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Groups scale back services due to economy

By Josh Humphries
The Daily Reflector

Tuesday, April 14, 2009

As the pressure of the economy continues to build in Pitt County, local groups are scaling back services in an effort to save money.

The Pitt County Humane Society has cut hours due to a lack of funding, said Joan Pollock, a member of its board of directors.

The humane society is now open Wednesday through Sunday, as compared to the previous Tuesday-through-Sunday schedule.

The cut is directly due to the economy, Pollock said.

"Besides fundraising efforts, we count on the public for support," she said. "We keep about 50 dogs and about 30 cats at any one given time, and it costs a lot of money to maintain that facility."

Pollock said the humane society is having pets returned by families who say they can no longer afford to keep them.

"I'm sure that the donations that we are not getting are attributed to the economy — it just affects everyone," Pollock said

The humane society will hold two of its biggest fundraisers in the coming weeks — a book sale at the Greenville Mall April 24-26 and the Canine Crawl, a one-mile walk for dogs and their owners, on May 2.

The Greenville Aquatics and Fitness Center has cut the number of hours that the pool is in operation in an effort to save on costs, said Steve Hawley, the public information officer for the city.

The hours have been reduced at times when the pool usually gets little to no use, he said.

Director Kathleen Shank said some pool programs were combined or temporarily eliminated to make it through the fiscal year.

"They are just minor cut backs to try to make sure the budget does not go over," Shank said. "Since we are one part of the city, all departments are trying to support the city by making sure they do well financially this year."

The city also is scaling back on travel and utilities.

The joint City of Greenville and Greenville Utilities Commission committee on payroll and benefits will make a recommendation to the City Council later this month on pay increases and insurance choices for its workers next year.

Officials do not expect to see pay increases in the recommendation.

The city and GUC share benefits and work on a similar pay scale.

"We are looking at everything," Hawley said. "We are looking at times when things are not being used and we can scale back without affecting services."

East Carolina University is facing a severe cut in state funding for the next two years and is looking closely at saving money across the whole campus, John Durham, ECU spokesman said.
ECU had a reversion of state funds this year of 6 percent and began trying to trim costs months ago by cutting down on travel, purchasing and utilities.

The university also has cut many special events and receptions and scaled back the meals provided for board of trustees meetings, which often last all day.

The University of North Carolina board of governors has cut orientation sessions for new members of boards of trustees at all 16 public universities in the state, Durham said, in an effort to save on travel and accommodation costs.

Pitt County is making similar cutbacks with a hiring freeze on all non-emergency personnel and very limited travel, county manager Scott Elliot said.

"The entire economy is affecting us; we have other areas that are down everything from investment earnings to register of deeds revenues and building inspection fees," Elliot said.

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Protest stops Tancredo's UNC speech

BY JESSE JAMES DECONTO, Staff Writer

Comment on this story

CHAPEL HILL - UNC-CH police released pepper spray and threatened to use a Taser on student protesters Tuesday evening when a crowd disrupted a speech by former Colorado congressman Tom Tancredo opposing in-state tuition benefits to unauthorized immigrants.

Hundreds of protesters converged on Bingham Hall, shouting profanities and accusations of racism while Tancredo and the student who introduced him tried to speak. Minutes into the speech, a protester pounded a window of the classroom until the glass shattered, prompting Tancredo to flee and campus police to shut down the event.

Tancredo was brought to campus by a UNC chapter of Youth for Western Civilization, a national organization of students who oppose mass immigration, multiculturalism and affirmative action.

Before the event, campus security removed two women who delayed Tancredo's speech by stretching a 12-foot banner across the front of the classroom. It read, "No dialogue with hate."

Police escorted the women into the hallway, amid more than 30 protesters who clashed with the officers trying to keep them out of the overcrowded classroom. After police released pepper spray and threatened the crowd with a Taser, the protesters gathered outside Bingham Hall.

Police spokesman Randy Young said the pepper spray was "broadcast" to clear the hallway. He said officers' use of force was under investigation by the department.

Inside the classroom, several student protesters screamed curses at Tancredo and Riley Matheson, president of the UNC-Chapel Hill chapter of Youth for Western Civilization.

"This is the free speech crowd, right?" Tancredo joked.
UNC-CH geography professor Alpha Cravey joined protesters in chanting the names of Marco Polo and Christopher Columbus.

But campus visitors and some faculty members in the capacity crowd of 150 urged the students to let Tancredo speak.

"We are the children of immigrants, and this concerns us," said junior Lizette Lopez, 22, vice president of the Carolina Hispanic Association. "So we would at least like to hear what he has to say if you want to hear what we have to say."

The protesters relented, and Tancredo began to speak, describing failed state and federal legislation aimed at providing in-state tuition benefits for undocumented immigrants.

Two women stretched out another banner, first along one of the aisles and then right in front of Tancredo. Tancredo grabbed the middle of the banner and tried to pull it away from one of the girls. "You don't want to hear what I have to say because you don't agree with me," he said.

The sound of breaking glass from behind a window shade interrupted the tug-of-war.

Tancredo was escorted from the room by campus police.

About 200 protesters reconvened outside the building. "We shut him down; no racists in our town," they shouted. "Yes, racists, we will fight, we know where you sleep at night!"

 Reached by phone after his departure, Tancredo said he had never been silenced by protesters, even at American University where 400 of them recently attended one of his speeches.

"We're very sorry that former Congressman Tancredo wasn't able to speak," Chancellor Holden Thorp said in a prepared statement. "We pride ourselves on being a place where all points of view can be expressed and heard, so I'm disappointed that didn't happen tonight. I think our Public Safety officers appropriately handled a difficult situation."

Police spokesman Randy Young said he couldn't recall student protesters shutting down another campus event.

"Fascists are fascists," Tancredo said. "Their actions were probably the best speech I could ever give. They are what's wrong with America today. ... When all you can do is yell epithets, that means you are intellectually bankrupt."

UNC graduate student Tyler Oakley, who had organized the protest, said he regretted the broken window but not silencing Tancredo. "He was not able to practice his hate speech," said Oakley. "You have to respect the right of people to assemble and collectively speak."

Lopez said she had mixed emotions about how the event ended.

"We were more interested in an intellectual conversation instead of a shouting match," she said. "Ironically, the people that are trying to get our voices heard silenced us."

Matheson, who formed UNC-YWC this year with seven other conservative students, said he knew Tancredo would be controversial but he never expected this kind of response.

"I didn't expect them to literally chase him out of the building," he said.

Staff writer Samuel Spies contributed to this report.

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UNC Health Care might ask uninsured for deposit

BY SARAH AVERY, Staff Writer
Comment on this story

UNC Health Care is firming up a deposit policy that it hopes will result in uninsured patients paying for more of their care.

The charges -- $100 for a new visit, $80 for return visits and $20 for X-rays and other tests -- are necessary to cover a growing budget hole from unpaid care, said Dr. William Roper, chief executive of UNC Health Care.

The health system already asks patients for deposits upfront and suggests those who can't pay meet with a financial counselor. Because many patients never follow through, and pay nothing, the hospital is only recovering about 4 cents on the dollar for patients who have no insurance. Two years ago, it was collecting 9 cents on the dollar for uninsured patients. The new policy will require that a payment plan be set up if a deposit can not be made.

"We are being hit with a tidal wave of people who are uninsured," Roper said, noting that the state's double-digit unemployment rate that has left thousands without job-based insurance benefits.

This year, the hospital is expected to pay $270 million in uncompensated care, up from $140 million five years ago, he said. Uncompensated care is the combination of free care for people who are too poor to pay, bad debts from people who haven't paid what they owe, and losses on Medicare and Medicaid services that pay below the hospital's market rates.

Roper said no one will be turned away from the hospital or clinics if they can't pay the deposits. Many will be enrolled in Medicaid or Medicare if they qualify and receive indigent
care if they meet a poverty threshold.

Still, most patients will be asked to pay at least $25 toward their care -- the smallest amount charged at a community clinic that provides indigent care.

"I believe it is a matter of dignity and honor that even people of limited means like to be treated as a true partner in the process," Roper said.

The hospital system drew criticism from many of its own doctors three years ago when it announced plans to demand a portion of payment before treatment. It also drew public ire for an aggressive approach to collecting bills. It later relaxed some of the policies.

Many questioned how the health system could impose such rules given that UNC Hospitals, its flagship, was founded in the 1940s with a mission to provide care regardless of ability to pay. The hospital receives about $45 million from state taxpayers to cover indigent care, said Karen McCall, vice president of communications for UNC Hospitals.

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Justice Roberts at NCCU law school event

STAFF WRITER ERIC FERRERI
Comment on this story

DURHAM - Dominique Williams realized that Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr. is really just a regular guy during a chance meeting at the front door to N.C. Central University's law school on Tuesday morning.

Williams, a third-year law student participating in a moot court competition, arrived at the same time as Roberts, who was in town to preside over the competition.

"He opened the door, not only for me, but for the people with him," said Williams, 29, a native of Halifax County. "That really helped me relax. Not only is he the chief justice, he's a person. I felt as if I was talking to one of my professors."

And apparently, even the nation's chief justice isn't above some small talk.

"He opened the door and was like, 'nice weather!' " Williams recounted.

Inside a packed courtroom, Williams and five other NCCU law students had their first experience arguing a case before a member of the U.S. Supreme Court. Moot court competitions give law students practice arguing cases on appeal, and Roberts was one of three judges to grill students on their arguments.

Tuesday's competition was closed to the public and the press. Williams recounted that Roberts chimed in from time to time and also posed several hypothetical situations, an attempt to get the students thinking.

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Mark Snyder has been the chef at the Alpha Chi Omega sorority at UNC-Chapel Hill for the past 10 years.

Staff Photos by Corey Lowenstein

Chicken with portobello mushroom was popular on a recent Wednesday night.

Will Thompson, left, a senior at UNC-Chapel Hill, assists Chef Mark Snyder in the kitchen at Alpha Chi Omega.
The chef of Alpha Chi

UNC sorority members enjoy the food and care they get from their in-house cook

BY SARAH LETRENT, Staff Writer
Comment on this story

The soulful sounds of gospel music fill the kitchen as a middle-age man in a starched white chef jacket, checkered pants, Nike tennis shoes and Tar Heel baseball cap tends to five occupied burners on the stainless steel Garland stove.

He grabs one of the behemoth pots with bubbling cream sauce and whisks in pesto. Tonight, he's fixing pasta for the girls -- all 160 of them.

Feeding 160 sorority sisters is no small task, but Mark Snyder, the 45-year-old chef at Alpha Chi Omega sorority on UNC-Chapel Hill's campus, does it five days a week. He runs the sorority kitchen like a restaurant, but outside the house walls and the Greek community, few passers-by know that Snyder or his kitchen are even there. He endures all the challenges of a restaurant chef but receives none of the glory.

Regardless, Snyder says, "This is the best environment I've worked in."

So what is it like to feed a sorority house? Snyder spends an average of $3,000 a week on food and goes through four gallons of sweet tea a day. He uses the sorority's commercially stocked kitchen to, among other things, bake cookies two or three times a week. At the sorority members' request, he serves up an artery-clogging spread of fried foods from corn dogs to French fries every Friday for lunch. It is aptly called "Fried Fridays."

From movies to campus

Snyder started his culinary career in Wilmington, working for five years under an Argentinian chef who owned a coffee shop and an Italian restaurant. He never went to culinary school, so his cooking style leans on those Italian beginnings. Don't let that stereotype his cuisine; a usual week's menu for the women of Alpha Chi can include crab cakes, bacon-wrapped filet mignon or the most requested dish -- macaroni and cheese.

After moving from restaurants and hotels to the movie catering business, Snyder worked on sets in California and North Carolina for eight years until a friend came to Chapel Hill to cater the film "Patch Adams," which was shot on campus in 1998. Snyder tagged along to help. He heard about cooking at a sorority through a woman who was cooking for the movie and happened to work at a Greek house on campus.

That was more than 10 years ago; Snyder has been an integral part of the Alpha Chi Omega sorority ever since.

Caroline Long, a sophomore member from Raleigh, sums him up best: "Mark is more than just a source of food to us. He is a friend and an amazing part of our Alpha Chi lives."

Long finishes class at 2 p.m., often rushing to the house to eat before lunch service ends. Often, she finds herself among only a few members in the dining room. Snyder comes out to chat with her while she eats.
Snyder says the best part of his job is that he can be a chef and have a life as well. While hotel and restaurant chefs work nights and weekends, Snyder gets to the house at 9 a.m. and leaves by 6 p.m. Even living an hour away in Wendell, he finds the job worth the commute.

Being a movie caterer meant Snyder was always on location. With a wife and two teenage children, he wanted a change. His devotion to his family extends to food; he catered his own wedding. While his wife was getting dressed and doing her hair, he was prepping the food because he had the time. "It didn't take me as long to get ready," Snyder cracks.

Snyder also enjoys his job's freedom. He can change the menu daily at the sorority house, which wouldn't happen at a restaurant or catering business.

Training his help

Snyder is the only chef in the house, but he has a staff of eight student waiters. Snyder trains all his waiters to cook, letting them prep to make their job more interesting and educational. It's nothing out of the ordinary to walk into the kitchen on a weekday and see eight college-age guys with aprons over Tar Heel T-shirts at the stainless steel island learning to butterfly and stuff chicken breasts.

"I'll start by saying this is the best job I have ever had," says Trey Shalley, a senior waiter from Greensboro. "It's not really a job but more of a hobby. I get paid to work for the nicest man, eat the best food on campus and serve over 100 girls. Sometimes I have to pinch myself just to make sure this isn't a dream."

The waiters have so much fun with Snyder that they nicknamed the house Alphachio's (pronounced like an Italian restaurant) and are known to start a food fight or two. Snyder apparently throws a mean mashed potato.

Although Snyder knows most of his wait staff will not pursue a culinary career, the job has its perks: The waiters get free food and they have learned basic cooking skills to help them get by in the kitchen once college is over.

As for Snyder, ask any person in the house and they'll tell you he is not only an adept chef but also an important part of Alpha Chi.

One resident of the house has a wheat allergy. No gluten? No problem. Snyder makes her special bread and wheat-free dishes.

Can't make it to the house during the scheduled meal time? Snyder offers "late plates"-- a sorority version of takeout for those in class or at work.

Need cooking lessons? One member became engaged and he taught her the basics -- cutting, chopping, sautéing -- so she will be able to cook for her new husband.

Snyder explains: "I want the girls to feel as if this is a home away from home."

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