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Perdue cuts pay of state employees, teachers

The Associated Press

Tuesday, April 28, 2009

RALEIGH, N.C. — Gov. Beverly Perdue on Tuesday ordered a pay cut for all state workers in May and June equal to a half-percent of their annual salary as shrinking tax collections force her to find about $1 billion more to close a widening gap before the June close of the budget year.

Perdue signed an executive order directing the flexible furloughs her administration estimates would save $65 million over the two months. That means state workers earning $30,000 a year could expect to see their monthly May paychecks cut by $75, followed by another $75 cut in June. In return, workers will get an extra 10 hours of flexible time off.

"I think it's hard for them to be told this morning that that they have to give up 150 bucks, because if they're like most North Carolinians they budget so finely around their obligations," Perdue said. But, she added, "this is all I can do."

The governor also planned to use $400 million in federal stimulus funds earlier than expected, to avoid layoffs. In addition, she wants to raid the main state reserve fund for up to $350 million and tap about $200 million from some of the other special-purpose funds that set aside money for such projects as highway building and land purchases.

The governor said she was acting under her constitutional obligation to balance each year's state budget. The current budget year ends June 30.

"It's something she has no choice about," said Senate leader Marc Basnight, D-Dare.

Senate Minority Leader Phil Berger, R-Rockingham, agreed that salaries were probably among the few places to cut spending so late in the fiscal year, but he noted that the furloughs were only a tiny part of Perdue's solution to closing the budget chasm.

"There ought to be some more cost savings than just $65 million," he said. "I think it's time we're going to have to get serious to really cut spending."

The cuts come on top of moves Perdue had already taken to close a $2.2 billion gap between income and planned state spending that greeted the governor when she took office in January. Perdue has addressed that gap by cutting state agency spending by up to 9 percent, and tapping at least $550 million from reserve funds.

A union representing state workers was resigned to the fact that Perdue had few places to cut in the final months of the budget year other than salaries, State Employees Association of North Carolina chief legislative lobbyist Ardis Watkins said. The union would continue fighting proposals that would make it easier to furlough state workers in the future, she said.

Although Perdue cannot impose salary cuts on elected officials such as lawmakers and judges, she said had asked Chief Justice Sarah Parker and legislative leaders to voluntarily take the pay cuts. Perdue said she would cut her own pay. House Majority Leader Hugh Holliman, D-Davidson, confirmed legislative leaders would accept pay cuts. The state constitution bars governors from changing the salaries of elected officials during their terms.

"Everybody is willing to give up something of their salary," Perdue said.

Perdue said she decided on an across-the-board salary cut after legal advice that it was the option most likely to sustain a legal challenge. Her office said she would ask the General Assembly to pass legislation
specifying that the pay cuts would not affect longevity pay, retirement or other benefits.

While the cuts to employee salaries are scheduled for May and June, for administrative reasons workers will be allowed to take their compensating time off between June and the end of December, State Budget Director Charles Perusse said.

The federal stimulus money Perdue will spend in the next two months comes from a fund designed to allow states to avoid deep layoffs as they confront budget shortfalls. The governor's proposed budget for the two years beginning July 1 recommended spending the $1.4 billion evenly over the two year span. Instead, Perdue decided Tuesday to spend $400 million of that now, Perusse said.

Perusse said the total spending gap for the current budget year could wind up between $2.8 billion and $3.2 billion, and the eventual amount would sway how much of the state's reserve funds are used. But Perdue wants to set aside about $200 million to cope with emergencies like a summer hurricane or disease outbreak, Perusse said.

The belt-tightening is likely to continue at least through the end of this year, Perusse said, before employment picks up in the second half of 2010.

Basnight, Berger and House Speaker Joe Hackney, D-Orange, said it's clear that with Perdue using up most of the money in reserve funds, legislators will have to cut dramatically to pare a spending gap in the year beginning July 1 that Hackney estimates will be about $4 billion. Perdue indicated she knew tough times were still ahead.

"It isn't over now. Don't you all think it's over now because we've got a long way to go before North Carolina has fully recovered," she said.

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COX NEWSPAPERS
Man charged in ECU bomb threat

The Daily Reflector

Tuesday, April 28, 2009

A man already charged with setting off false fire alarms at East Carolina University was charged Monday with making a bomb threat.

Vern Allen Hufnagle, 25, 2907 Cedar Creek Road is accused of sending the bomb threat by e-mail to the university’s crime tip in-box on Feb. 12. The e-mail was sent from an off-campus computer, Gregory said.

A communication major at ECU this semester, Hufnagle is no longer enrolled at the university, according to a university news release.

Lt. D.J. Gregory said Hufnagle was arrested on April 2 after he was seen setting off a false fire alarm in the Brewster Building, located on 10th Street at the foot of College Hill. He also was charged with false alarms on March 24 and March 26.

He was arrested and released on those charges under a $10,000 secured bond. During the investigations of the false alarms, officers linked Hufnagle with the false bomb threat, Gregory said.

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Pirates drop off their treasures to be recycled or reused

By Josh Humphries
The Daily Reflector

Tuesday, April 28, 2009

East Carolina University and the city of Greenville hope to cut down on the familiar piles of furniture and belongings in the neighborhoods surrounding the university at the end of the semester.

Departing college students do not have to leave their unwanted possessions in piles in town. They can be donated to area charities.

The Pirates Treasure program, which began Tuesday and continues today, encourages students to drop off unwanted items that will later be distributed to needy families in the area by local social services groups.

Lucia Brannon, ECU coordinator of off-campus student services, said this year is going even better than last year, and a large container at the collection site was beginning to fill up Tuesday afternoon.

Students can drop off unwanted household goods, including furniture, kitchen appliances, clothing, nonperishable food, and lamps, at the Willis Building on the corner of First and Reade streets today between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m.

The program, which started in December, aims to curb the amount of waste left in campus neighborhoods or sent to landfills by ECU students, an effort supported by the university and the city.

"ECU is really committed to the city, and the city government exists primarily to serve the residents, the professors and students live here," said Cori Hines, neighborhood liaison for the city of Greenville.

"This helps students feel a part of something positive in the community," Brannon said.

Collected items will be donated to Pitt County Habitat for Humanity and Meals on Wheels to be distributed to needy families.

Student volunteers will work in shifts at the collection site today to help people who were dropping off items.

Contact Josh Humphries at jhumphries@coxnc.com or (252) 329-9565.

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Schools seek clarification on Perdue pay cuts

Staff, wire reports

Tuesday, April 28, 2009

RALEIGH — Gov. Beverly Perdue on Tuesday ordered a pay cut for all state workers in May and June equal to a half-percent of their annual salary as worsening tax collections force her to find about $1 billion more in savings before the end of the budget year in June.

Perdue signed an executive order directing the flexible furloughs her administration estimates would save $65 million during the two months. That means state workers earning $30,000 a year could expect to see their monthly May paychecks cut by $75, followed by another $75 cut in June. In return, workers will get an extra 10 hours of flexible time off.

The governor also planned to use $400 million in federal stimulus funds earlier than expected to avoid layoffs. In addition, she would raid the main state reserve fund for up to $350 million and tap about $200 million from some of the other special-purpose funds that set aside money to pay for things like highway building, land purchases and clean-water projects.

"The world is not ending," Perdue said at a news conference. But she acknowledged that "these are solutions that may be distasteful to our people."

The governor said she was acting under her constitutional obligation to balance each year's state budget. The budget year ends June 30.

Cuts apply to all state workers including teachers.

Heather Mayo, Pitt County Schools spokeswoman, said the system is currently seeking clarification on how the 10-hour furloughs can be used. She said the Department of Public Instruction is expected to institute guidelines for them.

Mayo acknowledged concern about how the announcement might affect teacher morale, but she said officials are confident local teachers will remain focused.

"We tend to see stress levels rise at the end of the year with testing and this certainly just adds to that stress," Mayo said. "We know that our teachers are working hard to do their very best for the students of Pitt County Schools and, despite the challenges, they will continue to give their all."

Mayo said the Pitt County Schools office has been flooded with calls since the announcement. Officials are providing answers to the most commonly asked questions on the school system's Web site.

"Our goal is to try and keep our employees as informed as possible as new information is made available to us," Mayo said.

The pay cuts come on top of moves Perdue already had taken to close a $2.2 billion gap between income and planned state spending that greeted the governor when she took office in January. Perdue has addressed that gap by cutting state agency spending by up to 9 percent, and tapping at least $550 million from reserve funds.

The State Employees Association of North Carolina is resigned to the fact that Perdue had few places to cut in the last two months of the budget year other than salaries, the group's chief legislative lobbyist Ardis Watkins said. The union will continue fighting proposals that would make it easier to furlough state workers in the future, she said.

Although Perdue cannot impose salary cuts on elected officials such as lawmakers and judges, she said she had asked Chief Justice Sarah Parker and legislative leaders to voluntarily take the pay cuts. Perdue said
she would cut her own pay. House Majority Leader Hugh Holliman, D-Davidson, confirmed legislative leaders would accept pay cuts. The state constitution bars governors from changing the salaries of elected officials during their terms.

“Everybody is willing to give up a little of their salary,” Perdue said.

Perdue said she decided on an across-the-board salary cut after legal advice that it was the option most likely to sustain a legal challenge. Her office said she would ask the General Assembly to pass legislation specifying that the pay cuts would not affect longevity pay, retirement or other benefits.

While the cuts to employee salaries are scheduled for May and June, for administrative reasons workers will be allowed to take their compensating time off between June and the end of December, State Budget Director Charles Perusse said.

The federal stimulus money Perdue will spend in the next two months comes from a fund designed to allow states to avoid deep layoffs as they confront budget shortfalls. The governor’s proposed budget for the two years beginning July 1 recommended spending the $1.4 billion evenly over the two-year span. Instead, Perdue decided Tuesday to spend $400 million of that now, Perusse said.

Perusse said the total spending gap for the current budget year could wind up between $2.8 billion and $3.2 billion, and the eventual amount would sway how much of the state’s reserve funds are used. But Perdue wants to set aside about $200 million to cope with emergencies like a summer hurricane or disease outbreak, Perusse said.

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State workers get unpaid time off

Perdue's order, affecting all workers, teachers and higher ed employees, may save $70 million

BY ROB CHRISTENSEN AND MARK JOHNSON, Staff Writers

RALEIGH - North Carolina state employees, who have traditionally enjoyed job security during economic storms, are learning they are vulnerable, too.

On Tuesday, Gov. Beverly Perdue ordered unpaid furloughs for all workers, public school teachers and higher education employees, in an effort to balance the budget in a struggling economy. The furloughs are expected to save the state between $65 million and $70 million, which will close a widening budget gap estimated at $3.2 billion in the current year, according to Charles Perusse, the state budget director.

Workers will see May and June paychecks reduced by a total of one half of 1 percent of their annual salary. An employee making $50,000 per year would see pay reduced a total of $250 during the next two months. An employee making $30,000 would see a salary cut of $150.

In return, state employees will be given 10 hours of flexible time off, which they may take between June 1 and Dec. 31.

The 10-hour furlough may be only the beginning. There are no guarantees that there will not be further furloughs, layoffs or pay cuts. The legislature will adopt a budget for the fiscal year starting July 1 and is looking at a series of reduction options.

House Speaker Joe Hackney said there is more pain ahead.

"We are going to have to have more cuts than the governor or the Senate contemplated," Hackney said.

The furloughs elicited anger at Perdue among many employees who have already been hit recently with news that their insurance benefits will be cut. Online message boards lit up with pleas to flood legislators with calls. At least one employee suggested that all workers take the same day off to paralyze state government, and another joked that the state trooper who drives Perdue should take a furlough in the middle of long trip.

Others accepted that things could be much worse in a state with 10.8 percent unemployment, one of the nation's highest.

"I'd much rather be furloughed than laid off," said Pavel Derka, who works in computer support at the Department of Public Instruction. "I can scale back and still support my kids. The furlough seems to spread the pain evenly."

The state tradeoff

State workers have long endured low pay and paltry raises but steady hours and high job
security.

"It's a tough pill to swallow," said Erica Baldwin, spokeswoman for State Employees Association of North Carolina. "But if it's the only way to keep people employed, we'll do it."

Michael Walden, an economist at N.C. State University, noted that many employees of private companies were losing their jobs during the recession.

"The tradeoff for state employees is we get to keep our jobs and take a half of 1 percent pay cut," Walden said. "I view that as a pretty good bargain, given the kind of economy we are in right now."

Perdue, who had earlier expressed reservations about furloughs, said she was forced to act because of declining revenues.

"The national fiscal crisis continues to bleed down on North Carolina," Perdue said at a news conference. "Our unemployment rate is extraordinarily high. Many of North Carolina's leading corporate citizens and most of North Carolina's families have been tremendously impacted by this global financial crisis."

The governor's actions are a stopgap measure to balance this fiscal year's budget, as the state constitution requires, during the next two months.

Senate Republican leader Phil Berger, of Eden, said Perdue did too little cutting and too much grabbing pots of money to cover the additional deficit. "We should be looking at spending reductions that cover 50 percent of the shortfall," he said.

Berger pointed out that Perdue is using federal stimulus money that her budget and the Senate budget planned to use for next year. The governor also proposed $530 million in tax increases in her budget, he said.

Perdue took the steps after estimates suggested that state government would face a $3.2 billion shortfall for the fiscal year that ends June 30, or about a $1 billion deeper hole than the Perdue administration had anticipated.

She called shortfall in the $21 billion budget "historic." In making the cuts, Perdue said she has been careful to protect the core services of government.

The more sober fiscal outlook became apparent after budget analysts examined the income tax filings after the April 15 filing deadline.

Perdue dipped into funds

Besides the furlough, Perdue took additional steps to plug the budget hole.

She decided to raid the $780 million rainy day fund reserve fund that is used for emergencies such as hurricanes and epidemics. The state is already taking $250 million from the rainy day fund to subsidize the state employees health plan. Now Perdue said she plans to draw down an additional $300 million to $350 million to pay for the day-to-day operations of government.

Perdue will dip into an additional $400 million in federal stimulus money that had been set aside to help state government get through the next fiscal year that begins July 1.

The governor said she will tap unspecified amounts from other pots of money. Her budget advisers say they are still trying to decide which funds to tap.

Perdue said she considered exempting lower-income state workers from the pay cuts. But she said both legal and administrative considerations caused her to call for across-the-board cuts.

Most workers will see paychecks reduced over May and June. An employee earning $50,000
per year would see $125 reduced in May and another $125 reduced in June's paycheck.

Employees who don't work the full year, such as many teachers and university employees, would see their pay cut before their last paycheck of the school year.

Perdue's executive order does not cover elected officials. But Perdue said she had received promises from elected leaders in the legislature, the courts and the Council of State that they would voluntarily abide by the reductions.

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Furlough questions

Furlough questions and answers

Q: How much will pay be cut?

Pay for all state workers will be cut one half of one percent of an employee's annual salary. So if you make $30,000 it will be cut $150. If you make $75,000 it will be cut $375. These are one-time pay cuts for the fiscal year ending June 30. The governor said no one is exempt.

Q: When will the cuts show up in the paycheck?

They will show up in the May and June paychecks. So a person making $50,000 per year would find his or her pay reduced $125 in May and $125 in June. For those employees on less than full-year contracts - such as teachers - the pay cuts may show up differently, but will be made before the end of the school year.

Q: Why are state employees getting 10 hours of unpaid leave?

The governor's office said this is compensation for the pay cuts. Contrary to the state government rumor mill, they are not additional pay cuts. During the most common type of furloughs, an employee is sent home for a day or a week with no pay. But Perdue has ordered a "flexible furlough" that allows people to take the time off between June 1 and Dec. 31.

Q: If the pay cuts are made in May and June, why aren’t the furloughs at the same time?

Because state officials were worried that it would be difficult to schedule the 10 hours off for everyone during May and June. So they are using what they call "a flexible furlough" that allows the employee to take time off during the rest of the calendar year. The furloughs cannot be rolled over into 2010, but must be taken during the current calendar year.

Q: How common are furloughs?

In this economic environment, many states are either laying off or furloughing employees. In California, state workers are furloughed two days per month. In Colorado, the governor has proposed five days of state furloughs. Georgia has furloughed 25,000 employees. Maryland is furloughing employees five days. The New Hampshire governor is proposing 12 days of unpaid leave. The New York governor is proposing five days of furlough. And those don't count the 15 states that have either permanently laid off employees or are considering doing so.

Q: Did the governor consider exempting lower paid employees?
April 29, 2009

Without Cafeteria Trays, Colleges Find Savings

By LISA W. FODERARO

SARATOGA SPRINGS, N.Y. — John Belushi memorialized them in “Animal House” as he stockpiled edible projectiles for an epic food fight. Generations of college students in the Northeast have deployed them as makeshift sleds. But the once-ubiquitous cafeteria tray, with so many glasses of soda, juice and milk lined up across the top, could soon join the typewriter as a campus relic.

Scores of colleges and universities across the country are shelving the trays in hopes of conserving water, cutting food waste, softening the ambience and saving money. Some even believe trayless cafeterias could help avoid the dreaded “freshman 15” — the number of pounds supposedly gained in the first year on campus (and on all-you-can-eat meal plans). “I like not having to carry a tray around,” said Peter McInerney, a freshman here at Skidmore College, as he grabbed a midafternoon snack of an egg sandwich, pancakes and apple juice. “It makes it feel like this is less of a machine just spitting food out. It’s still not home, but it feels more homey without the tray.”

The Sustainable Endowments Institute, a research organization that tracks environmental practices at the 300 colleges and universities with the largest endowments, said that 126 of them had curtailed use of trays, some of them banishing trays only from certain dining halls, and some introducing, for example, “trayless Tuesdays.” Such moves are often part of a larger push to embrace environmentalism that includes hiring sustainability coordinators, introducing solar panels, composting dining-hall waste and encouraging students to turn off lights with catchy sayings like “Do It in the Dark.”

“The trend has definitely taken off,” said Mark Orlowski, executive director of the institute, which this fall plans to add a question about trayless cafeterias to an annual survey that includes other dining-related topics like vegan entrees, biodegradable containers and community gardens. “It reduces not just waste, but energy and water consumption. Over all, it’s been very successful.”

Joseph H. Spina, executive director of the National Association of College and University Food Services, described trayless dining as “sort of the hot thing right now.”

“There was a smattering of it 18 months ago,” he said, “but every week I’m picking up another campus or two that’s adopting it.”

At Williams College in western Massachusetts, the Zilkha Center for Environmental Initiatives estimates that the college is saving 14,000 gallons of water annually since eliminating trays last spring at Driscoll, one of four campus dining halls, where 147,000 trays had been washed a year. The other dining halls are scheduled to go trayless in the fall.
At the Rochester Institute of Technology, which stopped using trays last summer, the manager of the Grace Watson Dining Hall, one of five on campus, said she had seen a marked drop in food waste, estimating that the school saved 10 percent on food spending despite rising ingredient costs.

"With the trays, you come in and often your eyes are bigger than your stomach," said the manager, Janet Olivieri, who frequently eats at the dining hall and has lost 10 pounds since the change. "This way they can only get what they can carry on one plate. If the customer wants more, they have to make a conscious decision to come back for it."

At Cornell University, where 5 of the 10 dining halls have done away with trays since September, the biggest pushback has come from faculty. "They were more boisterous than anyone," said Gail T. Finan, the university's director of dining and retail services. "A couple of professors sent me e-mails saying, 'This is ridiculous.'"

Skidmore, a pioneer in trayless dining, tried to minimize the jolt by implementing the change between the spring and fall semesters in 2006, when the cafeteria, the Murray-Aikins Dining Hall, underwent a $10 million overhaul.

For the most part, when students returned in the fall, they were so dazzled by the transformation of the cafeteria that they hardly noticed the missing trays. The renovated dining hall has three slate fireplaces and a half-dozen food stations, including a do-it-yourself griddle for eggs. Three of the chefs are graduates of the Culinary Institute of America, and all the pasta, granola and baked goods are made on site.

Officials said their decision to go trayless was mainly about atmosphere, though they welcomed any ecological benefit. "In our thinking, the trays were institutional, along with the conveyor belts, and we really wanted to move away from that," said Christine Kaczmarek, director of business services at Skidmore.

But while the environmental benefits are real, going trayless is not a panacea. At Skidmore, the all-you-can-eat format and multiple food stations, featuring vegetarian, Italian and classic comfort foods, encourage students to forage, taking a bit of this and a little of that. But this system also leads to congestion as diners return to the lines for seconds (or fourths).

"That's one of the disadvantages," said Sam Pope, a junior from Worcester, Mass., referring to an absence of trays. "You have to keep getting up and getting more food. It increases dining hall time because there's so much traffic."

As part of her senior honors thesis, Sarah Whateley, an environmental studies major, conducted a research project to demonstrate how much food was still wasted in the dining hall. She asked students to scrape their leftovers into plastic bins over two days, yielding 330 pounds of food on a Sunday and 403 pounds on a Monday. The food services staff then illustrated that quantity by stacking the equivalent weight in boxes of rice in the entrance of the dining hall.

"People were really surprised," she said. "Entire sandwiches were being thrown out, and a whole slice of pizza."

Still, Miss Whateley believes there is less waste without the trays. "Most people don't want to get up to get more food," she said. "The only thing that changes is that you take less and you actually eat what you want rather than what you see."

Dr. Spina, of the college food service association, cited another benefit: "preparation for the cocktail-party
circuit" by having to balance dishware and cutlery. "You eventually have to learn how to hold your hors d'oeuvre and cocktail in one hand while making animated conversation with the other," he said, "so it's a life lesson."

No word yet on what students are doing for makeshift sleds.
Duke plans 'a seismic shift' in treating chronic disease

BY ERIC FERRERI, Staff Writer

Durham - Duke University Health System announced a plan Monday to dramatically shift how it treats chronic diseases -- and use its home city as its laboratory.

Duke and community leaders have created Durham Health Innovations, a project intended to treat disease more efficiently by going into communities and connecting with more patients.

The groundwork-intensive, grass-roots effort would run counter to the traditional health-care model, said Lloyd Michener, chairman of Duke's community and family medicine department. It encourages Duke to go to the patient, rather than expecting the patient to come to the hospital.

"It's crazily ambitious," Michener said. The initiative will start with $1 million in planning money this year for teams to work on ways to improve treatment of 10 chronic illnesses prevalent in Durham. "It's a seismic shift."

The diseases under study are not unique to Durham. But officials say the current methods for treating problems such as asthma, cancer, heart disease, diabetes, HIV and substance abuse are inefficient. The initiative expands on neighborhood clinics Duke already operates across Durham to more aggressively target needs. One new technology, geospatial mapping, could enable Duke to use county health department data to find where particular diseases are most common and then establish local programs to treat them.

"We spend a fortune on health care and the outcomes are not any better," said Gayle Harris, Durham County's health director. "Hopefully, we will come up with projects that the community will use."

The projects are funded by the National Institutes of Health and Duke Medicine, which hopes to reduce treatment costs by emphasizing disease prevention. At the end of the year, each of the 10 project plans will be evaluated.

While the partnership boasts the ambitious goal of improving the health of the "entire population of Durham County," organizers acknowledge it will heavily target health problems -- such as heart disease and infant mortality -- particularly common in minority and poor populations.

"People with health insurance also have access to quality care," said Sharon Elliott-Bynum, co-founder of Healing with Care, a Durham group that does community health outreach. "The individuals who don't have that same access [to insurance] have difficulty finding quality care."

To be truly community-based, the new health-care treatment plans will rely on legwork, and services will be tailored to life-styles, Michener said. "Take barbershops. Going into barber shops works great in the black community but doesn't do squat in the white community," he said. "If we want people to check their blood pressure, we can have them come to the office,"
which is inconvenient, or we can go and do it at barber shops."

Duke hopes to fund changes using money currently budgeted but knows it could take a hit if it accomplishes its goal of reaching more people -- even those without insurance.

"It's a risk we're already incurring, because if you get sick and go to one of our [emergency rooms], we're going to take care of you anyway," Michener said. "Duke Health System is going in knowing there are risks. [But] we're in Durham and we're going to be in Durham a long time, so we need to push this dialogue forward."

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