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N.C. swine flu cases up to 7; Craven, Carteret, Onslow hit

Staff and wire reports
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RALEIGH - The number of confirmed swine flu cases in North Carolina has jumped to seven as federal lab tests verified what state officials had suspected.

The N.C. Department of Health and Human Services said Tuesday there are four confirmed cases in Craven County and a related case in Carteret County. Officials have said four of those people work together and got sick after one of them traveled to New York City. The fifth is a child of one of the four adults.

The state also added a second confirmed case in Onslow County, where a man who had traveled to Texas was identified as the first confirmed case over the weekend. Officials suspect his wife has the virus.

A Wake County case remains "probable," but had not been confirmed by late Tuesday, state officials said.

An elementary school in Craven County closed Monday after a student was found to have a probable case of the swine or H1N1 flu. The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention revised its recommendations for schools and daycare centers Tuesday, saying those that had closed for flu-related reasons could reopen. Instead, the CDC recommended that students and staff with flu-like symptoms stay home for a minimum of seven days.

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Holtz, Steele present city $500K check for center

By Kathryn Kennedy
The Daily Reflector

Wednesday, May 06, 2009

It's hard to raise money during tough financial times. But don't try to sell that statement to East Carolina football coach Skip Holtz and his pal, Drew Steele.

The pair has been the face for three years' worth of fundraising efforts that will help pay for the Drew Steele Center — a renovation of the Elm Street Gym into a multi-purpose accessible recreation center. Both were on hand Tuesday evening to present a $500,000 check to Greenville Recreation and Parks Director Gary Fenton and Greenville Mayor Pat Dunn.

Dunn said she was impressed with the teamwork that went into the fundraising initiative, as well as "the goodness of people in this community."

"This is a big check in many ways," she said, chuckling as she accepted the oversized gift. "We include all people in our programming. Sometimes we haven't had the facilities.

The center will cater to those in the community with special needs — including Steele, who has Down's syndrome. Holtz said he was inspired by Steele's attitude from the first time they met at a Special Olympics event. An annual golf tournament and fundraising dinner yielded much of Tuesday's donation.

"It's amazing what happens when people will buy into a dream and come together," Holtz said, thanking all those who contributed to the cause and others working behind the scenes.

"We could all learn something from a lot of special needs children and the enthusiasm that they have," he added. "We are going to make a difference here."

The city has applied for a North Carolina Parks and Recreation Trust Fund grant that would match the contribution from Steele and Holtz. That million dollars would complete the first phase of a project, and Fenton said the $500,000 will remain intact until the matching funds are awarded.

The director estimates will require about $3 million to complete the project. Fenton noted that the state is tightening the budget across the board, but said he refuses to be discouraged.

"In (39 years of recreation and parks work) I've never experienced a fundraising initiative quite like this," Fenton said. "We have a dynamic project. And it is absolutely worth funding.

"It will get funded. It may not be in 2009, but we will get funding. We will persevere."

Of course, Steele doesn't discourage easily. He took the podium only briefly to thank Holtz, his parents and the caterers for bringing fried chicken and meatballs before dashing back across the room.

"His optimism is contagious," Fenton said during the presentation. "We should all catch it."

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Pitt hospital toughens visitation policy

The Daily Reflector

Tuesday, May 05, 2009

Stricter visitation policies are being implemented at Pitt County Memorial Hospital and its sister institutions now that the H1N1 flu has been confirmed in North Carolina.

The hospital's parent organization, University Health Systems of Eastern Carolina, is restricting visitation to members of a patient's immediate family and to children age 12 and over, according to a news release sent earlier today.

Hospital officials say anyone who is possibly sick with respiratory or gastrointestinal symptoms should not visit hospital patients.

As of 11 a.m. today, North Carolina had one confirmed case of the H1N1 flu virus, originally called the swine flu virus. The United States Center for Disease Control and Prevent has identified 403 cases in 38 states. One person, a toddler, died in Texas.

"The stricter visitation policies are in place to help protect our patients, visitors and staff. We have not seen any cases in the counties where our hospitals are located, thus far. We are just taking precautionary measures at this point," said Dr. Keith Ramsey, medical director for infection control at UHS/PCMH and professor of medicine at the Brody School of Medicine at East Carolina University. "Anyone who comes to the hospital with flu-like symptoms to receive treatment will be isolated and closely observed."

Hospital officials encourage people to wash their hands frequently, cough or sneeze into their shoulder or elbow and stay home from school or work if they are sick to prevent the spread of any illness.

Hospital officials will monitor H1N1 cases in North Carolina daily, and will remove these restrictions as soon it is safe to do so.

Along with Pitt hospital, University Health Systems owns or manages Albemarle Health, Bertie Memorial Hospital, Chowan Hospital, Duplin General Hospital, Heritage Hospital of Tarboro, Outer Banks Hospital, Pitt County Memorial Hospital, Roanoke-Chowan Hospital, University Home Health and Hospice and ViQuest. It also has physician practices and is affiliated with the Brody School of Medicine at East Carolina University.

For more information on the H1N1 flu virus, visit http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/.

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Study: New UNC will double traffic

BY JESSE JAMES DECONTO, Staff Writer

Comment on this story

CHAPEL HILL - Fifteen years from now, the future Carolina North campus will nearly double the traffic on the roads that feed it, according to a draft analysis released Tuesday.

Right now, about 40,000 vehicles travel Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and Estes Drive every day. By 2025, 40,000 more will enter or leave the campus, and MLK Jr. Boulevard will exceed capacity by 2015 because of the new traffic, says the analysis prepared by consultants at Vanasse Hangen Brustlin Inc.

By 2025, parts of Estes and Eubanks Road will see traffic volume more than twice capacity, unless those roads are widened or traffic is diverted.

The study says MLK Jr. Boulevard northbound will need an additional left turn lane onto Estes Drive Extension by 2015. By 2025, "many more intersections may need signal timing adjustments and turn lane additions to maintain their level-of-service," the report states. "More extensive reconstruction may also be needed of Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and Estes Drive in the immediate vicinity of the site."

More than a dozen intersections along MLK, Homestead Road, Greensboro Street in Carrboro, Columbia Street, Estes Drive and U.S. 15-501 already have poor levels of service, according to the study. With the new traffic as of 2015, others would reduce their levels to E or F, the lowest two grades. They include:

MLK at I-40
MLK at Weaver Dairy Road
MLK at Piney Mountain Road
MLK at Estes Drive
North Greensboro at Weaver Street
Estes Drive at Caswell Road
Estes Drive at East Franklin Street

By 2025, more than 20 additional intersections would have poor levels of service, as far west as the Calvander community on Old N.C. 86.

Carolina North traffic may also trigger a need for signal lights at Homestead and Rogers roads and at Estes Drive Extension and Airport Drive.

The draft analysis calls for new sidewalks, crosswalks, lighting, bus stops and bike lanes to serve the campus.

"The redesign of major roads adjacent to the site will need to account for these sidewalk and
pedestrian crossing needs," it says. Chapel Hill Transit will require one or two more buses by 2015 and at least 10 by 2025, according to the analysis.

"The cost for operating these initial vehicles should be borne by the project," the report states.

The study suggests potential traffic-calming measures to discourage cut-through traffic on and near the following streets:

Piney Mountain Road
Hillsborough Street (Chapel Hill)
Seawell School Road
North Elliott Road
North Lakeshore Drive
Barclay Road
Northwood Road

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WHAT'S NEXT

7 p.m. Thursday, a public education meeting about Carolina North, including presentation of the draft traffic impact analysis, will be held at the Chapel Hill Public Library, 100 Library Drive.

7 p.m. Monday, a public hearing on Carolina North will be held at Chapel Hill Town Hall, 405 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.
College students increase reliance on credit cards

When I attended college the option of charging an item to a credit card did not exist. Credit cards were not in abundant supply and their users were limited to a handful of bank clients with good payment records. What changed this credit landscape was primarily the cooperation by state legislatures in raising the interest rates that could be charged on a credit card as well as the awareness that there was much money to be made with customers carrying balances with interest and fees.

Soon every college newspaper around the country was soliciting student applicants. At first the balance limits were relatively low, around $500 to $1000, but this did not take long to change. Sponsoring banks would make more money from paying customers than they would lose from non-paying customers.

At about the same time purchase limits increased, the banks also took on a more aggressive collection strategy. Credit cards for college students were here to stay and an aggressive marketing strategy to sign-up even more customers was put into high gear. This was done without a proper check of the applicant’s ability to pay, and was done because those paying according to schedule outnumbered defaulters.

In 1998, the federal government, led by Sallie Mae, a leading college financing company took a sincere interest in this problem. Sallie Mae conducted its first survey as to how many college students had credit cards and the average balance they carried on each.

The results were staggering.

In 2008, the average college student carried nearly $2,200 in credit card balances. Further, the higher the standing among the student the higher the credit balance.

For example, in 2008 graduating seniors had an average of $4,100 in card debt, up 44 percent from 2004 survey numbers.

In comparison, during the same time period the freshman’s credit card debt rose 27 percent to just over $2,000.

As the cost of higher education is on the rise, what is upsetting about this credit card phenomenon is students resorting to the charge card to buy necessary items such as books, supplies, and in some cases, even tuition.

Creditors are only too happy to lend since they are aware that the last thing a young college graduate wants to do is start his or her career with a heavy debt load. College newspapers also contain ads from bankruptcy attorneys advising students to start their work careers with a clear slate.

Bankruptcy on your record is something you can never escape. Just because it is removed from your credit report after so many years, employers and lenders are persistent in asking if you have ever applied for bankruptcy.

The answer to this revolving credit dilemma is simple. College students need to stay away from credit card debts, but if they do get sucked into this credit vortex the last thing they want to do is file bankruptcy for a small amount that does not exceed a few thousand dollars. Remember also that the age of 18 is the age of majority in all states in which students are considered old enough to protect themselves when it comes to signing a valid, binding contract. There is no taking this problem home to mom and dad and getting it resolved. In fact, students may have entered into these credit card contracts without their parents’ knowledge. However, at the age of 18 the law considers minors old enough to take care of themselves.

Lastly, even in this period of economic peril credit card companies continue to get students to sign a binding contract for a charge card. The same issues that motivated them prior to this economic downturn to seek out college students as customers remain just as pertinent and lucrative today.

Jack F. Karns, S.J.D., is a professor of business law in the College of Business at East Carolina University.
Game-changing call to college football: Playoff

BY FREDERIC J. FROMMER
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Tackling an issue sure to rouse sports fans, lawmakers pressed college football officials Friday to switch the Bowl Championship Series to a playoff.

John Swofford, the coordinator of the BCS, rejected the idea of switching to a playoff, telling a House panel that it would threaten the existence of celebrated bowl games. Sponsorships and TV revenue that now go to bowl games would instead be spent on playoff games, "meaning that it will be very difficult for any bowl, including the current BCS bowls, which are among the oldest and most established in the game's history, to survive," Swofford said.

Rep. Joe Barton of Texas, who has introduced legislation that would prevent the NCAA from calling a game a national championship unless it's the outcome of a playoff, bluntly warned Swofford: "If we don't see some action in the next two months, on a voluntary switch to a playoff system, then you will see this bill move."

After the hearing of the House Energy and Commerce Committee commerce, trade and consumer protection subcommittee, Swofford told reporters: "Any time Congress speaks, you take it seriously."

Yet it is unclear whether lawmakers will try to legislate how college football picks its No. 1 before the first kickoff of the fall season. Congress is grappling with a crowded agenda of budgets, health care overhaul and climate change, and though President Barack Obama favors a playoff, he hasn't made it a legislative priority.

College football's multimillion-dollar television contract also could be an obstacle.

The BCS's new four-year deal with ESPN, worth $125 million per year, begins with the 2011 bowl games. That deal was negotiated using the current BCS format. While See BCS, B3

BCS
Continued from B1

ESPN has said it would not stand in the way if the BCS wanted to change, the new deal allows the BCS to put off making major changes until the 2014 season.

Jonathan Turley, a constitutional law expert at George Washington University, said the legislation could result in a court challenge.

"This is a rare effort by Congress to prevent people from using what is a common description of sporting events," he said in a telephone interview. The legislation, he said, "may run afoul of the contractual agreements between parties, wiping out benefits that have already been paid for by companies."

Barton, the top Republican on the committee, said at the hearing that efforts to tinker with the BCS were bound to fail.

"It's like communism," he said. "You can't fix it."

The current system features a championship game between the two top teams in the BCS standings, based on two polls and six computer rankings.

Under the BCS, some conferences get automatic bids to participate while others do not. Conferences that get an automatic bid — the ACC, Big East, Big 12, Big Ten, Pac-10 and SEC — get about $18 million each, far more than the non-conference schools.

Swofford is also commissioner of the ACC.

"How is this fair?" asked the Subcommittee chairman, Democratic Rep. Bobby Rush of Illinois, who has co-sponsored Barton's bill. "How can we justify this system ... are the big guys getting together and shutting out the little guys?"

"I think it is fair, because it represents the marketplace," Swofford responded.

Craig Thompson, commissioner of the Mountain West Conference, which does not get an automatic bid, called the money distribution system "grossly inequitable."