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Good start: Leaders' response to tragedy solid

Friday, July 10, 2009

City initiatives announced Wednesday, while open to ongoing discussion and fine tuning, should begin a process of community-wide calming in the wake of the tragic shooting deaths of two young men along Greenville’s Fifth Street 10 short days ago. Swift and decisive action breeds confidence.

Greenville police, government and downtown business leaders met at City Hall to discuss measures designed to prevent further downtown violence. On June 30, an East Carolina University student and the manager of a local pizza restaurant were shot and killed in a drive-by shooting in front of a nightclub on Fifth Street. Five days later, a dispute between rival groups resulted in gunfire that damaged a nearby downtown building.

The events have touched nerves across the community, causing renewed uncertainty about the city’s readiness to combat such violence as they have reopened lingering repositories of racial distrust and prejudice, adding further accelerator to a potentially explosive environment.

Police Chief William Anderson emerged from this week’s meeting, however, with a list of first steps, including a traffic diversion plan designed to cut down on vehicular traffic near downtown nightspots. He also announced that the department has increased its foot patrols in the area and is considering using additional law enforcement personnel for this purpose.

Another important part of this initiative falls to local nightclub owners, Anderson said. He encouraged them to look at variables such as dress codes and membership requirements to add an extra level of managerial control over nightclub crowds. Sharing the burden, too, must be those who frequent the clubs and who hope and expect to enjoy the downtown environment.

Those at the meeting this week emerged encouraged by the cooperation they said they saw there. This likely will be the hinge on which overall success turns in these efforts. Also, city officials and business owners said they would meet again at the end of this month to review the effectiveness of plans announced Wednesday. Such timely evaluation of these first efforts will be needed should course corrections be required.

In recent years, a determined group of business, law enforcement and city leaders have turned the downtown area into a popular destination, one in which the trepidation of recent days was nowhere evident. The decisiveness shown this week in the wake of one of the city’s worst moments has the potential to jump-start the reconstruction of public confidence in the city’s ability to keep this area safe.

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Educators: Loss of dual enrollment may cause chaos

By Brock Letchworth
The Daily Reflector

Thursday, July 09, 2009

A legislative budget proposal to eliminate the availability of most college-level courses for high school students has local educational leaders concerned about its potential effects.

The proposed House version of the state budget wipes away much of the funding for state dual enrollment initiatives such as the Huskins Bill program and Learn and Earn Online, which for more than a decade have been offering college classes at no cost to high school students looking to get a head start on higher learning.

House and Senate leaders still are negotiating a final version of the budget for the new fiscal year, which started July 1. The proposals to end some dual enrollment opportunities are among several cuts that have been suggested to address a $4.5 billion deficit.

The reductions would combine to save the state about $35 million, legislators say.

The House's version of the budget would allow for only technical courses or those for an applied science to be offered to high school students through Learn and Earn Online and the Huskins Bill program, which provide college courses via the Web and at local high schools. Early College High School classes offered on campus would not be affected.

PCC officials say the move would go into effect next month. They say it would negatively impact more than 300 high school students planning to take college transfer courses next year through PCC and school systems that would be left to find classes for them.

"The public school systems are going to have chaos trying to get these kids classes when they had planned for these classes to be offered with us," said Susan Nobles, PCC vice president of institutional advancement. "Trying to get them back into a schedule in public schools could be a real problem."

Students in Pitt County high schools registered for their classes last school year, and officials there say a new NC WISE computer system could make any last-minute adjustments to schedules even more challenging.

PCC President Dennis Massey said the reduction of dual enrollment would cost the college money it is owed for last year's enrollment of high school students. It would not have an effect on the college's instructional staff, he said.

"It would be really unfortunate to see these opportunities taken away," Massey said. "Since its start, it has been quite a good arrangement for high school students and their families, and it has become quite popular."

Pitt County Schools officials have said the elimination of Learn and Earn Online, in which students take the course at community colleges via the Web, would be a crucial blow to smaller schools and school systems which previously could not afford to offer college-level courses.

There were more than 350 Pitt County high school students concurrently enrolled last year.

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ECU School of Music presents 14th-annual guitar festival

The Daily Reflector

Friday, July 10, 2009

Before rock and roll, jazz or even the blues, guitars were used to play classical music. In fact, the modern guitar has roots that date back as far as the 15th century.

East Carolina University’s School of Music will celebrate the classically based instrument at its 14th-annual guitar festival beginning Saturday. Concerts will be held at 4 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. daily through Tuesday by students, ECU faculty and professional guitarists. While some events are ticketed, the event offers a few free concerts as well.

Event organizer and ECU professor of guitar studies Elliot Frank has assembled national and international performers to participate in the festival. Concerts will include Slovenian virtuoso Marko Feri, Adam Holzman, the Akerman Teixeira Duo, American virtuoso Jason Vieaux and the 2008 solo competition winner Jeremy Collins. Frank, who will give a concert at 7:30 p.m. Saturday, has performed in Colombia, Venezuela and Vienna, Austria. He is a prizewinner in national and international competitions including the Concurso Internacional de la Casa de España in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

Feri has won national and international competitions including “Fernando Sor” in Rome, “Nicola Fago” in Taranto, Italy, “Lilian Caraian” in Trieste, Italy, and plays regularly in music festivals around the world both as a soloist and with chamber-music ensembles.

For more than 20 years, Holzman has been a recording artist, concert performer, soloist and educator. Holzman has performed at the prestigious Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, New York venues such as Kaufman Hall at the 92nd Street Y, Merkin Hall and Carnegie Recital Hall. Holzman has also performed in music festivals and series in Miami, San Francisco, Boston and New Orleans. He is the founder of the guitar department at the University of Texas at Austin, where he lives with his wife and son.

The Akerman Teixeira Duo is comprised of Mary Akerman and Robert Teixeira. In addition to giving solo concerts throughout the United States and internationally, Akerman has performed with the Atlanta Symphony, recorded with Robert Shaw and the Atlanta Festival Singers and has played on National Public Radio’s “In Performance Today” program. Texieria was one of 12 guitarists selected to perform at the Guitar Foundation of America’s 1987 International Festival. He performs throughout the Carolinas as a soloist and chamber musician in addition to his duo performances with Ackerman.

Vieaux played more than 100 international concerts in the last two seasons. Highlights of his 2008—2009 season included recitals at San Francisco’s OMNI Foundation for the Performing Arts, a debut for the prestigious Nürtingen International Guitar Festival in Germany, tours of Mexico and debuts in Brazil and Poland.

In addition to the concerts, a guitar workshop for students age 12 and older will be held. Master teachers Bruce Holzman, Joseph Ikner and Patrick Lui also will be a part of the workshop faculty.

On Tuesday, some of the country’s finest young guitarists will compete in the finals of the ECU Solo Guitar Competition at both the college and pre-college levels. The semifinal rounds will take place at 4 p.m. Sunday for the pre-college students and 4 p.m. Monday for the college students.
Concert schedule

Saturday
4:30 p.m.: Jeremy Collins recital
7:30 p.m.: Elliot Frank and Marko Feri recital

Sunday
4 p.m.: Pre-college competition semifinals, free
7:30 p.m.: Andrew Zohn and Adam Holzman recital

Monday
4 p.m.: College competition semifinals, free
7:30 p.m.: Akerman Teixeira Duo and Jason Vieaux recital

Tuesday
3 p.m.: Student concert, free
4 p.m.: Pre-college competition finals, free
7:30 p.m.: College competition finals

Where: All concerts will be held in A.J. Fletcher Recital Hall

Cost: Single concert is $15 for adults, $10 for students. Entire series is $40 for adults and $20 for students. Tickets available at the door.

Call: 328-4788.

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Subpoena seeks more on Mary Easley, e-mail

A new subpoena issued to N.C. State University seeks more documents about Mary Easley's jobs at N.C. State University and shows that investigators want to know more about deleted e-mail messages from former Chancellor James Oblinger's high-priority account.

The subpoena was received this week, according to NCSU Chancellor James Woodward.

Investigators want to know how the former first lady was using her time. The request demands "all documents relating to vacation days accrued by Mary P. Easley in connection with her employment ... including, without limitation, documents reflecting the days on which she used a vacation day and any compensation she received in lieu of using her accrued vacation days."

It also requests all documents relating to the decision in 2008 to offer Mary Easley a new position with a higher salary, along with her personnel file, evaluations of her work and the source of private funds used to pay her salary.

Easley had worked at NCSU full time since 2005, first leading a speakers series, and then in an expanded role since 2008 that paid her $170,000 per year. She was fired amid controversy last month.

Asked about Easley's sporadic appearances on campus, her lawyer has said she had a loose arrangement with her superiors that allowed her to work from home and elsewhere. She worked on weekends, too, the lawyer has said.

Authorities also asked the university to provide information on the missing Oblinger e-mail messages. Other messages have shown that the governor was involved in helping to create the position for his wife and that Oblinger was a part of it.

But the university says e-mail messages from a special account that would have handled that correspondence have been deleted.

The authorities want "any record" showing the date on which such messages were deleted and the computer user responsible.

A grand jury is investigating issues connected to the former governor and his wife. It meets next week.

Define temporary

State Republican Party Chairman Tom Fetzer says there's no such thing as a temporary tax increase in North Carolina.

In a Thursday morning news conference, Fetzer said Gov. Beverly Perdue has made an empty promise that she won't let her proposed 1-cent sales tax increase live past its expiration date.

In 2001, the legislature enacted a half-cent sales tax increase that was set to expire in two
years. A quarter-cent of that increase became permanent.

Perdue was lieutenant governor when those decisions were made.

"This governor has no credibility on the issue of a sales tax increase," Fetzer said.

Democrats have said tax increases are the only way to spare vital programs and services from devastating and irreparable cuts. Fetzer, like Republicans in the legislature, is calling for deeper cuts. "Any time you raise taxes, you get bad consequences," he said.

Harrell, wife separate

Rep. Ty Harrell and his wife have separated.

On July 2, the Raleigh Democrat's wife sued him, claiming that he had engaged in an extramarital affair. She is seeking custody of their two children and support.

The couple married in 1991. Harrell said Wednesday that he had not seen the filing and would not comment on its allegations.

"This is a challenging time in my life," Harrell said. "My main focus is on the continuing well-being of my two sons."

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By staff writers J. Andrew Curliss and Benjamin Niolet

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Public records bill advances

Government loss would be costly

BY BENJAMIN NIOLET, Staff writer

RALEIGH - Losing public records lawsuits would be more costly for governments under a bill moving ahead in the state House.

The bill would require judges to impose a payment of attorneys fees on municipalities and government agencies if they lose lawsuits filed over access to public records.

The House gave preliminary approval to the bill Thursday but must vote on it again before it would go to the Senate.

State law already allows judges to require a losing party to pay attorneys fees for the winner, but judges rarely do so in public records cases. The bill's supporters say the idea is to discourage governments from stonewalling or withholding public records.

"The public records are the people's records," said Rep. Deborah Ross, a Raleigh Democrat and co-sponsor of the bill. "They're not our records. They're not the politicians' records."

The bill would create a new division of the Attorney General's Office to advise about 1,500 governmental units on public records issues. The unit could also mediate disputes before they end up in court. Ross said she thought the bill would lead to more openness and fewer lawsuits.

Judges could decide not to award attorneys fees if the case was not clear-cut. The bill also gives governments cover if they deny the records because of a judge's order, court opinion or attorney general's opinion.

Opponents said those exceptions restrict a city or town's ability to turn to its staff or contract lawyers for advice. Records requests could languish if a city had to turn to the Attorney General's Office to decide whether to release them, opponents said.

Rep. Lucy Allen, a Louisburg Democrat and former mayor, offered an amendment that would allow a government or agency to avoid paying legal fees if it relied on a written opinion from its staff or contract attorneys to deny releasing the records. The amendment was defeated.

The bill's supporters said the amendment would have ensured that attorneys fees are never awarded. Local attorneys could feel pressure to tailor their advice to what a town council wants to hear, members said.

"Adding this provision is really allowing the fox to watch the henhouse," said Rep. Thom Tillis, a Cornelius Republican.

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Nike U.

The Nike sports equipment company, whose swoosh adorns the uniforms of many college athletics jerseys from coast to coast, naturally wanted the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to re-enlist with the company. UNC-CH athletes are part of a high-profile, successful program, and the stars are oft-seen human billboards for Nike.

The Tar Heels' deal is worth $37.7 million over 10 years, much of it in apparel and equipment, although all 19 head coaches in various men's and women's sports now have individual deals with the company. Herein lies a rub, as least so far as the attitude of Athletics Director Dick Baddour goes. Baddour no longer releases specifics of individual deals with coaches. That's wrong, and Chancellor Holden Thorp, who received $2 million from the company for his Academic Enhancement Fund, ought to right it.

These coaches are employees of a public university, and a signed contract with Nike on the part of the university should obligate UNC-CH to full disclosure. Whatever the reasons are for secrecy, they're not good enough. Perhaps Nike doesn't want coaches at other schools to know what the Chapel Hill people are getting. Maybe Baddour doesn't want people to know. It doesn't matter. This should be public information, and it is insulting to the taxpayers who support the university to keep these kinds of secrets.

These Nike deals (and those with other companies) are commonplace now, and universities have long argued that they save a school millions in expenses and that the academic enhancement money is a needed boost. But there's still something distasteful about a public institution selling its name in this way, as if the athletics department were some sort of private industry.

For now, the concern is that the individual coaches' deals be revealed. Immediately.

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WCarolina football player dies following workout

The Associated Press

CULLOWHEE, N.C. - A junior defensive back at Western Carolina has died after participating in a voluntary offseason workout.

Western Carolina spokesman Daniel Hooker says Ja'Quayvin Smalls collapsed Wednesday and was pronounced dead about 7:30 p.m. at Harris Regional Hospital in Sylva.

The school says he collapsed while running during an evening workout session. Observers said Smalls had complained of cramps at the beginning of sprint exercises and had been removed from the lineup to stretch.

The workout was the first for Smalls, who enrolled in Western Carolina's summer school. He had transferred from Georgia Military College, where he ranked second in tackles.

Athletic director Chip Smith says Smalls' death was especially tragic, since he was so young.

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