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State budget OK'd in first of two votes

By Ginger Livingston
The Daily Reflector

Tuesday, August 04, 2009

A state Legislature that increases taxes on almost everyone and will force local governments to adjust their spending plans did have some good news Tuesday for East Carolina University.

The university's dental school will receive $3 million and the Brody School of Medicine will get $2 million for the indigent care it provides, based on a budget proposal given a first approval by both houses.

"They were very lucky, because it was tough in some of these areas to come up with extra funding," said Rep. Marian McLawhorn, D-Pitt.

State law requires the General Assembly to pass its biennium budget with two votes on two separate days in the Senate and House chambers. On Tuesday, the Senate voted 27-17 for the budget and the House voted 65-52 in favor of its passage. Today's vote is scheduled for 3 p.m.

McLawhorn and Rep. Edith Warren, D-Pitt, voted for the $18.9 billion budget, which is 2.4 percent smaller than the previous year's budget. Information about the votes of the county's other legislators, Rep. Arthur Williams, D-Beaufort, and Sens. Clark Jenkins and Don Davis, both Democrats, wasn't immediately available.

"I have said so many times that there were so many parentheses in this budget, parentheses means you're reducing," Warren said. "It was heartbreaking to work through my section. Parentheses everywhere. But I'm satisfied, we've done the best with what we had to work with."

The new budget raised the state sales tax a penny and added a tax surcharge to profitable corporations and individuals whose taxable income topped $60,000.

"There were a lot of things in this budget that folks don't like, a lot of people don't like the cigarette tax, they don't like the beer and wine tax and have said they won't vote for this budget because of these taxes," McLawhorn said.

However, the House Democratic caucus wouldn't have gotten the votes necessary to pass the budget without these revenue increases, which lessened the number of cuts to human service programs, she said.

In most North Carolina counties, the sales tax increase raises it to 7.75 percent. In Pitt County the sales tax will be 8 percent, because of a quarter-percent increase approved several years ago for local school construction.

The budget keeps kindergarten through third-grade classroom sizes the same. It gives public school systems flexibility in managing grades 4-12 classroom sizes, Warren said.

The budget funds enrollment growth needs for the state community colleges and universities, McLawhorn said. Programs within the university system will have to be cut, she said, but the budget language allows the system to choose which programs to end or to reduce.

McLawhorn and Warren led conference subcommittees, the groups of House and Senate members who worked on finalizing the state's budget.

Warren, who oversaw natural and economic resources, said she was happy some money was made available for farmland preservation and the Clean Water Management Trust Fund received $50 million. The fund makes grants available for projects that address water pollution problems.

"Pitt County has made good use of these grant funds in the past," Warren said.

There were hesitations about funding the dental school and indigent medical care, McLawhorn said, because some lawmakers saw them as expansion items. Legislative leaders early on said no expansion items would
be funded.

However, the dental school project was eventually seen as part of the Legislature's commitment to improve dental health and the state's existing dental school programming, McLawhorn said.

The ECU dental school is scheduled to accept its first class in the fall of 2011.

McLawhorn called securing the indigent care funding a major victory because it is now part of the state's reoccurring budget, meaning new legislation won't be needed for its approval each budget cycle.

Not so lucky were the state's county and municipal governments.

Pitt County Manager Scott Elliott said the county is expected to lose $100,000 the state contributed to the county's probation and parole services.

The county also is expected to lose $154,000 of the $234,000 it's traditionally received from beer and wine taxes, he said. The state also will no longer pay the Pitt County Detention Center for housing prisoners classified as misdemeanants, people serving jail time for misdemeanor convictions, Elliott said.

"We have an overall $206 million budget. These are major impacts, they are not devastating, but we will have to make it up somewhere," he said.

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ECU bucking the trend

By Nathan Summers
The Daily Reflector

Tuesday, August 04, 2009

It seemed a bold statement when Terry Holland challenged East Carolina’s disgruntled football followers in 2004 to take greater ownership, and perhaps better care, of the ECU sports tradition.

Holland told fans winning required a commitment from them to fill not just the stands but the funding coffers as well.

In return, he promised to put the right pieces in place to rebuild a winning tradition.

Holland did his part. He hired football coach Skip Holtz as the first major play of his nearly six-year tenure as ECU’s director of athletics, and didn’t stop there. Holland also made changes at the top of the baseball and men’s basketball teams. He beefed up scheduling, pitched bigger and better facilities and even lobbied Conference USA for a break in the league’s cross-country travel.

He kept pitching the age-old notion that if every ECU supporter gave just a little, their combined efforts could make ECU a legitimate player on the national sports stage again, despite a disastrous football funk that saw the team win three times in the previous two seasons when he arrived.

When the economy crashed, forcing hundreds of colleges to find ways to cut athletic costs, ECU’s faithful proved it had done its part, too, helping to keep its sports program afloat and cruising along.

Holland would rightly say he had it planned that way.

“We asked them to invest,” Holland said of his original sales pitch to ECU fans, who despite the struggling economy have helped the Pirates nearly sell out their season tickets for football for the second time in three years. “We said that it was our job to increase the value of their season tickets, so that if they did have tickets that they couldn't use on a particular day, that they wouldn't have to go begging for someone to take them, that they could actually sell them for face value, or that if scalping is legal someday, that if you needed to scalp them you could.

“I think we've created that type of environment for the games with our current stadium size.”

As proof of the athletic program's continued growth despite the recession, Pirate Club and other private funding will allow ECU to add 7,000 seats inside Dowdy-Ficklen Stadium at the end of the coming season.

Thanks to a student fee, the school will also move ahead as planned with new or upgraded facilities for track, softball and women’s soccer.

“We’re still planning to go with it,” Holland said of the school's numerous athletic blueprints. “We’ve been evaluating the donations to the Pirate Club, as well as the season ticket sales, and to be honest, they’re right on target.”

That's not to say ECU has gone on a spending spree. Like all universities, East Carolina has endured cuts, including plenty in the athletic corridor.

In addition to a slew of basic cutbacks, executive associate athletic director Nick Floyd said ECU is trying to think of even more ways to save. For example, Floyd said ECU has adopted a replacement policy for uniforms. Unless they're torn or blood-stained, chances are they'll keep getting used.

“We’re trying to operate in an environment of heightened awareness,” Floyd said.

But when the funding is available, there is no reason not to act, he said.

“The fact that our donations and our ticket sales have been on target reinforces our thought about going
forward with this project," Floyd said of the stadium and field upgrades. "It is a great indicator of the strong underlying demand for Pirate football and Pirate athletics."

Many schools have been forced to excise entire programs from their athletic frameworks, while others are taking their financial reprogramming in stride.

Count Holland and ECU in with the latter, at least for now.

In 2005, ECU opted to scrap its men's soccer program, a decision that drew some criticism at the time but which Holland contends was the right thing to do. With teams in seemingly every sport dropping out of sight across the country, perhaps Holland was right to act when he did.

"Nobody likes to be in that kind of position, but at the time of fixing our program, it wasn't fair to go out and hire a coach, and to continue to recruit athletes unless we could provide that program with more resources, and we didn't have more resources to put into it at that time," Holland said.

"At the present time, we don't anticipate dropping any sports. Our first approach would be something other than cutting personnel. Furloughs are where we would go first in order to keep everybody employed and keep the same concept. Everybody would cut back rather than losing a team or a person."

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COX NEWSPAPERS
Building community bonds

Police, people mingle at Night Out

By Michael Abramowitz
The Daily Reflector

Tuesday, August 04, 2009

More than 1,000 Greenville and Pitt County residents turned out Tuesday night on the Town Common to support local law enforcement agencies' efforts on the National Night Out Against Crime.

Billed as "A good night to get to know your neighbors," this year's event was coordinated by Lt. Ed Carson of the Greenville Police Department. It showcased the many services that law enforcement and other city and county agencies provide.

Officers wearing warm-weather uniforms representing Greenville, East Carolina University, the Pitt County Sheriff's Office, Alcohol Law Enforcement and the State Highway Patrol mingled with residents on the sprawling lawn beside the banks of the Tar River. They shook hands, played with children and shared information at dozens of booths set up along the walkways.

Helicopters from the sheriff's office and Army National Guard first hovered over the park, then landed and were quickly swarmed by curious children.

Free hot dogs, hamburgers and soft drinks were handed out along with brochures, flyers and gift bags advertising services available to individuals and families.

"We're excited about this event," Chief William Anderson said. "This is our fourth year of participation in the National Night Out, and it's grown every year. Lieutenant Carson did a great job of organizing the event and getting the community involved."

"America's Night out Against Crime" is in its 26th year nationwide. It was introduced in 1984 by the National Association of Town Watch, a nonprofit crime prevention organization, as an effort to heighten awareness and strengthen citizen participation in local crime-prevention efforts, according to the organization's Web site.

The main goal of the local event was to showcase local law enforcement as a community-based, crime-fighting enterprise and strengthen the police-community relationship, Anderson said.

"We want people to see how easy it is for us to share information and work together as one community," he said.

Information was available about topics including family violence, child and spousal abuse, neighborhood crime prevention, drug treatment, medical emergencies, fair housing practices and animal control issues.

There also were representatives from public and nonprofit agencies with information about a wide range of services such as children's health insurance, parent outreach, recycling and environmental protection, and business support for women and minorities.

People who rent homes could find information about landlord and tenant rights and responsibilities from the city's code enforcement and housing divisions.

Volunteer parking enforcement officers from the Handicapped Enforcement Legal Parking (HELP) team educated people about the rights of handicapped drivers and the need to respect handicapped parking rules.

Mayor Pat Dunn scanned the crowded lawn and said she hoped more people will team up with law enforcement to make the community safer.

"Our community is rich in resources," Dunn said. "We need to recognize and make use of them to better ourselves as individuals and as a community."
Sheriff Mac Manning said his office is always working to find more ways to strengthen the bonds between officers and the people they serve.

"It's hard to put your finger on whether those bonds grow from year to year, but the big crowd sure tells me something nice is going on. It's very encouraging," Manning said.

Manning said that his office is preparing to receive several grants from the Governor's Crime Commission to strengthen its capabilities.

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Pitt County school system to get federal grant to retrofit buses

By Brock Letchworth
The Daily Reflector

Monday, August 03, 2009

Some school buses in Pitt County are going to be more eco-friendly when they hit the roads later this month, school officials say.

The Pitt County school system is one of four in the state slated to receive a federal grant from the Environmental Protection Agency to retrofit buses as part of the Clean School Bus USA campaign.

The campaign is aimed at reducing children's exposure to diesel exhaust and the amount of air pollution created by diesel school buses.

Joey Weathington, director of transportation for Pitt County Schools, told the Board of Education Monday night that the district will be retrofitting 30 buses for the upcoming year. The $86,103 cost for equipment and labor will be covered by the federal grant. The grant also covers diesel retrofitting for Wilson County Schools ($29,040), Edgecombe County Schools ($74,182) and Nash-Rocky Mount Schools ($52,272).

The grant includes two phases, Weathington said. The first provides for the two types of retrofitting equipment: a diesel oxidation catalyst designed to reduce emissions by 25 percent and a diesel multistage filter which reduces emissions by 50 percent.

Weathington said a second phase will provide two school buses with 2010-clean diesel compliant engines to Pitt County later this year.

Pitt County obtained similar retrofitting equipment in 2007. Weathington said the retrofits are only certified for buses made since 2002. Of 103 qualifying buses, Pitt County will have 78 percent with some type of emission-reducing equipment.

"That is a high percentage," Weathington said. "You won't find anybody around with that type of percentage."

Weathington said the new equipment is expected to last up to 300,000 miles, and the district shouldn't have to replace it because the state replacement cycle begins at 200,000 miles.

In other news from Monday's meeting:

Assistant Superintendent of Finance Michael Cowin said officials are still not certain how the state budget might affect the school system. Lawmakers are expected to begin voting on a budget today.

Superintendent Beverly Reep gave the board an update on how the system is using the Second Life virtual reality program for its Early College High School.

Pitt County had 18 students participate in the pilot program last year through East Carolina University. Second Life allows users to participate in a real-time interactive class online for college credit.

Reep said the district is hoping to get the funding it needs to add 18 more students in the upcoming school year.

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United Way uses blood drive as part of community outreach

The Daily Reflector

Tuesday, August 04, 2009

United Way of Pitt County, in cooperation with Taff Office Supply, held a blood drive Tuesday to help the American Red Cross shore up its summer blood supply and to extend its reach in the community.

"As we engage the community around our shared vision of community impact, we realize that we must further expand our role to include community outreach," James Wagner, director of communication and marketing for the United Way, said. "Through events like the blood drive, community investment fairs, participating in National Night Out and various festivals and events, we seek to be as transparent and as accountable as possible to ensure that donors can have the utmost confidence when they designate funds to United Way of Pitt County."

United Way kicked off its Pacesetter fundraising campaign in July with companies that have a large employee base, among others, and is gearing up for its general campaign, which begins in September.

As United Way moves toward funding programs instead of agencies, it continues to be a local agency dedicated to encouraging collaboration and transparency, Executive Director Cecelia Scott said.

"As we transition to Community Impact, we hold ourselves and our programs accountable with donors' investments by producing data-driven, measurable outcomes," she said. "By bringing leadership and resources together like never before, we can truly improve community conditions across Pitt County."

Scott said there are several points donors should remember as they make contributions to this year's campaign:

All nonprofit (501c3) health and human service agencies will receive any funds designated to them by a United Way donor. For example, if a United Way donor designates a contribution to Literacy Volunteers, the United Way will honor that request and send the donation to Literacy Volunteers.

Under its former funding model, United Way will continue to fund several agencies through the end of 2009, including Ayden Christian Care, Boy Scouts, Camp Sunshine, Creative Living Center, Family Support Network, Flynn Christian Home, Girl Scouts, Literacy Volunteers and PICASO (Pitt County AIDS Service Organization).

Through the new Community Impact program, United Way will fund one or more programs of agencies but not the agency itself. For example, the $20,000 allocation to Pitt County government will support the 10-year plan to end homelessness, and the $25,000 allocation to East Carolina University will support Project Working Recovery, which assists individuals to choose, get and keep a job as a means to sustain their recovery from addiction.

Other agencies with programs that will receive United Way funding for 2009-2011 include the Family Violence Program, Boys & Girls Clubs of Pitt County, Salvation Army, Council on Aging, Greenville Community Shelters, American Red Cross, Mediation Centers of Eastern NC, Life of NC/STRIVE, Pitt County Partnership for Progress, Pitt County Educational Foundation and REAL Crisis.

State employees who wish to designate to United Way of Pitt County through the State Employees Combined Campaign (SECC) must use the SECC Number 1437-000, otherwise the contribution will go to United Way of North Carolina.

For more information on the United Way of Pitt County and the programs it funds, call 758-1604 or visit www.uwpncnc.org.

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Budget raises your taxes

State could cut 700 workers

BY BENJAMIN NIOLET AND KEVIN KILEY, STAFF WRITERS

RALEIGH - The state would reduce community services for the mentally ill, force school boards to make cuts, pack inmates into fewer prisons, put more than 700 state employees out of work and raise sales taxes under a budget proposal that received preliminary approval Tuesday.

The $19 billion spending plan, which is more than a month late, was a hard-fought compromise among Democrats who control both chambers of the legislature and the governor. House and Senate Democrats and Gov. Beverly Perdue differed on which taxes to raise to cope with the plunging revenues that North Carolina and other states face because of the recession.

The compromise plan cleared the Senate in the afternoon and House in the evening after weeks of offers between Democratic budget negotiators. It passed both chambers in party-line votes and requires one more vote in each chamber before it goes to Perdue.

Perdue said Tuesday night that she would sign the budget, but with reservations. Perdue had pressed for more taxes to protect education and other services. The budget proposal would raise $990 million in new taxes, most of which comes from a 1-cent sales tax increase. Perdue had pressed for an additional $200 million in unspecified tax increases.

"It's clear to me after working with the General Assembly very aggressively and very hard over the last two-and-a-half months that they have gone as far as they are willing to go," Perdue said.

The deficit was an unprecedented shortfall for the state. It forced Perdue, who took office in January, to make difficult choices to keep the budget in balance and forced her to defer some of her ambitious campaign proposals.

Democratic lawmakers wrestled with what combination of spending cuts and tax hikes to use to close the budget gap, which Democrats said was $4.5 billion. Lawmakers took advantage of $1.4 billion in federal stimulus money.

Under the proposal, all residents would pay an extra penny per dollar in sales tax, and wealthier residents would have a surcharge tacked on their income tax payments. The state would levy sales tax on digital products such as music and ringtones, and smokers and drinkers would pay more for their vices. Democrats said the tax increases were the only way to avoid painful cuts, particularly to education and social services.

"Think about the things we would have had to do if we did not have the additional revenue," said Sen. Tony Rand, a Fayetteville Democrat and the Senate majority leader. "These things are wrenching in their application and what they do to a society."
There were still plenty of cuts. Advocates for people with disabilities were surprised Tuesday to see a $40 million cut, about 10 percent, to community services for the mentally ill, disabled or those struggling with addictions.

"This will have a devastating impact on community services," said Dave Richard of the Arc of North Carolina, which advocates on behalf of the disabled.

'Missed opportunities'

Republicans said the cuts were largely superficial. They noted that the state spent $20.3 billion last year and that the current budget would spend nearly as much.

"There are a lot of missed opportunities in this budget," said Rep. Paul Stam of Apex, the House Republican leader.

Democrats say Republicans' math distorts reality. To stay afloat in the last fiscal year, state officials raided reserve funds, froze hiring and spending, and furloughed workers.

Democrats said Republicans were lobbying criticism without offering solutions. "They are not up to the job of governing in a recession when decisions are hard and when things are tough," House Speaker Joe Hackney said.

The budget proposal eliminates more than 2,000 state positions, including more than 700 that are currently filled. Some Democrats who come from hotly contested districts had worried ahead of the vote about whether they could support the budget. No Democrats voted against it Tuesday.

"It's not going to haunt me," said Sen. John Snow, a Murphy Democrat. "It made substantial cuts, but it kept teachers working."

The budget votes this week means lawmakers are close to wrapping up the legislative session that began in January. Legislative leaders indicated Tuesday that a couple of major issues, including how to restructure the state's coastal insurance program, remain to be resolved before they leave Raleigh.

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Read the budget

The budget bill is a 233-page document. You can download a pdf of it at tr.im/vtG9

To read a less technical summary of the budget bill, go to tr.im/vtGm

Or, to find easy links to both, and wade into the debate on the budget, visit The News & Observer's political blog at dome.newsobserver.com.

Sound off

Sound off

Happy about the budget cuts? Angry about the tax increases? Call the governor or your representative in the House or Senate.

N.C. legislature main number: 919-733-7928
Governor's Office: 919-733-2391 (citizen and community services)
Highlights of budget cuts and taxes

The budget proposal includes cuts across all categories of state spending. Here's a look at notable items in the proposal.

Public education

- $225 million will be cut for grades 4-12. Local officials will decide how to cut. Local officials cannot change the average class size for grades K-3.
- Cut $48 million by delaying the purchase of math textbooks in grades 6-12. In the following year, the state expects a moratorium on all new textbooks to save $115.4 million.
- Cut $38.3 million by eliminating funding to help students who perform poorly on certain statewide tests.
- Cut $12 million by eliminating funding for 200 literacy coaches.

Community colleges and higher education

- Cut $14 million to community college campuses. The cut cannot affect programs involving retraining unemployed workers.
- Cut $72.9 million for universities by targeting senior and middle management, centers and institutes, low-enrollment degree programs, faculty workload, speaker series and institutional trust fund.
- Increase in-state and out-of-state tuition by either $200 or 8 percent, whichever is the lower amount, at all UNC institutions to raise $34.8 million.
- Reduce funding to university centers and institutes across the state by $13.7 million. The budget specifies reductions for specific campuses but allows campus officials to decide how to make the cuts.

Health and human services

- Cut $12.9 million by eliminating 350 positions within the Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities and Substance Abuse Services.
- Reduce state funding for local mental health, substance abuse and physical disability service providers by $40 million.
- Reduce funding to help counties administer public assistance programs by $5.5 million.

Natural and economic resources

- Eliminate 70 vacant positions in the Department of Environment and Natural Resources to save $3.4 million.
- Cut funding to the Clean Water Management Trust Fund by $50 million each year for two years.
• Require the Department of Commerce to sell the state's King Air plane and reduce all costs associated with operating it, including a pilot position, to save $148,000 this year and $296,000 next year.

Justice and public safety
• Cut $8.1 million by eliminating 187 Department of Correction positions.
• Close seven small prisons to save $8.4 million this year and $22.3 million next year.
• Increase the SBI Crime Lab fee assessed on convicted criminals from $300 to $600. Impaired-driving cases make up the bulk of the money generated by the fee. The increase would raise an additional $195,000 this year.
• Cut $4.8 million by eliminating 27 work crews that provided free labor to state and local governments.

Taxes
The budget bill includes a tax package expected to raise about $990 million this year.
• Individual income surcharge. Applies a 2 percent surcharge on married couples whose taxable income is between $100,000 and $250,000. Couples with taxable income of about $250,000 would see a 3 percent surcharge on the tax they owe. The increase would raise $172.8 million.
• Corporate income tax. A 3 percent surcharge on the profit tax paid by corporations to raise $23.1 million.
• 1-cent sales tax increase. Would raise the state sales tax rate by a cent. In most counties, the new sales tax rate would be 7.75 percent. The increase is expected to raise $803.5 million.
• Raise $11.8 million with sales tax on digital downloads and Internet purchases.
• Increase taxes on tobacco and alcohol. Consumers would pay 10 cents more for a pack of cigarettes, 2.8 percent more for other tobacco products, a nickel for a six-pack of beer, 4 cents more for a bottle of wine and 5 percent more per bottle of liquor. The new taxes would raise $68.8 million.

Fees
The budget includes various fee increases. Here's a sample:
• Marriage license fee increases from $50 to $60.
• Bail bondsmen licenses increase from $100 to $200.
• Fees paid by HMOs to operate increase from $250 to $500.
• Child care licensing fees increase from $35 to $52 for small operations and from $400 to $600 for the largest facilities.
• Convicted criminals who have a court-appointed lawyer will be charged a $50 appointment fee.
• Defendants who fail to appear at court will pay $200 instead of $100.
• Convicted criminals whose cases included SBI Lab testing would have to pay $600, double the previous fee. The fee would mostly affect those convicted in impaired-driving cases.

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The North Carolina Biotechnology Center has awarded $300,000 in grants to three university-business collaborations – including ones involving the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and North Carolina State University.

The Research Triangle Park-based nonprofit granted $100,000 to UNC’s Scott Randell, an associate professor in the Department of Cell and Molecular Physiology who is working with RTP-based company Entergrion to grow eye cells in test cultures. The cells would be used to test dry-eye treatments.

Christian Melander, an assistant professor in NCSU’s Department of Chemistry, won a $100,000 grant for a joint project with Agile Sciences of Raleigh. The company develops compounds that disperse biofilms; Melander is working to use that technology to develop an approach to help control bacterial spot disease on peaches.

The third $100,000 grant went to Dr. Wayne Cascio, vice chairman of the Department of Cardiovascular Sciences in the Brody School of Medicine at East Carolina University. Cascio is working with RTP-based company Entegen to assess the ability of freeze-dried platelets to help stop excessive bleeding during open-heart surgery and in patients taking anti-clotting drugs.

The $100,000 awards, called Collaborative Funding Grants and co-sponsored by the Kenan Institute for Engineering, Technology and Science at North Carolina State University, provide funds that public-private teams can use to hire a postdoctoral researcher or technician to work at a North Carolina university under the supervision of an academic scientist on a topic of defined commercial interest.

“In addition to fostering greater cooperation between academia and industry, the Collaborative Funding Grants help new breakthroughs to reach their full commercial potential more quickly,” said Cynthia Sollid, manager of the science and technology development program at the Biotechnology Center.
The Washington Post

The First Big Test: Watching Expenses
Some Students Clamp Down as They Gear Up

By Jonathan Starkey
Washington Post Staff Writer
Sunday, August 2, 2009

Getting that college tuition and housing bill under control is only the first step. Then comes the comforter and refrigerator and textbooks and -- well, the College Board has a list of 118 to-buy items on its off-to-college checklist.

And don't forget the pizza money.

The bill to outfit a freshman can run to thousands of dollars if you're not careful, financial advisers say. As recession losses have whittled down college funds and as part-time jobs have become more elusive, families are finding creative ways to stretch each dollar.

In recent weeks, Sharon Okolicsanyi of Manassas has scoured the Web for deals on a laptop for her daughter, Helena, who will be a freshman at George Mason University. They finally found a bargain: It cost $499, marked down from $700. A security and software upgrade cost $100, and a printer cost $30, marked down from $70.

"I don't know much about computers," said Sharon Okolicsanyi, a teacher and single mother. "I had to keep looking and looking. I had to find the best deal."

In many ways, their summer has been defined by college-prep bargain-hunting.

On a recent trip, the Okolicsanyis picked up $68 worth of supplies, including spiral notebooks, pencils, dividers, pens and packs of paper. They also cut down the cost of an $80 "11-piece dorm-in-a-bag set" with a 20 percent coupon. Extra-long sheets, two towels and a hamper were included. More expensive pens were left behind.

On top of her loans, Sharon borrowed $500 to help cover expenses. As for pocket money, Helena, 18, plans to work part time through the federal work-study program and may rely on Mom for some extra money. She has already sought out a financial adviser on campus, and she is still awaiting word on a school scholarship.

"On the one hand, you want so much stuff," Helena said. "On the other, you don't want to pay for it."

Christine Parker, a financial planner and president of Parker Financial in La Plata, advises mindful preparation.

Parker used the checklist drawn up by the College Board -- best known for its SAT and other tests -- to estimate the cost of moving from home into the dorm. By her count, there's paper towels for $6.99, notebooks for $19.99, audio equipment for $64.64 and a computer-printer combo for $897. Toiletries,
including tweezers and floss, add up to $245.77. Buying all 118 items on the list would cost $4,250.35, enough to "break the back of most American families," she wrote in an e-mail.

Parker suggests making a shopping list, so as to avoid emotional purchases. Rather than buying new, take as much as possible from home. Also "separate wants from needs," Parker said.

She suggests that parents sit down with students to draw up a budget for expenses at college. A good place to begin: How much will the student need each week to cover personal hygiene items, laundry, the phone bill, and a movie or food off campus?

"How much are you going to allow them? Or how are you going to help them understand what money they are going to spend?" Parker said. Some parents provide monthly allowances typically ranging from $100 to $500, she added. In 2008-2009, personal expenses averaged $1,906 nationally for a student living on campus at a four-year private school, according to the College Board.

Too often, students leave home with unrealistic ideas about spending and accrue giant credit card balances, Parker said. According to a study issued this year by student lender Sallie Mae, college freshmen carried a median credit card balance of $939, compared with $373 in 2004. The average for graduating seniors is more than $4,100.

"Most financial literacy for kids comes from their parents," Parker said. "You have to be actively involved. It's better if we're teaching them than letting the credit card companies teach them."

Parents should remember, too, Parker added, that the federal stimulus plan has broadened options for covering college costs. Now students can use 529 college savings plans to buy computers and pay for Internet service, for example. An expansion of one credit allows low- and middle-income families to offset up to $2,500 spent on qualified education-related costs, such as tuition, room and board, and books -- the other big academic expense.

Alexa Stott of North Brunswick, N.J., is headed to the University of Maryland and plans to save by renting her books online. Stott, 17, and her mother, Beverly, said she can cut book costs by half by renting from Chegg.com. Chegg will send Stott the books plus return packaging, which she'll use to ship the books back at the end of the semester.

The cost of textbooks can easily approach $700 a year, according to a committee that advises Congress on student aid.

Sharing books also pays in savings, experts say, as does searching for used textbooks on sites such as Amazon.com and eBay's Half.com. Texts for some courses are available free at the Flat World Knowledge site (http://www.flatworldknowledge.com), where students can also buy books and study aids.

"It's hard to get back what you spent" on books, Stott said. Renting, she said, "is going to save me a lot of money."

And again, some parents provide help with dorm-room essentials as well as cash. For graduation, Andrew Holleran's parents promised a laptop, which he just picked up at school at a discount. To outfit his room, he said, they were waiting to shop until early September, because by then "most students will have gone off to college, and there will be some sales." (But he's not getting an expensive new sound system, said his mother, Donna Holleran.)

As for day-to-day money, his parents have opened a checking account, where they'll deposit a couple of hundred dollars a month. They'll settle on a budget after a couple of quarters, once they have a more accurate idea of how much college life costs, Donna Holleran said. Andrew is the first of four siblings -- ages 18, 16, 15 and 11 -- expecting to go off to college.
"My husband and I haven't been in college for 25 years, so we are not exactly sure how it's going to play out," said Holleran, a stay-at-home mother.

The economy hasn't helped. She said she and her husband, a lawyer, lost 25 percent, or about $7,000, of money invested in a 529 college savings plan when the market tanked last year.

"We made the mistake of keeping his account aggressive a little bit too long," she said.

Andrew is doing his part, too. After a couple of months, he finally broke into the tight summer job market. Work starts this week in the clubhouse at a Northern Virginia golf course, and it couldn't come soon enough. Holleran will use his earnings, plus some savings and graduation gift cards, to cover day-to-day expenses during his freshman year at Ohio State University. School starts in late September.

"That's probably going to -- hopefully -- get me through the first year," he said.

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