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Second vote could send $21.4B state budget to Easley for signature

Lawmakers tentatively approved the budget Monday in the first of two required votes.

BY GARY D. ROBERTSON
The Associated Press

RALEIGH — The General Assembly tentatively approved Monday night a nearly $21.4 billion final budget bill for the new fiscal year, a plan that slows down the recent rapid rise in spending but provides a hefty IOU in the form of $857 million in debt.

The result of two weeks of intense negotiations between House and Senate Democrats, the measure increases spending by 3.4 percent, or $698 million, compared to more than 9 percent growth in each of the previous two years.

The relatively small increase results from a slowing economy that provided a meager surplus for the year ending June 30 and required lawmakers to make some last-minute changes to attempt to satisfy fellow Democratic Gov. Mike Easley.

"Not everybody gets what they want, but I believe this is a very good budget for the state of North Carolina," said Sen. Linda Garrou, D-Forsyth, a chief budget-writer, before the Senate gave it initial approval by a vote of 34-16.

The Senate and the House, which minutes later approved the spending plan 97-21, were scheduled to cast the second of two required votes Tuesday. Easley will be asked to sign the bill into law.

"It is both fiscally responsible and respectful of the problems some people are having making ends meet," said House Majority Leader Hugh Holliman, D-Davidson, during the debate.

But some Republicans complained the budget still spent too much in uncertain economic times and borrowed too much without requiring statewide voter approval. And they warned that the budget would require higher taxes to pay for the debt in the future.

"I think given the economic times that we've got, it would be must more prudent for us to look at our situation realistically," said Senate Minority Leader Phil Berger, D-Rockingham, during Senate debate. But the bill still breezed to initial approval with bipartisan support.

There are no new taxes and tax breaks are few this year as Easley successfully persuaded fellow Democrats to delay for a year eliminating the gift tax and expanding a refundable tax credit for the working poor.

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BUDGET
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Easley was worried there wasn't enough revenue after tax collections missed estimates by $63 million total in May and June, forcing some last-minute spending reductions. Easley, who has never vetoed a budget bill, is in his final year in office.

"The overcollections were not what we expected them to be," said Rep. Mickey Michaux, D-Durham, the chief House negotiator.

Easley failed to receive all that he sought for his signature. At Four preschool initiative, while a provision left out of the budget would have given the governor power to raise public school teacher salaries if tax revenues improve this year.

"The governor is reviewing the budget," Easley budget adviser Dan Gerlach said. "You have to look at the whole budget overall, not just this thing or that thing."

Teachers would receive average 3 percent raises while other state employees would receive the greater of 2.75 percent or $1,100 — less than what either group wanted.
Drinking games proving deadly to college students

BY AMY FORLITI
Associated Press Writer

WINONA, Minn. — On the morning after the house party on Johnson Street, Jenna Foellmi and several other twentiesomethings lay sprawled on the beds and couches. When a friend reached over to wake her, Foellmi was cold to the touch.

The friend’s screams woke up the others still asleep in the house.

Foellmi, a 20-year-old biochemistry major at Winona State University, died of alcohol poisoning on Dec. 14, one day after she had finished her last exam of the semester. According to police reports, she had three beers during the day, then played beer pong — a drinking game — in the evening, and downed some vodka, too.

Foellmi’s death was tragic, but typical in many ways.

An Associated Press analysis of federal records found that 157 college-age people, 18 to 23, drank themselves to death from 1999 through 2005, the most recent year for which figures are available. The number of alcohol-poisoning deaths per year nearly doubled over that span, from 18 in 1999 to a peak of 35 in 2005, though the total went up and down from year to year and dipped as low as 14 in 2001.

"There have always been problems with young people and alcohol, but it just seems like they are a little more intense now than they used to be," said Connie Gores, vice president for student life at Winona State. "The goal of a lot of them is just to get smashed."

Over the seven-year span, 83 of the college-age victims were, like Foellmi, under the drinking age of 21.

A separate AP analysis of hundreds of news articles about alcohol-poisoning deaths in the past decade found that victims drank themselves well past the point of oblivion — with an average blood-alcohol level of 0.40 percent, or five times the legal limit for driving. In nearly every case, friends knew the victim was drunk and put him or her to bed to "sleep it off."

Schools and communities have responded in a variety of ways, including programs to teach incoming freshmen the dangers of extreme drinking; designating professors to help students avoid overdoing it; and passing laws to discourage binge drinking.

Charges were filed in about 40 percent of the cases in which outcomes of criminal investigations were known — most often against fraternity members or others who obtained alcohol for someone underage. There were a few hazing charges. In most cases, plea bargains were reached and the penalties included fines, probation or community service.

The federal data showed deaths spiking on weekends — when young people are more likely to go out with the goal of getting drunk — and in December, when college students wrap up finals. Most of the dead were young men.

College students on average drink only a little more than adults in a typical week or month, said Scott Walters, an assistant professor of behavioral sciences at the University of Texas School of Public Health. But college students "tend to save the drinks up and drink them all at once."

The federal figures do not indicate whether a victim was a student or not. But the 2006 National Survey on Drug Use and Health showed that adults ages 18 to 22 in college full-time are more likely to binge-drink than those not in school.

AP's analysis of news articles found freshmen at greatest risk, with 11 of 18 freshmen deaths occurring during the first semester.

Walters said one reason is that freshmen are on their own for the first time and trying new things. Also, there is a mentality that "if you're under 21 and someone's got alcohol, you've got to drink it, because you never know when somebody's going to have it again."

One practice — drinking 21 shots on a 21st birthday — has proven especially lethal. Of the college-age deaths that made news, 11 people, including eight college students, died while celebrating their 21st birthdays.

"The 21st birthday we knew was coming. We didn't know about the 21-shot thing," said Cindy McCue, who lost her son Bradley, a junior at Michigan State University, in 1998 after he downed 24 drinks in less than two hours.

The McCue family started a nonprofit organization nearly 10 years ago called Be Responsible About Drinking, or B.R.A.D., to teach young people about the dangers. The foundation created birthday cards reminding those turning 21 to celebrate responsibly.
Play it again

North Carolina Suzuki Institute celebrates 25th anniversary at ECU

BY KIM GRIZZARD
The Daily Reflector

For nearly as far back as she can remember, Emily Davis Palmer and her siblings attended the same summer camp. They played alongside the same children. They heard the same songs.

On Monday, Emily's 4-year-old son, Charles, spent his first day at camp. He joined in on "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star," a song his mother played a quarter century ago at East Carolina University.

Charles is among about 250 students from nearly a dozen states attending the 25th North Carolina Suzuki Institute at ECU's School of Music. Students ages 3 to 18 and their parents are spending the week studying violin, viola or cello at the institute, the only one of its kind in the state.

"It's a wonderful thing for the parents and children to do together," said Joanne Bath, artistic director of the institute and Hardy Distinguished Professor of Suzuki Pedagogy at ECU's School of Music. "I don't know another camp like this where the parents and the students participate together."

The Suzuki method, named for Japanese educator and violin teacher Shin'ichi Suzuki, emphasizes parental involvement and positive reinforcement. Suzuki's "mother tongue" approach attempts to teach children music the same way they learn to speak their native language: by starting early and reinforcing through repetition.

Jill Shank of Holly Springs had never touched a violin until her oldest son, Stephen, started playing at age 5. She's been coming to the Suzuki Institute ever since. This year, besides Stephen, now 10, she and her husband have brought Lauren, 7, and Matthew, 4.

"We really look forward to camp," Shank said. "Camp is a big motivator for us to practice in summer.

"It's fun; it's social. They play all day long."

At the institute, even the youngest students play for as many as four hours a day in
small and large groups.

On Monday, renowned conductor, composer and teacher Terry Durbin of Lexington, Ky., led a group of dozens of young violinists through various renditions of “Twinkle, Twinkle.” For these, the littlest stars at the institute, just lining up to play was quite an arrangement.

“Reach out and touch ... no one,” Durbin quipped, as parents around the room chuckled. But what started a chorus of giggles among the preschool set was when he said, “No bows up noses.”

“It’s a happy atmosphere,” Bath said. “They enjoy it because the classes are fun. The teachers try to keep everything fun.”

Once settled, the students worked to play the familiar song “Twinkle, Twinkle” in an unfamiliar tempo. The result, at first, was a cacophony that not even their mothers could love.

“I’m hearing 500 different tempos,” Durbin said. “You know what we call that? A mess.”

Minutes later, students regained their composure and polished “Twinkle, Twinkle” to performance level.

“They all learn the same repertoire, and they all learn it by memory, so their ears get incredibly well developed,” Bath said. “The fact that they can come together with children from all over the country and the world and that they can play the same pieces together is an incredible experience.”

Dana Friedli of Cary experienced Suzuki instruction from early childhood. Now a Suzuki instructor, she has referred several of her students to the institute, but this is the first year she has brought her daughter, Morgan Pasewicz, 6.

“I thought it was time,” Friedli said. “She finally has (learned) enough songs that we thought it was worth coming.”

Though Suzuki students often study year-round, rather than taking summers off, Friedli said spending a week at the institute gives students and parents a boost.

“There’s something magical that happens at camp,” said Friedli, who teaches music at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

“You get the same information basically from another voice, and that’s really important for the parents and the kids,” she said. “It makes a big difference.”

Jessica Bolin, 11, of Greenville has been playing violin for eight years, but she still enjoys attending the institute.

“You learn different techniques from different teachers,” she said. Olivia Smith, 13, of Chapel Hill began Suzuki violin at age 6. Her teacher, one of Bath’s former students, recommended she begin preparing early this year to be ready for the institute.

“My teacher took from Mrs. Bath, and she always came to this as a kid,” Olivia said. “She wanted me to come. She told me I would be practicing four or five hours a day. I like it. It doesn’t seem like I’m practicing that long at all.”

Even during an afternoon break on Monday, Olivia planned to go upstairs in A.J. Fletcher Recital Hall to find a place to practice.

Rehearsing voluntarily during free time? Bath said that’s a sign of Suzuki’s success.

“I think music should be like golf,” she said. “It should be something wonderful where you get great pleasure from making improvements.

“The idea is to help children love music and have music be a big part of their lives.”

See SUZUKI, D2
A $1.1 billion investment from State Employees’ Credit Union will give lenders ample cash.

By Tim Simmons

Despite a sour credit market, the largest provider of student loans in North Carolina will have all the money it needs to meet demand for the 2008-09 school year.

The N.C. State Education Assistance Authority is making that promise based on a decision by the State Employees’ Credit Union to invest $1.1 billion in the student-loan market.

The move comes about six weeks before colleges start classes, one of the busiest times of the year for financial aid offices.

The $1.1 billion will replace some of the money that had been generated through an often-used market known as auction-rate securities.

Lenders were caught off guard in February when the auction-rate securities market failed as part of the bigger credit crunch. Some lenders eventually got out of the business entirely.

But the failure was especially important to North Carolina students, because auction-rate securities were used to finance about $2 billion a year in student loans.

“We will use this investment from the credit union to refinance some of our taxable auction-rate bonds,” said Steve Brooks, director of the state authority.

“We also are using it to finance some new loans for this year.”

The authority was not in danger of running out of money, but the $1.1 billion investment allows it to provide loans with better rates and conditions than other available options.

“The rate we got from the credit union is at least as good and probably better than we could have done anywhere else,” Brooks said.

The credit union, in turn, is increasing its investment in a market with a good track record.

The authority backs about 60 percent of the student loans made in the state — or about $3.3 billion worth.

The public is far more familiar with its partner institution, the College Foundation of North Carolina. CFNC works with borrowers, promotes saving plans and works closely with school counselors to increase college enrollments.

The work includes an emphasis on obtaining grants and scholarships before families borrow money, a philosophy that Brooks thinks is a good fit with the credit union. “They actually came to me when they read about the problems in the credit markets and how it was affecting us,” Brooks said.

North Carolina’s is the second-largest state employee credit union in the country, said Leigh Brady, a spokeswoman for the credit union.

It has 1.4 million members and $16 billion in assets. It also has worked with the state before to provide smaller amounts of financial aid to students.

“We are natural partners, since we all focus on providing low-cost financial services to benefit North Carolinians,” said Shirley Bell, chairman of the group’s board.

As part of the agreement, credit union members are eligible for supplemental student loans at reduced rates once they have exhausted the federally guaranteed loans available to them, Brady said.

“Members of our credit union have been begging us to come up with some kind of student loan product, and they do the best job of it,” Brady said of CFNC.

Brooks said the state authority is working to refinance loans backed by tax-exempt auction-rate bonds.

“The credit union can’t really help us in that regard,” he said. “But this is the first big step toward getting them all done.”
Carson suspects get new charges

Grand jury hands down indictments

BY JESSE JAMES DECONTO
STAFF WRITER

HILLSBOROUGH — An Orange County grand jury on Monday indicted the two men accused in the slaying of Eve Carson on charges of armed robbery, first-degree kidnapping, felonious larceny and possession of stolen goods.

The jury also indicted Demario Atwater on additional charges of possession of a firearm by a felon and possession of a weapon of mass destruction. Authorities say Atwater wielded a sawed-off shotgun.

Despite investigative records showing that police think Carson was also shot with a handgun, suspect Laurence Lovette does not face weapons charges because he does not have a felony record. Prosecutors cannot consider Lovette's juvenile record for the purpose of lodging additional charges.

Both men were indicted March 31 on first-degree murder charges in the March 5 slaying of the UNC-Chapel Hill student leader. She was shot five times, according to an autopsy report released last week.

Orange-Chatham District Attorney Jim Woodall left unanswered the question of whether authorities believe the account of an anonymous informant who said Atwater told her he and Lovette entered Carson's home and took her from it. None of the new indictments reflects such a scenario.

Search warrants and related documents indicate that Carson may have been abducted from her home, forced into her Toyota Highlander and driven to an automated teller machine before she was shot in a neighborhood near campus.

A Rule 24 hearing, at which Woodall will announce whether he'll pursue the death penalty against Atwater, was postponed until Aug. 11. Woodall said that attorneys needed more time to prepare and that he wanted to give Carson's family more time to decide whether to attend.

If Atwater is convicted of murder, some of Monday's new charges could translate into aggravating factors to support a death sentence.

Orange County has not sent anyone to death row since 1970; no offender in Orange County has been executed since 1948.

Lovette, 17, is not eligible for the death penalty because of his age.

Lovette is charged also with first-degree murder in the death of Abhijit Mahato, a Duke University engineering student from Bengal, India, shot in a robbery in January.

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Duke Health talking about gun safeguards

Parents are likely to encounter a different type of question during their children's health visits at Duke University Health System's pediatric clinics these days: Do you need a gun lock?

As part of a joint effort by Durham County and Duke, pediatricians are talking to parents not only about the safety of guns in families' homes but also about safeguards in places where children visit.

"It involves not only asking, 'Do you have a gun in the house where the child lives?', but also, 'What about family members and friends?' and 'What about other households where the children may visit or stay during the weekend?'" said Dr. Sara Robert, a Duke pediatrician and professor.

The American Pediatric Association, which advocates for limiting children's access to guns, estimates that more than 168,000 children across North Carolina live in residences with loaded guns, and more than 82,000 children are in homes with loaded, unlocked guns.

**DOES THIS APPROACH WORK?** Yes, according to research published last week in the journal Pediatrics. Families who received counseling during well-child visits were significantly more likely to store guns safely than a control group, research showed.

**WHAT'S UP TODAY?** Duke pediatricians will be at the Duke Health Center at 4023 N. Roxboro St. today, starting at 9 a.m. to talk to children and families about gun safety. At the health center, and at Duke clinics at 3024 Pickett Road and 6301 Herndon Road, display tables will offer brochures, magnets, stickers and free gun locks.

**WHAT DO TRIANGLE GUN-RIGHTS ADVOCATES SAY?** Martie Schulte, a chief range safety officer for the National Rifle Association, said asking about neighbors' gun practices is intrusive and puts responsibility in the wrong hands.

"What I would do is educate the parent and the child on home firearm safety — on what to do in any situation if they see a firearm," Schulte said. "That way you don't have to rely on all this information or Johnny's family or Joey's family."

—— Thomas Goldsmith
Easley's easy money

You don't need to be Orlando Wilson or some other great fisherman to know that there is but one rule of fishing: If a catch is too small, you toss it back.

The opposite rule should apply in politics: If a catch is too big, you should throw it back — because something’s fishy.

There is something fishy about that huge raise-first lady Mary Easley received from N.C. State University. If she doesn’t throw it back, Chancellor James Oblinger or UNC system President Erskine Bowles should reduce it.

I like the governor personally, because among other things, he doesn’t seem overly concerned with the opinion of the media or the public. Every time he was criticized for not showing up at some back-slapping function to have his picture snapped with, say, a farmer who grew the large-kumquat in Eastern North Carolina, my respect for his independence grew.

He embodied the state’s Latin motto, Esse quam videre, "To be, rather than to seem."

Now, though, no longer facing re-election and apparently having lost any taste for public life, the governor appears to be in the midst of an unseemly effort to cushion Lady E’s and his return to private life.

Take a dozen pals on a junket to Italy at taxpayer expense? Climb aboard.

See your wife get a huge increase in pay from a state institution during the final months of your tenure? Sign here.

There may be some star-quality benefits — bragging rights or an ability to attract renowned lecturers, for instance — that a university receives for having the governor’s wife on the faculty. That’s why I never understood why N.C. Central University rarely mentioned that she was teaching there or that the governor is an alum of its law school.

If star quality is why NCSU feels Mary Easley is worth a pay hike from $90,300 to $170,000, it should say so and not insult our intelligence with talk of her increased responsibilities.

The NCSU vice chancellor’s assertion that the increase was warranted because of that is absurd, unless she’s going to — in addition to the duties cited — direct traffic, cook her famous string bean casserole (oops, sorry; that was Sweet Thang’s specialty) and coach special teams for the Wolfpack.

Efforts to reach Gov. Easley on Monday were unsuccessful.

The governor and his wife may not care what the media think of them, but a little empathy with the unwashed masses is in order.

MARY EASLEY: I’m sorry, Chancellor Oblinger. I can’t take such a whopping check when people in our state are hurting so.

CHANCELLOR: Why, that’s mighty thoughtful of you, ma’am. The people of North Carolina will be pleased to know that you turned down this money as a show of solidarity with them.

EASLEY: Turn it down? I just said I couldn’t accept a check. You leave my money in a hermetically sealed mayonnaise jar on the back porch of the Vatican: I’m flying back to Rome next week.

I disagree with the impassioned, disappointed state employee who wrote to me that Gov. Easley doesn’t care about poor people.

He cares. He and the first lady have adopted the philosophy of that great religious leader the Rev. Ike, who said, "The best thing you can do for the poor is not to become one of them."

With recent reports on his trip to Italy and Lady Easley’s extensive foreign travel and 88 percent raise — collectively known as the Great Money Grab of ’08 — a contemptuous gov seems to be telling us we can all kiss his esse quam videre.

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Binge drinking turns deadly for many college students

BY AMY FORLITI
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WINONA, Minn. — On the morning after the house party on Johnson Street, Jenna Foellmi and several other 20-somethings lay sprawled on the beds and couches. When a friend reached over to wake her, Foellmi was cold to the touch.

Foellmi, a 20-year-old biochemistry major at Winona State University, died of alcohol poisoning Dec. 14, one day after she finished her last exam of the semester. According to police reports, she had three beers during the day, then played beer pong — a drinking game — in the evening, and downed some vodka, too.

An Associated Press analysis of federal records found that 157 college-age people, 18 to 23, drank themselves to death from 1999 through 2005, the most recent year for which figures are available. The number of alcohol-poisoning deaths per year nearly doubled over that span, from 18 in 1999 to 35 in 2005, though the total went up and down from year to year and dipped as low as 14 in 2001.

"There have always been problems with young people and alcohol, but it just seems like they are a little more intense now than they used to be," said Connie Gores, vice president for student life at Winona State. "The goal of all of them is just to get smashed."

Over the 7-year span, 83 of the victims were, like Foellmi, under the drinking age of 21.

At least six of the deaths occurred in North Carolina, including that of Stephanie Huffer Kay, an N.C. State University student who died in April 2007 after celebrating her 21st birthday with her husband.

Her parents and NCSU have set up a scholarship — see http://tinyurl.com/6hs4sf — that requires recipients not to violate NCSU's alcohol and drug policies.

A separate AP analysis of hundreds of news articles about alcohol-poisoning deaths in the past decade found that victims drank themselves well past the point of oblivion — with an average blood-alcohol level of 0.40 percent, or five times the legal limit for driving. In nearly every case, friends knew the victim was drunk and put him or her to bed to "sleep it off."

"Her friends were with her. It's not like they just left her alone," said Jenna Foellmi's mother, Kate.

Charges were filed in about 40 percent of the cases in which outcomes of criminal investigations were known — most often against fraternity members or others who obtained alcohol for someone underage.

College students on average drink only a little more than adults, said Scott Walters, an assistant professor at the University of Texas School of Public Health. But college students "tend to save the drinks up and drink them all at once."
Worth it for students

As the General Assembly completes the state budget, the University of North Carolina system has been seeking $11.7 million in annual money and $17.5 million in one-time funding to bolster campus safety. Positions in campus security offices would be filled and staff would be provided to help students who seek psychological counseling. Lee Salter, director of counseling at N.C. State University, says that as things now stand, "We can't see all the students who need help." That situation is not acceptable.

And counseling, it should be noted, isn't just about finding and providing help for students with the potential to become dangerous — students such as the mentally ill young man who killed 32 people and himself last year at Virginia Tech.

Certainly it's important to try to identify any students of that sort, and the UNC system has done an admirable job in having campuses organize better safety plans for spotting such people and for spreading the word quickly on campus should acts of violence occur.

But the fact is that many UNC system campuses are seeing more and more need to provide counseling to get students over the rough spots that can derail them academically. At NCSU, appointments for counseling have gone up by 500 or more in each of the last five years while the staff size hasn't significantly increased.

It's not clear why the need for counseling has risen. Still, it has. Students, particularly those who are freshmen, often find themselves far from home and dealing with issues they've never before encountered — roommates with drugs, classroom challenges greater than they expected, homesickness, physical problems related to stress.

It's easy enough to say that part of growing up, part of college life, is "toughing it out" through hard times and rising up to meet challenges. In a given student population, however, there are a multitude of different backgrounds — the kid who was an independent type who has wanted to be on his own for years, and the one who has been sheltered, protected and has a more solitary nature. Both of those young people can have problems they can't handle, and many's the college counselor who has seen both types.

And as one official told The N&O, a counselor can make the difference between a saved semester and a lost one.

On the specific issue of safety, there is of course an increased need for campus officers and support personnel who see to it that a college campus is the sanctuary from danger that it ought to be. In these times, the lawmakers who are charged with providing the funding for the university system will do well to answer that call.

North Carolina has long prided itself on its public universities, noted for spectacular achievement in both the sciences and humanities. Additional money to protect students, and to keep them in that fine system, is a worthwhile investment.
Foundation invests in journalism education

CHAPEL HILL — The Carnegie Corp. of New York and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation have chosen the UNC School of Journalism and Mass Communication to join 10 other top journalism schools in a three-year program to adapt journalism education to the challenges of a struggling news industry.

With an initial $250,000 grant to UNC-CH, the Carnegie-Knight Initiative on the Future of Journalism Education encourages experimental projects, curriculum enhancement and collaboration with other academic disciplines and institutions.

Carnegie's president, Vartan Gregorian, said well-informed, bold journalists are central to a fully functioning democracy.

"Today's journalists must be steeped in experience and deeply knowledgeable about the subjects they report on," he said.

Knight Foundation president and Chief Executive Officer Alberto Ibargüen said today's journalists must deliver reliable information using multiple platforms and new technologies — and journalism education can train them to do that.

"In that sense, journalism schools have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to lead the industry," he said.

"Carnegie and Knight are playing a key role in extending our students' international experiences," said Jean Folkerts, dean of the UNC school.

"Today's students simply must engage in the global environment."