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East Carolina University News Bureau
E-mail to durhamj@ecu.edu Web site at http://www.news.ecu.edu
252-328-6481 FAX: 252-328-6300
City thanks Butterfield, asks for more support

By Kathryn Kennedy
The Daily Reflector

Monday, June 15, 2009

Gratitude was tempered by pleas for more funding when U.S. Rep. G.K. Butterfield visited with Greenville officials and staff Monday morning.

City staff applauded the congressman's support in securing a number of grants stemming from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Those include $1.9 million to remove lead-based paint from homes and the additional awards in annual Community Development Block Grants. Merrill Flood, director of community development, said CDBG funds are used to provide housing rehabilitation for low-income residents and job training resources to local nonprofits STRIVE of Eastern N.C. and the Family Violence Center of Pitt County.

But a tour around the city highlighted ongoing projects that still need funding and support.

The group took a small bus first around the site of the future Intermodal Transportation Center — which will sit between Cotanche and Evans streets and between East Eighth and East Ninth streets. It will provide a central location for dispatching East Carolina University buses and the city's GREAT buses. Assistant City Manager Thom Moton said they hope to extend the deadlines to spend $715,000 of federal money given to the project in 2007.

From there they drove the route which will become the 10th Street Connector, linking ECU and Pitt County Memorial Hospital by one multi-lane road. That project has been narrowed to three options with property acquisition scheduled to begin in two years and construction following in 2013.

The Lucille B. Gorham Intergenerational Center and the Greenville Police Department's headquarters were both offered as achievements of past federal funds and earmarks.

Butterfield spent time out of the bus at these sites, shaking hands and listening to program descriptions.

"Earmarks are a legitimate means for a member (of Congress) to direct funds in their district," he said, noting the term is often a negative to public ears. "But downtown revitalization or a mental health intake center? That's no bridge to nowhere."

He also spoke briefly about issues they're facing in Washington, D.C., including universal health care initiatives, pushing for sustainable energy and the swelling federal budget.

"We've got to get the budget under control and we're determined to do it," he said. "It's going to be painful."

Mayor Pro-Tem Mildred Council, Councilwoman Rose Glover and Councilman Calvin Mercer accompanied the congressman on his trip around Greenville. Councilman Bryant Kittrell attended the meeting but withdrew before the tour.

Contact Kathryn Kennedy at kkennedy@coxnc.com or (252) 329-9566.
Swedish students perform with local violinists

By Brock Letchworth
The Daily Reflector

Monday, June 15, 2009

Members of the Greenville Suzuki Association joined a group of Swedish visitors Monday night for a strings concert that organizers hope will forge new friendships and allow students to share ideas about music.

The concert was part of an ongoing exchange program between Suzuki groups. One of its organizers was Joanne Bath, director of the GSA and a Suzuki violin pioneer in the state. It included 18 Swedish children and about two dozen local students ages 8-19.

Bath, who started teaching Suzuki in North Carolina more than 40 years ago, said the concert benefits violinists from different cultures by bringing them together in a familiar arena.

"The Suzuki approach to music study is so good for this because children from all over the world are playing the same repertoire," Bath said. "They are learning basically the same way so when they get together they have a lot in common and we can have a wonderful concert."

Participants in Monday's concert practiced for about an hour before performing.

"This is so natural for them," Bath said. "They can get together and make beautiful music with very little practice."

Since 1991, Bath has taken four North Carolina groups to Sweden and England to participate in similar concerts. A group from England visited Greenville a few years ago, she said.

The Swedish group is in town until Wednesday. It will then travel to Dunn, where Bath's daughter teaches, for a similar concert.

Asa Sandell, of Dalarna, Sweden, said her daughters enjoy getting together with violinists from other cultures to play and discuss music.

"With Suzuki, you can always play with anyone from any country because you are playing from the same books, the same tunes," Sandell said. "To come see other boys and girls who have the same interest as yourself is special because you can gain new friendships. You don't have to know the language right away. Music is kind of the universal language."

Members of the Swedish group are staying with host families during their visit. They will put down their violins today for a trip to Bath before traveling to Dunn.

Contact Brock Letchworth at bletchworth@coxnc.com or (252) 329-9574.

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The budget document approved by the N.C. House on Saturday reflects the deeply troubling condition of the state economy this year. Facing a shortfall projected to exceed $4 billion, lawmakers would impose deep cuts on spending and sharp increases in taxes to balance the budget.

As the Senate and House now gather to hammer out a final budget for the coming fiscal year, it is impossible to diminish the gravity of the decisions before them. Clear, however, is that a year of hardship now seems unavoidable for North Carolina and citizens, though that was not always the case.

The state Constitution mandates that budget bills receive two votes, on different days, in the interest of public debate, a provision ignored yet again as the state House approved its spending plan on votes straddling midnight on Friday. The generally party-line vote saw the chamber approve an $18.6 billion budget. It sends that document to a conference committee with members of the Senate, who approved a budget plan in April.

With the new fiscal year set to begin on July 1, negotiations must be swift but promise to be complicated because the two sides have approved vastly different spending plans. The Senate’s bill won passage before sluggish tax collections dramatically increased the size of the shortfall. So the House bill includes roughly $2.2 billion in budget cuts and $784 million in tax increases, many of which are sure to draw opposition from the other chamber.

What hurts the most is the possibility such hardship might have been avoided.

A decade has passed since it first became clear that profound changes in the North Carolina economy would dry up revenue, leaving the state scrambling to pay the tab for public services. Yet, despite that certain knowledge, lawmakers lacked the courage and desire needed to enact the type of comprehensive tax reform needed to reflect a modern state economy.

As negotiations begin, likely budget items include the elimination of some salaries for teachers and state employees and will create larger class sizes in public schools. But there will be heated debate over increases in the income and sales taxes approved by the House.

But again this year, lawmakers looked to existing revenue streams rather than trying to fix a flawed system. And so again, North Carolina seems assured of paying the price of that inaction.

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Kickoffs announced for Pirates

The Daily Reflector

Tuesday, June 16, 2009

Regional and local television packages and official kickoff times for East Carolina's upcoming football season were announced Monday.

At least 10 of the Pirates' 12 regular season games will be televised. If CBS College Sports chooses to air ECU's Nov. 28 game with Southern Miss, it will be the 11th televised game.

Only ECU's Sept. 12 game at West Virginia has not been assigned a start time or television designation.

The Pirates open their season with a noon kickoff at home against Appalachian State. The game will be carried by MASN with local availability through NBC affiliate WITN-TV.

East Carolina will kick off three of its four Conference USA home contests at 3:30 p.m. — UCF on Sept. 26, Rice on Oct. 17 and UAB on Nov. 21.

WITN-TV will provide broadcast coverage of the league opener against the Knights, MASN will call the action against the Owls while both entities will air the Blazers' visit to Dowdy-Ficklen Stadium.

The Golden Eagles and Pirates will close out November with a 1 p.m. start.

A Thursday night home contest against Virginia Tech, set for a 7:30 p.m. kick on Nov. 5, is one of four regular season appearances on the ESPN family of networks that also includes road games at North Carolina (noon/Sept. 19), Memphis (8 p.m./Oct. 27) and Tulsa (8:15 p.m./Nov. 15).

Additional road matchups at Marshall (Oct. 3) and SMU (Oct. 10) will be carried back live to Greenville by CBS College Sports and MASN/WITN-TV, respectively. The Pirates and Thundering Herd are scheduled for a noon start, while the SMU game will start at 8 p.m.

— ECU Media Relations
Teaching program grads go unhired

They must teach or repay the state

BY LYNN BONNER, Staff writer

New college graduates who were enticed into teaching careers by state scholarships and prospects of a pushover job market are now facing closed classroom doors.

The most recent graduates of the N.C. Teaching Fellows program are entering a toxic job market but face a deadline for fulfilling the work requirements of the scholarships.

Teaching fellows have seven years after graduation to fit in four years of work in North Carolina public schools. If they don't, they must repay the state $6,500 a year for every year they are short of the required post-college teaching service.

These would-be teachers are looking for work under circumstances they could not imagine four years ago when they started college. Districts are now laying off the licensed professionals who just a few years ago they were desperate to hire.

"This is not what we expected," said Jasmyne Hill, who is looking for a teaching job in her home county of Pasquotank.

The fellows program was marketed to high school students with assurances of bright job prospects, said Hill, 21, who graduated from Elon University this year. "You'll definitely be hired. You're the first," she said, describing the tone of the recruiters.

"It's kind of like we were promised jobs when we took the scholarships," she said.

Anticipating more demand four years ago, the commission that governs the program upped its annual awards from 400 to 500. Information on how many recipients graduated this year and how many have found jobs is not yet available.
Jo Ann Norris, the program administrator, said the commission that oversees the Teaching Fellows gives scholarship recipients more time to meet their work obligations in extreme circumstances.

The teacher-recruitment program started in 1986 as a way to lure good students into the profession. After completing two rounds of interviews, successful applicants receive scholarships of $6,500 a year for four years and agree to teach for four years in a public school after graduation.

Fellows attend one of 18 colleges or universities that are part of the program. Norris said she did not know of any other teacher recruitment program like it in the nation.

Between the first graduating class in 1991 and December 2008, about 6,100 teaching fellows had graduated, and 3,514 were teaching this year.

In 2005, when this year's graduates started college, all the talk was about school districts trying to fill 9,000 to 11,000 teaching vacancies a year caused by population growth, smaller class sizes and faculty turnover. The state had almost 1,000 teaching jobs unfilled in October 2004, and school boards were fighting with then-Gov. Mike Easley over a proposal that would have made it easier for teachers who moved from out of state to qualify for jobs here.

More seekers; fewer jobs

Even though school districts are cutting teaching jobs, the N.C. Department of Public Instruction and the N.C. Public School Forum, which administers the Teaching Fellows Program, continue to paint a glowing view of the job market.

A Web site aimed at prospective Teaching Fellows says graduates aren't guaranteed jobs, "but with the additional teacher allotments and the increased student enrollment in North Carolina, there will be a strong demand for new teachers."

Prospective applicants are told school districts covet teaching fellows.

For example, Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools offered signing bonuses of $2,500 to teaching fellows last year. Lenior County schools handed out $500 bonuses to program graduates.

The scholarship program has grown in popularity as the work has dried up. Last year, 2,200 students applied for the scholarships, more than in any previous year, Norris said.

It's not only new graduates who are having a tough time in the shrunken job market, Norris said. She's also had to calm panicky new teachers who found out this spring that their school districts would not renew their contracts.

"We've been through budget crises before," Norris said, "and as I say to folks who call, hopefully this economic downturn is not going to last forever."

What to do now

Lauren Wortman, a 2007 N.C. State graduate, is back in the job market after resigning from her teaching job in Wake County to move with her husband to Shelby.

Wortman, who had her last day at Knightdale High School last week, said she felt sorry for new graduates just entering the job market. But Wortman said she wasn't worried about finding a new position before the scholarship repayment deadline.

"I still have plenty of time to fulfill that requirement," she said. "In three more years, someone will be retiring and there will be a job open."

She advises applicants who cannot find work to consider starting as teacher assistants or substitutes, so they can stay connected to the profession and the districts where they want to
teach. She also suggests that teaching fellows who planned to get masters degrees think about starting on them this year.

By this time last year, most of the new graduates from the Teaching Fellows program at UNC-Greensboro had jobs, said Annette Cline, the university's assistant program director. "That's not the case this year," she said.

"It scares them a little bit," Cline said. "But I definitely think things are going to turn around."

Lauryn DuPree, who graduated from Meredith College this year, got a close-up look at the tightening job market while student teaching in Wake this spring when the district imposed a hiring freeze.

The 21-year-old from Knightdale wants to teach in the county where she grew up. She has applied at 40 Wake schools and visited 20.

As for the scholarship's work requirement, DuPree said she's trying to put the deadline out of her mind.

"I'm trying not to dwell on that right now," DuPree said. "I'm trying to stay optimistic."

lynn.bonner@newsobserver.com or 919-829-4821

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Assembly must make hard choices

The state House specifies spending cuts and tax hikes as the blueprint for a budget, but tax reform is important, too.

It's crunch time -- number-crunching time -- at the General Assembly. In just two weeks the state budget for the fiscal year that begins July 1 is due to be signed into law. As things stand, the budget has only begun to take its final shape.

This year's fiscal picture is like none in decades. North Carolina is potentially in the hole by billions of dollars. A recession-wrecked economy isn't producing anywhere near the tax revenue of recent years. Yet state government's responsibilities haven't diminished a bit.

The situation calls for a compromise between cutting expenses and boosting revenue -- that is, taxing. The key, in the next two weeks, is to make the smartest possible moves in both categories.

The House, to its credit, has wrapped up a budget plan that doesn't shrink from grim reality. At $18.6 billion for fiscal 2009-10, it comes in $4 billion below the budget approved for the current year, or nearly 20 percent less. That's a huge reduction; because many expenditures are essentially fixed or go straight to education and vital social services, the cuts' total could hardly be greater.

House Democrats, who control the chamber, would balance their budget by 1) axing about $3 billion in programs funded in the current year's budget and 2) imposing $780 million in new taxes. More than $1 billion in stimulus funds helps offset the cuts -- in tune with Congress' aim of saving jobs now, but trouble down the road in budgets to come.

On a near-party line vote, Democrats pushed their plan through the House over the weekend. Republicans offered little help, taking potshots at projects and spending practices -- nothing wrong with that -- but declining to identify the hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars (billions, really) in reductions that their no-new-taxes stance would logically require.

Reality is that teacher layoffs, higher tuition and less spending on health are in the cards. Reality is that for all the teapot museum grants everyone decries, only cuts to the biggest, most sensitive budget categories produce enough savings. That's why the House budget, as passed, includes tax increases to ease the cuts' sting. The specifics here are sobering -- and not just the small hike in the liquor tax.

A quarter-percentage-point increase in the state sales tax (to 4.75 percent) hits folks in the wallet every time they shop. And while the House widens the sales tax's scope, extending it to some services, this is hardly the long-sought, comprehensive sales tax reform that would lower the rate in return for broadening the tax's reach. It's just a tax hike, necessary but regrettable. A boost in income tax rates for earnings over $200,000 also produces big money, but does nothing to keep our tax burden in line with surrounding states'.

Still, the House budget was an honest effort. Now, with two weeks to go, the Senate and
Governor Perdue rejoin the fray. The Senate, to its credit, already has signaled its support for some tax reform, and that should be a basis of negotiations. The goal must be a budget that that strikes the best possible balance. And in this dire year, it’s doubly vital to shape that minimal budget with maximum openness.

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Cut out wasteful spending

The analogy wouldn't work in the dead of winter, but this time of year it's right on target: North Carolina's state budget is like a garden with a weed problem. Lots of good, nourishing veggies, threatened by weeds that can choke out plants we want and depend on. Doesn't anyone know how to operate a hoe?

The N&O’s "Generous Assembly" series last week covered lots of territory in surveying some expenditures that make the budget look overgrown in spots. Saturday's installment dealt with projects that develop strong support despite meager evidence that they can bring the kind of benefits first envisioned.

Then on Sunday, we read about unusual state employee compensation policies that, almost as if by accident, have obligated the state to huge future payouts. It's important that state personnel be fairly and competitively compensated. But it's also important that taxpayers not be left to finance employee perks that range well beyond the norm for either the private or the public sectors.

In the category of misbegotten projects, it's hard to beat the Atlantic Coast Conference "Hall of Champions." Greensboro legislators pushed for a state investment even though the ACC declared it had no intention of putting up any funds on its own. If the state can get off the hook with the $2 million already allocated, it should. Too often, as with the case of the N.C. Center for Automotive Research in Northampton County, once a project gets initial seed money, the state then is pressured to keep raising the ante to keep its initial investment from being wasted.

The N&O's Dan Kane attempted to uncover a master list of state-funded programs created over the last 10 years, only to be told that there is no such list. Governor Perdue wisely wants to correct that. The state can't possibly do a logical job of prioritizing its expenditure of scarce resources if it can't even keep track of all the programs and projects that accumulate at the behest of civic boosters or economic development groups or legislators trying to bring home the bacon.

State employees compensation is another area where good intentions clash with the realities of budgeting amid a severe recession. If base pay levels tend to be on the low side, the thinking has gone, make it up with a generous approach to other forms of compensation.

That's surely what has happened. For instance, employees can carry up to six weeks of vacation, and Kane reported that nearly 24,500 employees whose data he was able to survey were doing so. If everyone cashed out their accrued vacation, it would cost $154 million at current salaries. And many employees will carry their vacation until they retire.

They also will be able to convert unused vacation time exceeding six weeks into sick leave, and then use that sick leave to extend their time in service and augment their pensions. These costly provisions amount to solicitous treatment of the state government workforce -- a worthwhile objective. Yet, from the comments of a couple of the legislature's top budget writers, it's clear that mushrooming personnel costs are an unpleasant surprise. Kane wasn't even able to quantify those costs for employees in the University of North Carolina system,
which refused to disclose pertinent data.

A garden carelessly tended will sprout weeds very quickly. The state’s budget clearly needs more rigorous oversight when it comes to questionable expenses that make it harder for essential programs to survive.

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N.C. keeps close eye on flu

Cases are up, as is capacity to test

BY SARAH AVERY, Staff Writer

A recent uptick in the number of pandemic flu cases confirmed in North Carolina reflects not only that the virus is circulating but also that surveillance is especially sensitive.

The state reported 96 cases on Friday -- including two among N.C. State University students. A UNC-Chapel Hill student had earlier been diagnosed with the new flu strain, and other cases were reported among grade school students in area counties.

The case count recently began rising in the low double digits each day, which state health leaders expected once the virus was confirmed as circulating. Flu spreads fairly easily in droplets from coughs and sneezes.

But other factors also account for the rising numbers, said Dr. Jeffrey Engel, state health director. He said two private laboratories recently gained the needed material to test flu samples for the novel virus. That has tripled the capacity to test possible cases, which had previously been conducted at the state public health lab in Raleigh.

In addition, people are on high alert for flu symptoms, Engel said, and are more readily going to their doctors when they come down with a fever, aches and other symptoms.

As a result, the state is detecting more of all flu infections, not just pandemic flu, for this time of year compared to previous off seasons.

"We definitely saw an uptick with influenza-like illness," Engel said. "I think this year what happened is we had a phenomenon of the worried ill."

Engel said scientists are trying to figure out how frequently and under what conditions the virus triggers severe symptoms. While there have been more than 17,000 cases confirmed or suspected in the United States, only 45 people have died. None has died in North Carolina, and Engel said he is aware of only two people needing hospital care.

savery@newsobserver.com or 919-829-4882

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Groups at high risk from pandemic flu

• Children younger than 5
• Adults over age 65
• Children who are receiving long-term aspirin therapy
• Pregnant women
• People who have asthma, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, HIV or other chronic ailments
• Residents of long-term care facilities

SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
Denver grads create 'bike library' for those needing a free ride
By Lauren Ashburn, USA TODAY

They’re known around the University of Denver campus as “the sustainability duo.”

Mary Jean O’Malley and Zoe Turrill, 22-year-old recent graduates of the university, are the masterminds behind a bike-sharing program on DU’s campus that will debut this fall.

The “bike library” is a pilot for a citywide bike-sharing program that will launch next spring. Six hundred bikes will be placed in 40 kiosks around the city of Denver, so locals can borrow and return them.

Two kiosk locations will be on the DU campus for use by students and faculty.

Turrill and O’Malley, with help from the student senate and several departments on campus, created the free service to ease traffic congestion and reduce students’ financial burden.

"College students, we eat ramen noodles for every meal," Turrill says. "We can barely afford to pay for our gas."

She and O’Malley canvassed the campus and raised $50,000, mostly from student organizations and academic departments, to finance the program.

The initiative has earned them a commendation from Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper. "They got the entire university community all enthused and excited about this," he says.

A number of other universities have some form of bike-sharing, "but to the best of our knowledge, this is the first time a university has partnered with a city" in such a program, says Chase Squires, DU senior public affairs specialist.

In recent years, bike-friendly programs of various types have sprung up in communities around the country:

• The non-profit Bicycle Kitchen in Los Angeles asks volunteers to teach people to fix their own bikes for a donation of $7 an hour; no one is turned away for lack of funds.

• In Sacramento, non-profit Cycles 4 Hope collects and refurbishes bicycles for the homeless.

• In Washington, Bikes for the World, sponsored by the Washington Area Bicyclist Association (WABA), collects unwanted bikes and parts in the USA and delivers them to the poor in developing countries.

Bicycles can be a cost-effective and environmentally friendly mode of transportation, and bike-sharing programs can attract dollars even in a shaky economy.

According to WABA, donations increased 20% from 2007 to 2008.

"The economy is forcing people to look at cutting costs," says executive director Eric Gilliland. "One way to do it is to not drive as much."

According to the American Automobile Association, the average cost of owning and operating a bike is $750 a year, compared with $8,000 for a car.

Spearheading the Denver bike-sharing program has spurred the "sustainability duo" to put their entrepreneurial spirit and interest in the environment to work: This fall, Turrill will begin a fellowship with non-profit Environment America, and
O’Malley will join Teach for America, teaching children in Tulsa.

The city of Denver has aspirations of its own, Hickenlooper says: “The goal is to have 10% of the total commuter population on bikes in 10 years.”

*Contributing: Taylor Barnes*

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