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Right of way: 10th Street project progressing well

Tuesday, November 24, 2009

Greenville’s 10th Street connector project stands as one of the most important infrastructure improvement efforts now facing the city. Its completion will provide expedited East-West vehicle travel — crucial for access to Pitt County Memorial Hospital — and create a more attractive entrance to the community from points west.

Progress on this project has been slow, but purposefully so given the need to relocate homes and businesses in order to build the connector where it best serves the community. Those involved deserve credit for conducting the process in an accessible and deliberate manner, leading to last week’s selection of a route.

Though completion of the 10th Street connector is several years in the future, the vision for such a project reaches back a decade. The arguments for such a thoroughfare are abundant, reflecting a needed infrastructure improvement that serves the entire community.

The roadway will establish a needed link between the main campus of East Carolina University and the medical campus, including PCMH. It will speed ambulance service from east Greenville to that facility as well, thanks to an overpass that will take traffic over the railroad tracks. And, by providing a seamless drive from U.S. 264 to Stantonsburg Road to 10th Street, the finished road will serve as a more direct entrance to the city, moving drivers into the campus and downtown areas with ease.

Such a project does not happen without meticulous planning and considerable effort. But the 10th Street connector, in particular, represents a tricky initiative because of its location. The site selected last week will force the acquisition and destruction of an estimated 30 residences and the relocation of residents. It will also affect several businesses and other long-standing institutions there.

Given Greenville’s historical record with redevelopment work, the city, in partnership with the state Department of Transportation, East Carolina and PCMH, has correctly approached each step of the process with care and consideration. In contrast to projects undertaken in the past, the lines of communication have been open, decision makers have been accessible and the process has proceeded smoothly.

Government should not displace residents or businesses without overwhelming cause, but that certainly exists in the case of this project. The completion of this thoroughfare will be an asset to the city. But the process must continue to engage those affected — to treat them with respect, honesty and compassion — in the years to come. Doing so ensures the best outcome: an improvement with which all can be satisfied.

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Four-year stretch

It's funny how the talk of improving four-year graduation rates at University of North Carolina schools always seems to coincide with state budget woes.

Of course, it's no coincidence. The state subsidizes the cost of higher education at the 16 public university campuses, as it should. Otherwise they wouldn't be public institutions, would they?

The sooner students graduate, the less subsidy per student.

So, when budget crunches come around, the talk at the legislature and in university administrators' offices inevitably turns to trying to figure out ways to get students out the door more quickly.

These days, University of North Carolina system president Erskine Bowles is proposing holding individual schools accountable for their retention and graduation rates by tying those rates to money for additional enrollment.

Outside academia, a conservative group based in Raleigh suggests giving bonuses to faculty based on freshman retention.

I have another suggestion: Allow students to pay professors a few bucks for a few extra points on a test. Students will avoid Ds and Fs, getting more credit hours and moving more quickly toward graduation.

Such a system will surely garner national recognition. It did when a Wayne County middle school tried it.

Setting aside the sarcasm for a moment, does anyone really believe that these other alleged solutions wouldn't have the same effect as purchasing grades, that is, promote grade inflation and devalue college diplomas?

Bowles' idea, on its face, seems like a good one. Perhaps schools shouldn't be getting more money to enroll new students if they aren't graduating the ones already there.

Taking money for new enrollment will certainly get the attention of administrators. But it will also give them an incentive to lower academic standards, the easiest path to higher graduation rates.

Not that lowering standards hasn't already been occurring, especially when college administrators become obsessed with bogus U.S. News & World Report rankings that emphasize graduation and retention rates instead of learning.

One study shows student grade-point averages at public universities rising by 0.6 points over the past 15 years.

Seemingly missed in all this fuss is how much student bodies, especially those at public universities, have changed since the 1950s and '60s when most students graduated in four years.

Today, most students aren't affluent. Many work. Most don't have some life path set out in front of them.

That kind of diversity tends to happen when you expand enrollment. Since 1980, the number of students enrolled at UNC campuses has nearly doubled.

The increase in enrollment is no accident. Policy makers have made a conscious decision to improve access to higher education. But improving access isn't simply a matter of admitting more students.

It also involves understanding that more will take longer to graduate.

Scott Mooneyham writes about North Carolina government and politics for the Capitol Press Association.
Southern Miss state of mind

By Nathan Summers
The Daily Reflector

Monday, November 23, 2009

East Carolina’s 2009 football schedule contains numerous oddities that were evident even before the season began.

Most notably, the middle of the campaign featured a three-game stretch in which the Pirates played no Saturday games, but instead Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday games.

ECU head coach Skip Holtz looked past that and immediately saw something perhaps even more daunting.

“People started looking at the Tuesday, Thursday, Sunday schedule, and they looked at being on the road at West Virginia and North Carolina and two of the first three are on the road against very quality, BCS-type opponents,” Holtz said. “The thing that always caught my eye is that Southern Miss is last.”

The Pirates (7-4, 6-1 Conference USA) finish their regular season when they host the Golden Eagles at 1:30 Saturday afternoon in a C-USA East Division clash.

The winner of the game will claim the East and play in the following weekend’s C-USA championship game.

Given that Southern Miss has 26 wins in 34 previous games against ECU, Holtz said he would love to make the Pirates’ end of the rivalry a little more legitimate.

In his four previous games against the Golden Eagles (7-4, 5-2 C-USA), Holtz is 1-3.

“I wonder if it’s a rivalry for them,” Holtz said. “You’ve got to win every once in a while to make it a rivalry. I just don’t know how they view it. I know how we view it, as a rivalry game, but it is extremely lopsided, especially being 2-15 at home and how spaced out our wins are.”

Holtz’s lone win in the series came in overtime at Hattiesburg in 2006. The Pirates lost last season’s meeting in Mississippi by a convincing 21-3 score.

Injuries

Senior linebacker Jeremy Chambliss is perhaps the biggest question for ECU after he injured his shoulder early in the Pirates’ win over UAB last weekend.

Holtz said even if Chambliss, who is fourth on the team with 62 tackles despite having already missed a game this season with the flu, suits up against Southern Miss, he would likely be very limited.

The Pirates will also likely be without true freshman linebacker Marke Powell, who steadily carved a niche in the rotation before his foot injury last weekend left him doubtful for this Saturday. Reserve linebacker and special teams man Austin Haynes (knee) is also questionable.

The defensive line got a boost from the return of Josh Smith from his shoulder injury last week, and Holtz said he expects Smith to make a full return this week after not having any lingering pain.

The offense hopes to welcome back senior receiver Jamar Bryant (shoulder) and running back Jon Williams (knee) by Saturday.
Out for the season are defensive lineman A.J. Johnson (knee), tight end Rob Kass (knee), linebackers Dustin Lineback (knee) and Matt Thompson (elbow) and defensive back Dekota Marshall (leg).

Harris honored

East Carolina's Dwayne Harris, who set a school record with his third kickoff return for a touchdown in ECU's win over UAB, was named Conference USA Special Teams Player of the Week. It's the second time this season Harris has won the award.

Harris established a new East Carolina single-season and career record for most kickoff returns for touchdowns with his third of the 2009 campaign, a 99-yarder against UAB in the fourth quarter. In all, he racked up 146 kickoff return yards on three attempts.

The 99-yard return was the second-longest kickoff return in program history and was his third return for a score this season. Harris compiled 254 all-purpose yards and accounted for three touchdowns with two scoring receptions, including a 59-yarder that was ECU's longest pass play and longest touchdown (rushing or passing) of the season.

With his eight-catch, 108-yard performance against the Blazers, Harris moved into second place on ECU's career receptions list with 146.

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Friend charged in ASU shooting death

Eli Ruble said he was trying to scare partygoers, didn't know gun was loaded when he pointed it at Jay Derby's head.

By Ely Portillo
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Posted: Tuesday, Nov. 24, 2009

Galen Elijah Ruble told police he thought his muzzle-loading rifle was unloaded when he pointed it at his friend's head and pulled the trigger, according to Boone police.

But Jay Derby, a 20-year-old student, was killed Sunday during a party at Ruble's apartment near Appalachian State University.

On Monday, Boone police charged Ruble with involuntary felony manslaughter.

"This is negligent. You don't point a gun - it's not a toy," said Boone Police Captain Jim Wilson. He said Ruble, also 20, is distraught about the shooting, which has rocked both families.

"We know he loved Jay," said Susan Derby, Jay's mother, saying she isn't angry with Ruble.

"For me, it's just sadness," said Derby.

Derby, a 2007 Butler High graduate, was studying business at Appalachian. Ruble, of Durham, was taking a year off from the university and was working at two restaurants in Boone.

Police say Derby went to a small party at Ruble's apartment this weekend. About 12:30 a.m. Sunday, police say Ruble went to his bedroom and came back with his .50 caliber muzzle-loading rifle, intending to scare his friends.

He told police he expected only a small pop from the gun's percussion cap.

On a muzzle-loading rifle, the percussion cap explodes when the trigger is pulled - setting off the main gunpowder charge and propelling a slug down the barrel. The gun is loaded by pouring powder and a slug into the muzzle.

Derby was declared dead at the apartment when paramedics arrived.
Ruble, who goes by Eli, cooperated fully with investigators, police said. He was being held at Watauga County Jail under $10,000 bond late Monday and is scheduled to appear in court Dec. 15.

He was previously charged with marijuana possession and underage possession of alcohol, court records show. Both charges were dismissed in 2007. He has no further North Carolina criminal record.

Ruble's uncle, Ben Brinkley, said his nephew is a history buff, which is probably why he owned the antique-style rifle.

"He's not a violent kid," Brinkley said.

Ruble graduated from Durham School of the Arts and was a talented musician, Brinkley said. He was planning to return to college to study forestry.

"This was an accident," Brinkley said. "I'm sure Eli's living in a personal hell right now."

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SPORTS OF THE TIMES

Instead of Firing Coach, Northeastern Ends the Program

By WILLIAM C. RHODEN

Boston

When Northeastern’s football coach, Rocky Hager, was called to meet with Athletic Director Peter Roby on Sunday, his first thought was that the posse had caught up with him. He was going to be fired.

In six seasons as the head coach, Hager had not had a winning season.

Instead, Hager was shocked by what he heard from Roby. The university was effectively firing the entire football program. In a stunning announcement — privately delivered to players Sunday night and publicly announced Monday — Northeastern said it was dropping football.

“I recognize that this certainly is a decision that was not popular,” Roby said. “I respect that and I respect the emotions that are in play. I just hope that people will respect the way in which we went about doing it in order to be as respectful and as appropriate as we could, even if they don’t agree with the decision, they’ll come to appreciate the process and the rationale.”

Shortly after he met with his team Monday, Hager said he was still in a state of disbelief.

“What I told them at our 12 o’clock team meeting was that I thought I was going to get fired because I hadn’t won enough,” Hager said.

Lloyd Clarke, a three-year starter at fullback, directed his feelings at Roby.

“Our athletic director is definitely a silent bomber,” he said. “He really just backstabbed a lot of people. There’s a good way and a bad way of going about things. This was definitely done in a bad way. He sat down and lied to a lot of parents, a lot of freshmen. He consistently told people that they were guaranteed five years to play here. In reality, there wasn’t. I feel that this decision was made a little while ago, they’ve been talking about this the last two years.”

Roby denied that he had misled players or their families, saying: “A year ago, it was my hope and intention that we were going to continue to support the football program and hoped that we could see some improvement so that the quality of that experience would be better than it had been.”

Roby knew as early as 2007, when he completed a review of the athletics department, that the football program, in terms of cost and benefit, was “one of the programs that we really hadn’t seen that level of success,” he said.
Northeastern competes in the competitive Colonial Athletic Association. Roby said that the escalating cost of doing business had simply become too high. The university spends more than $4 million a year on the program, according to The Associated Press. But it was not the annual budget so much as the cost to improve or replace existing facilities that led to the decision.

In the 74 seasons of the football program, Northeastern has had 27 winning seasons, most of those between 1948 and 1971 under Joe Zabelski, one of three Northeastern coaches with a winning record.

“We try not to make decisions solely on wins and losses,” Roby said. “When you look across the landscape at the conference we’re in and what people are committing in terms of being successful, you have to ask yourself, are you prepared to match that level of investment?”

He added: “You have to ask the tough questions. What is it that’s keeping us from achieving and sustaining that excellence? To my view, it was going to require multimillions of dollars of investment to upgrade the facility, and improve the operating budget.”

Firing Hager wasn’t the solution, Roby said. “We know that when you make a change in your coaching staff, in order for you to attract a quality person to come and lead your program, you have to make some commitments to them with respect to what you’re willing to do to help them be competitive. I couldn’t make the recommendation that we should invest multimillions of dollars going forward.”

Northeastern is offering its football players what effectively amounts to a generous buyout. They can stay and earn their degrees, and they will still have access to academic support, sports medicine and strength and conditioning teams.

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There just will not be a football team for them to be a part of.

Clarke said that he was going to make the best of the situation. “I’m going to get my grades up now, get the most out of Northeastern,” he said. “I’m going to do all the things that I couldn’t do because of athletics.”

That’s one snapshot out of 87 players who suddenly find themselves without a program.

“There’s no way of making this a good decision,” Roby said. “It’s just got to be done as best you can.”

With that, Roby excused himself. There were parents to call, coaches to meet with and wounded feelings of 19- and 20-year-olds to try to mend.

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Clemson to get $98M for wind energy test facility

COLUMBIA, S.C. -- Clemson University is getting nearly $100 million to study wind energy, funding that officials at the South Carolina school said Monday could eventually lead to thousands of new jobs for the state.

"This positions Clemson and South Carolina to become national leaders in the development of wind energy and benefit from the green economy," said school President James Barker. "We believe it will have a tremendous positive benefit for the state."

The new facility for wind turbine drive train testing will be part of the Clemson University Restoration Institute campus at the former Navy base in Charleston. A drive train takes energy generated by a turbine's blades and increases the rotational speed to drive the electrical generator, like the transmission in a car.

It needs to be near the state's coastline, and not at Clemson's main campus in the state's northwestern corner because the 200-ton wind turbines being tested will likely arrive by sea, officials said.

"Wind power holds tremendous potential to help create new jobs and reduce carbon pollution," said U.S. Energy Department Secretary Steven Chu. "We are at the beginning of a new Industrial Revolution when it comes to clean energy and projects like these will help us get there faster."

Chu, who is scheduled to visit Clemson's main campus on Nov. 30 for a symposium on green energy, says the facility will create needed jobs and could eventually help lower energy costs for consumers.

The Energy Department gave Clemson $45 million in federal funding under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. State and private sources provided $53 million in matching funds, for a total of $98 million, officials said.

Several other states have received stimulus funds to study wind energy but they pale in comparison to Clemson's award. Last week, Michigan State University announced it had received nearly $84,000 to measure wind speeds around the state. And the University of New Hampshire has also received $700,000 in federal stimulus funds to help develop three deep water wind energy test sites in the Gulf of Maine.

Clemson officials said that funding will become available by the end of January, with construction expected to begin next year. The facility should be up and running by the end of 2012, said Imtiaz Haque, a mechanical engineering professor at Clemson.

Officials estimated that the facility will initially employ at least 100 people, but some say the overall job benefit could be exponentially greater. Building off of the new facility's research, the Energy Department has estimated that the wind industry in South Carolina could eventually provide anywhere from 10,000 to 20,000 jobs.

"As the wind energy market emerges along the East Coast and turbines continue to grow in size and
weight, South Carolina is strategically positioned to serve as an industrial hub for this evolving industry," said John Kelly, executive director of the Restoration Institute. "Obviously this is the beginning of what we hope will be the location for manufacturers."