Have been to Tibet? How do they konw human-rights are abused in Tibet? ridiculous!
April 12, 2008

Fewer Options Open to Pay for Costs of College

By JONATHAN D. GLATER

Parents will have to navigate unfamiliar and difficult terrain when it comes time to pay for college this year, with student loan companies in turmoil and banks tightening their standards and raising rates on other types of borrowing.

Lawmakers and the administration are trying to head off any crisis by making sure that "lenders of last resort" stand ready to take the place of companies that have left the federal loan program. And a growing number of colleges have applied to participate in the federal direct loan program, in which students borrow from the government.

But families often use a combination of resources to pay for college, drawing on savings, federal loans, bank loans and home loans to plug the gap between college costs and financial aid.

Even if the government wards off problems in the credit markets and federal student loans are easily accessible, other sources of financing will become less accessible as consumers find themselves stretched thin and lenders get more choosy.

Turbulence in lending has complicated the efforts of people like Dawn R. Beaton of Mill Valley, Calif., to pay for her daughters' education. A single mother earning less than $50,000 a year, she already has run into difficulty taking out a federal parent loan for her oldest daughter, Nicole, to attend a nearby community college. Her original lender pulled out of the market, and she is still waiting, months later, to hear from a replacement lender on that $5,000 request. She anticipates having to borrow about $10,000 to send her middle daughter to a private college in Ohio later this year.

"When I go to bed at night, I worry about it," said Ms. Beaton, who is a financial manager for a vineyard.

"If you don't have the money, there you are, in a serious, ulcer state. You feel inadequate."

According to a recent New York Times/CBS News poll, 70 percent of parents surveyed were "very concerned" about how they would pay for college; only 6 percent were not concerned.

To ensure continued availability of federal loans, the secretary of the federal Education Department met
on Friday with representatives of the state agencies and nonprofit companies that guarantee federal loans on behalf of the government. The goal was to work out how the guarantors would serve as lenders, if necessary. This emergency safety net has never been pressed into widespread use.

Though there is no major problem now, the lending industry is warning of a credit squeeze without action. "I would say there is widespread belief," said Margaret Spellings, the education secretary, "that we will have a real problem, that the lender of last resort or some other solution will have to be used this year."

Last year, students and their parents borrowed nearly $60 billion in federally guaranteed loans, a figure that has grown more than 6 percent annually over the last five years after taking into account inflation. In recent years, the growth rate has declined but may pick up as the economy slows and as other borrowing options fade.

"I want to make sure we are going to do our part, and that students will be able to go to college this fall," Ms. Spellings said.

Lawmakers in Washington have proposed increasing the amounts that students can borrow through federal programs and authorizing the Education Department to purchase federal loans, thereby providing banks with cash to make more loans. The House Education Committee approved legislation this week that would allow dependent students to borrow a total of $31,000 through federal programs to pay for their undergraduate education, up from $23,000 now.

Still, it is difficult to gauge whether a financing problem will emerge later this year for students and, if so, how serious it might be. The disruption in the federal lending program so far has mostly been from borrowers shifting to another lender. Ms. Beaton, for example, expects her $5,000 loan request to eventually be granted. "By the time I get the money, school will probably be over," she said.

Financial aid administrators say few students had been shut out. "I haven't heard anything about any sort of unusual trends so far, not to say that it isn't going to intensify," said Daniel C. Walls, associate vice provost for enrollment management at Emory University in Atlanta. "I suspect there's going to be more negotiating around financial aid this year than any other year that we've experienced."

Admitted students are just now receiving financial aid awards from colleges, and the test will come when tuition payments for the fall term are due, aid administrators say.

"By mid- to late June, certainly July, will be the months that we really begin to understand the relative financial situations of families," said Jean McDonald-Rash, director of financial aid at Rutgers in New Jersey.
Students attending several expensive and wealthy colleges will enjoy expanded financial aid, as those institutions move to replace need-based loans with grants. Harvard and Yale recently announced expansions of aid to families making as much as $150,000, displaying a degree of generosity that few institutions can match.

Some student advocates say lenders are exaggerating the obstacles they face in search of a bailout from Washington.

"Student lenders are trying to hype the current credit crunch to scare Congress into providing them additional subsidies and to discredit last year's hard-won higher education reform," said Luke Swarthout of the U.S. Public Interest Research Group in Washington, referring to cuts lawmakers made last year to the subsidy payments to lenders of federal loans.

Kevin Bruns, executive director of America's Student Loan Providers, dismissed such criticism as baseless. "Lenders' only goal is to get the administration to use its existing authority to provide liquidity to the capital markets that fund federal student loans," he said. "Lenders don't need to overstate anything — the facts speak for themselves."

There are clear signs of potential problems in the fall. It remains difficult for lenders to sell securities backed by student loans, in turn making it harder to raise capital. One guarantor of private loans, a nonprofit company called the Education Resources Institute, filed for bankruptcy protection this week.

"Everything that's happened in the capital markets with this credit crunch has caused the fixed-income investor base to shrink, so there are fewer potential buyers of securities backed by the loans," said Andrea L. Murad, senior director at Fitch Ratings in New York.

The House legislation seeks to address this situation by allowing the Education Department to buy student loans itself. At least 25 loan companies — including big lenders like the College Loan Corporation; the Student Loan Xpress unit of CIT; and NorthStar Education Finance — have stopped making federal loans, according to the Education Department. Some estimates put the number at nearly twice that.

Colleges generally say that more than 2,000 companies make student loans, and there are plenty of lenders to step into the breach.

No doubt to sidestep any related problems, more than 100 colleges and universities have applied to participate in the direct loan program since the end of February, according to the department. Ms. Spellings, the department secretary, has said the direct loan program could double the amount of new loans it makes to students, if necessary.
Some commercial education companies have already taken steps to ensure that their students can find lenders, in some instances by preparing to make loans themselves.

Problems are more likely for those seeking private loans, which do not have any government backing. The terms of private loans, like other consumer loans, vary depending on the credit histories of individual applicants and in some cases can top 20 percent.

In the last several months, rates on those loans have risen by nearly one percentage point, according to research by Mark Kantrowitz, who publishes the financial aid Web site FinAid.org. Lenders have also tightened their standards, making it costlier for those with weak credit histories to obtain loans.

Private loans have grown sharply in popularity over the last 10 years, as families have looked for ways to pay the difference between tuition, on the one hand, and their savings and federal loan options, on the other. Last year, according to the College Board, students took out more than $17 billion in private loans, up from just $1.6 billion a decade earlier.

“If the financial aid system had kept pace with inflation, there wouldn’t be any need for private loans,” said Paul Wrubel, co-founder of TuitionCoach.com and a consultant for families trying to figure out how to pay for college.

Families also have closed the gap between college costs and federal loans by borrowing against their homes — and that is another option vanishing as house prices fall and lenders clamp down. Millions of homeowners now owe more than their houses are worth, leaving no equity to borrow against.

There is no data on how many parents may have used home equity loans to pay for higher education, researchers and aid administrators said, but there is no doubt many did, to take advantage of tax breaks and lower rates.

Tapping into home equity was always part of the college finance plan for Connie and Dave Orient of Canonsburg, Pa. She is a paralegal at a law firm in Pittsburgh and he is in the family construction business. Their older son, Christopher, is a sophomore at California University of Pennsylvania, a public institution relatively inexpensive for in-state residents. The younger son, Luke, a high school junior, wants to go to Virginia Tech, which she said would cost three times as much.

“T believe that I am in an area that is not depressed or anything,” Ms. Orient said. She added that she hoped still to be able to borrow against the house she and her husband built 25 years ago, but was unsure how much equity she really has in it and how much a lender would be willing to extend. “Nothing’s selling anywhere right now.”
Research, networking at geologists conference

STEVE LYTTLE

About 600 geologists and geologists-in-training were in the University area late last week, as UNC Charlotte hosted the 57th annual meeting of the Southeastern Section of the Geological Society of America.

It was a chance for scientists to talk about the latest research in the origins of limestone sediments in parts of the Carolinas, or the scale stability of gas hydrate fields in the Gulf of Mexico.

But it also was a chance for students from UNCC and other schools participating in the event to meet professional geologists, show off their own research, and perhaps make a few connections that could result in a job sometime in the future.

And for UNCC's Department of Geography and Earth Sciences, it was an opportunity to display its wares -- and take the visitors on a few field trips.

"It's a great opportunity for us to showcase what we're doing," said Martha "Missy" Eppes, an associate professor of earth sciences at UNCC. "It certainly boosted our workload, preparing for the event, but it also is a lot of fun."

Some of the nation's leading geologists gave reports at the conference, held Thursday and Friday at the Hilton Charlotte University Place. But students also were involved, giving a few reports and displaying posters that documented their research.

Chris Caveny-Cox, who is working toward a master's degree in earth sciences at UNCC, said he wasn't doing a poster or giving a report, but he attended as many sessions as possible.

"This is phenomenal," said Caveny-Cox, who also is a state extension agent in Gaston County. "This event gives us exposure to some notable presenters, and that's an opportunity we can't miss."

He said the programs also will help him in his role as a volunteer with the Catawba Land Conservancy and the Schiele Museum in Gastonia.

"Students are getting exposure to some of the cutting-edge research taking place," Eppes said.

And some of the students did the research themselves. Sandy Ebersole of the Geological Survey of Alabama and the University of Alabama came to the conference with student Brittany Ray, a sophomore at Alabama. Ray posted results of her study on fossils from the Cretaceous Period (60 million to 80 million years ago) in Alabama.

"It's a good opportunity for the students to do some networking," Ebersole said.

"I've already met quite a few people and been able to talk to them about their research," Ray said. "I'm really enjoying this."

Some of the research focused on topics from other parts of the world -- like East Carolina University's Reanna Camp, who is studying a river basin in New Zealand. And others focused on subjects closer to home -- like fellow East Carolina student David Hornsberger, who is studying the effects of urban land use on streamwater and groundwater in Eastern North Carolina.

There was more than research on the schedule, though.

UNCC faculty members Andy Bobyarchick and John Diemer made sure the visiting geologists got a chance to see some Carolinas geology. Field trips to the Hiddenite gem mine in Alexander County and Congaree National Forest near Columbia were also on the schedule.