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Easley unhappy with House’s budget proposal

By Gary D. Robertson
The Associated Press

RALEIGH — The full House waded through its proposed $21.3 billion budget plan on Tuesday even as Gov. Mike Easley said he was disappointed by what he called a retreat on education spending.

Easley asked why his fellow Democrats failed to provide what he recommended for teacher pay, university enrollment increases and his More at Four preschool initiative.

"It’s very puzzling to me how a House that was so progressive on education last year can retrench so rapidly this year,” Easley told reporters following the regular monthly meeting of the Council of State.

The House budget for next year cleared three committees Tuesday, approved by the last panel after 7 1/2 hours of debate and votes on more than 50 amendments. The budget, which is expected to receive the first of two required floor votes Wednesday, sets aside $14.6 million to pay for thousands of additional University of North Carolina system students this fall.

Easley’s budget said $34.6 million was needed for this fall, and UNC officials are concerned less money would mean that some students who are admitted will have to stay home.

"It’s not only unacceptable, but it’s just puzzling to me how they can be that far off the mark," Easley said.

House Democrats said they didn’t have enough money to provide average raises of nearly 7 percent for teachers, as Easley wanted. Instead, they gave an average 3 percent raises.

Without 7 percent raises, the governor said he and legislative leaders are breaking a 2005 promise to get teacher salaries above the national average during the next school year. Instead, Easley said, the House is "really stifling the teachers."

House leaders have said they can’t offer 7 percent during uncertain economic times and also give higher raises to rank-and-file state employees.

Overall, the House budget spends $183 million less than Easley’s plan.

"We had to balance the budget and I’m satisfied that we did the best we can with what was available," said Rep. Doug Yongue, D-Scotland, one of the House’s chief budget writers.

State employees would either receive a 2.75 percent annual boost or $1,100 — whichever is greater — under the House plan.

Easley wanted only 1.5 percent, with a bonus and an extra week of vacation.

Lawmakers in both parties also have shunned Easley’s proposed 20-cent-per-pack increase in the cigarette tax to help pay for the teacher raises.

The House Appropriations Committee worked well into
the evening before giving its final approval, with the Democratic-controlled panel largely agreeing to small spending shifts within the budget bill but little to address Easley's concerns.

But they also voted to expand counseling and legal help for homeowners at risk of foreclosure and to bar the state from giving temporary housing to registered sex offenders released from prison where they could come in contact with children.

An amendment by Rep. Pat Hurley, R-Randolph, to bar state lottery officials from getting paid more than the governor was turned into a study of all state salaries. Current lottery director Tom Shaheen receives a $246,000 salary. Easley earns $135,854.

The Senate will create its own version of the budget. Easley ultimately will be asked to sign a compromise budget bill into law.

Democrats say the budget wouldn't raise taxes, but it would increase a handful of fees and shift more than $41 million from dedicated trust funds and reserves to balance the budget. Overall spending would increase by 3.2 percent, much smaller than last year's 9.6 percent increase over the previous year.

"It's not last year's budget... and that's a good thing," said House Minority Leader Paul Stam, R-Wake. But he said that wasn't enough to support the bill.

The House Finance Committee agreed to shift a proposed $10 fee increase for marriage licenses to the fee for divorce court filings, which would now be $20 higher, or $75.

The proposal earmarked proceeds from the additional fees for domestic violence prevention programs. But committee members, particularly Republicans, complained that the act of getting married shouldn't be linked to marital conflict.

"There's nothing about the act of getting married that leads to domestic violence," said Stam, who offered the amendment to remove the extra license fee, which he called a tax.

The working poor also would get higher refundable tax credits as part of the budget, which adjusts the second year of the two-year budget starting July 1. A sales-tax holiday for energy-efficient appliances also would be instituted for the first weekend in November.

The overall Health and Human Services budget would be reduced by $167 million, largely by recalculating state Medicaid spending and reining in a program for the mentally ill and developmentally disabled.

The House also wants to spend $170 million in cash and to authorize $549 million in debt over the next four years to add 1,000 prison beds, university buildings and other construction projects.
PBS show features professor

"The Power of Forgiveness," a documentary airing tonight, includes research done by ECU psychology department chairwoman Kathleen Row.

By Josh Humphries
The Daily Reflector

Forgiveness, it seems, can be just as beneficial to those who forgive as to those who are forgiven.

East Carolina University psychology professor Kathleen Row said years of research show that forgiveness directly affects a person's health.

Row, chair of the psychology department at ECU, will be featured during a PBS documentary, "The Power of Forgiveness," today at 10 p.m. on WUNC-TV.

Row's research shows that forgiveness directly affects a person's health as measured by blood pressure, ability to sleep and energy levels.

Row had taught at the University of Tennessee for 31 years before coming to ECU in 2006. She has been doing forgiveness research for about 10 years and plans to continue her work at ECU this fall.

The film, directed and produced by Martin Doblmeier, won the best film award at the Sun Valley Film Festival and features interviews and stories from people of many beliefs and traditions. It has aired on PBS stations across the country.

Row's research shows a measurable difference in the blood pressure and heart-rate-recovery levels of those who can more easily forgive compared to those who can't.

Row asks each participant to fill out a questionnaire about forgiveness. Then, in a face-to-face interview, the subject is hooked up to heart-rate and blood-pressure monitors and asked to recount a time when he or she was wronged or betrayed.

All blood pressure and heart rates rise as subjects recount their betrayal, Row said, but those who had forgiven the wrongdoing return to normal levels much faster.

The severity of the incident does not relate to the body's reaction, she said. A small betrayal or a large one create the same responses, if the subject has not shown for-
If death calls, do patients hear?

Very ill often take an optimistic view

BY THOMAS GOLDSMITH
STAFF WRITER

Even very sick people like to think they are going to survive for a while.

But an accurate idea of how long patients have left is important for medical and end-of-life care, according to a new Duke study.

The study, which appears today in the Journal of the American Medical Association, says that patients with heart failure tend to overestimate by about 40 percent the time they have left to live.

"Not only did patients appear to be overly optimistic, but it also seemed that patients had very little comprehension of what an average life expectancy would be for someone with heart failure," said Dr. Larry Allen, a Duke cardiologist who is the lead author of the study.

And hopeful thinking wasn't helpful. People who overestimated their longevity did not live longer than those who guessed more accurately, the study found.

The mistaken estimates can have a fundamental effect on decisions about medications, transplants and end-of-life care, the study authors said.

Researchers surveyed 122 patients, average age 62, from people enrolled in a Duke heart-failure management program. The study compared the patients' projections of how long they thought they would live with life expectancies based on scientific models. Patients estimated they had 13 years to live. The science was more sobering: 10 years.

"There's just an innate component of human nature that doesn't want to look at the impending limitations of our own lives," said Cooper Linton, a vice president for marketing at Hospice of Wake County. "We are all inclined to let what we hope for guide what we predict."

For Army Sgt. 1st Class Kimberley Christopherson, being kept up-to-date on the severity of her heart condition was key to making decisions about her care.

"For a couple of months I struggled," Christopherson, 40, said from her room at Duke Hospital. "As far as I was concerned, my life could have ended at any time."

After developing congestive heart failure last year, Christopherson came back from Arizona this winter to be closer to her family in Virginia. She was recently put on a heart-transplant list.

"My situation has gotten worse," she said. "It's to the point where they feel something different needs to be done."

The Duke study did not ask the subjects about the basis for their estimates, leaving room for further work in the field, Allen said.

Possible reasons include a lack of complete information from doctors and patients' optimism about their own life spans, he said.

Patients with more serious disease and younger patients were more likely to overestimate their time left, the study showed. Better estimates could give patients and families more time to prepare for tasks such as end-of-life planning and funeral arrangements.

"Our goal is not to deprive people of hope," Allen said. "We want them to hope for the best, but we want them to prepare for the worst."

In an accompanying JAMA editorial, Dr. Clyde W. Yancy of the Baylor University Medical Center said clinical projections of life expectancy remain imprecise and that doctors shouldn't change the way they relate to patients because of the study.

"Although well-intended and carefully constructed tools and awareness of the natural history of disease are helpful, it is the primacy of the patient-physician interface that must prevail," Yancy wrote.
Web sites pick up on student loans

Traditional lenders are harder to tap

BY JUSTIN POPE
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The credit crunch has driven dozens of lenders out of the student loan market. But a number of new Web sites are trying to sidestep the traditional players, facilitating loans between students and anonymous investors or even friends and family members.

The latest startup player in the so-called “peer-to-peer” student lending market, GreenNote.com, marks its official launch today. The timing is intended to attract interest as students piece together financial aid over the summer.

The field is still fairly small but hoping for sharp seasonal increases. Fynanz.com, a competitor that matches up students anonymously with investors, said it’s seen a big uptick this week, with applications for $180,000 in loans arriving in the last three days.

The sites are popping up as many lenders have stopped issuing federally subsidized loans. Such loans are still available — contrary to sky-is-falling predictions — but students are having to hunt for banks or turn to the federal government itself.

Meanwhile, the credit squeeze is affecting some students as they try to find private loans, which more and more students need once they hit the ceiling on cheaper federal aid.

Peer-to-peer loans are stepping into that private-loan market.

The idea is that students can secure better terms by turning to individual investors willing to back them. Investors may get satisfaction from helping out a child, relative or friend. And if the lender knows the borrower personally, it lessens the likelihood of late payments or default.

“I do think they have some long-term promise,” said Mark Kantrowitz, who runs the Web site finaid.org. “I can see some-thing like alumni using one of these sites as a way to provide loans for current students.”

Indeed, three supporters of New York University have put up $500,000 through Fynanz to be available to students there.

Help with matchups

Sites like Prosper and Zopa have already tried to tap into the broader world of peer-to-peer lending, using the Internet to match up people who need to borrow for a range of reasons with strangers willing to back them.

Fynanz, which debuted in March and now operates in 16 states, called itself the first such service to target student loans. The site evaluates students for credit risk and matches them with investors who bid to finance the loans.

“It’s been a very eye-opening experience as to just how many people are out there who actually want to fund students,” said CC Chaman, the Fynanz chief executive. He said even nonprofit lending agencies have concluded Fynanz is an effective way to get their money to students.

GreenNote works differently. It focuses largely on formalizing and servicing loans between people who already know each other.

Students who need a private loan and have a bad credit history, but know people willing to lend to them, may find the terms attractive. There’s no credit check and the interest rate is 6.8 percent. That’s the same as a federal Stafford loan and better than most private loans and federal PLUS loans for parents.

The downside is students may not be able to borrow all they need. There also are fees — 1 percentage point of the interest return for lenders, and 2 percent up front for borrowers. And the interest isn’t tax deductible.
Audit says FSU students were overcharged

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

FAYETTEVILLE — State auditors say students at Fayetteville State University were charged too much for financial aid in 2007, the final year of former Chancellor T.J. Bryan's tenure at the university.

The Fayetteville Observer reported Monday that the 59-page report said there was no criminal wrongdoing. The report listed 13 other problems, including failing to collect unpaid student accounts and mistakes in checking financial aid applications from students.

University officials said students who were overcharged have been reimbursed and oversight was strengthened. The report was released Friday.

Bryan resigned as chancellor in July after criticism over a new nursing program and reports of previous financial problems.
A senator's surgery

As a source of civic or regional pride, it goes well beyond the usual boasts about being a great place to live, work and play. But the Triangle in general, Durham more specifically and Duke University in particular now can say that if you find yourself needing brain surgery, this looks to be a splendid port in a storm.

What a tribute to the professionals who have given Duke its first-class reputation in the world of health care and Durham its well-deserved nickname, the City of Medicine. Oh, we know about the Bull City, but this is about saving lives, not sending them up in smoke.

As a wealthy man and a member of Congress, doubtless with no health insurance worries to speak of, Sen. Edward Kennedy presumably could have chosen any hospital in the country for surgeons to operate on his malignant brain tumor.

He opted for Duke, where on Monday Dr. Allan Friedman and his team took on the challenge. Kennedy still will need chemo and radiation, but the operation was judged a success.

To help guard against the impairment in language functions that can result from surgery on a parietal lobe, Kennedy was kept awake during the procedure. That allowed for instant feedback and helped Friedman gauge where to cut. Yesterday, Kennedy was up and walking around.

Medical experts have said that the Massachusetts senator probably has an aggressive form of cancer. But if his treatment works, he could retain his place on the national stage for some time to come.

At 76, Ted Kennedy has been in the Senate an improbable 46 years, and his contributions to the nation's well-being have been manifold. Even if he were not the sole surviving brother of John F. Kennedy and Robert F. Kennedy — assassinated in their prime — Americans would wish him good luck during his recuperation and therapy. And many will remember where he went for surgery when the chips were down.