

FOR THE RECORD

By tradition, we take the term “revolt” very seriously here in Orange County. The practice goes back prior to the founding of the country; and thanks in part to a little rebellion that brewed up in Orange and Alamance counties in the mid 1700s, the groundwork for a revolution was set.

So when those orange signs proclaiming another Orange County tax revolt started to pop up, folks were indeed curious. Turns out that the group responsible, while it has some local members and interest, is not exactly native to our area, nor is it focused on the recent revaluation.

No, Freedom Works is a GOP-organized effort to recruit new members to the party and to instill in it a more libertarian philosophy when it comes to taxes. The group is led by, among others, former U.S. House Majority Leader Dick Armey, who may or may not have ever heard of Orange County. As the Republican Party strives to rekindle its fires and deal with the drubbing it took in the past election, the group and others like it have been organizing various tea parties and tax rebellions across the country. That’s fine. That’s their right.

And there is nothing wrong with citizens worried about rising taxes banding together and voicing a collective opinion. It’s happened before, albeit without so many signs.

But there is a lot of misinformation out there and we’d like to take a shot at a few corrections. First, revaluations happen on a regular cycle. The last one was in 2005. The next one is in 2013. Second, the recent revaluations for residential properties average 22 percent countywide. The county and the towns will start their budget processes by knocking down the tax rate by that amount to keep the revaluation “revenue neutral.” So if your house increased in value by more than 22 percent, you will be paying more taxes. The reason you will be paying more taxes is that your house is worth more money. If you feel like the value of your home rose too high too fast, you are encouraged to file an appeal. We’ve outlined that process on page 2. You can also review the forms and the process on the county’s website.

As they do every year, the towns and the county will review their budgets and decide whether to raise taxes. No budget has been drafted yet and no tax increase has been proposed. Drafts of the budgets begin to emerge in April and there is a series of hearings to give citizens an opportunity to examine and discuss the items and any proposed increase. The budgets are voted on in June in time for the beginning of the new fiscal year on July 1. This process is neither a mystery nor a conspiracy.

What can be a little mysterious are the details of those budgets. Finding places to trim are not as easy as saying “cut government waste.” Your waste may be someone else’s safety net, the neighborhood down the street’s curb and gutter repair, another fire truck or a competitive salary for a school nurse or police officer. There is little that any local government does in Orange County that could be described as fluff. There are corners that can be nibbled at in traditional areas – like travel expenses, lunches and office supplies – but it is difficult to find in them even the roughly \$1.25 million that it would take to cut a penny off the tax rate.

In the county’s case, about half of the money we pay in taxes goes to education. In the case of the towns, providing the police and fire departments and garbage pickup represents the bulk of ongoing expenses. Each town has focused in the past few years on improving infrastructure, which, naturally, costs money.

We welcome any ideas on how to keep costs and taxes down. We encourage those of you willing to take a serious crack at budget cutting to send your thoughts in as a letter to the editor.

For those of you who say “enough,” we’d like to know “enough what?”

What do we have too much of? What should we curtail? Where should we cut?

Here are the ground rules — the same ones the commissioners and town leaders are playing under: You can’t alter the state or federal constitutions, overturn any court rulings or obtain special legislation from the General Assembly.

Have at it, tax revolters. We welcome your leadership and sacrifice.

THE CARRBORO CITIZEN

EDITORIAL

Robert Dickson, Publisher

Kirk Ross, Editor

Taylor Sisk, Contributing Editor

Liz Holm, Art Director

Susan Dickson, Staff Writer

Margot Carmichael Lester, Rich Fowler, Contributing Writers

Ava Barlow, Photographer

Editorial Intern: Jasmina Nogo

ADVERTISING

Marty Cassady, Advertising Director

marty@carrborocitizen.com

OPERATIONS

Anne Billings, Office Coordinator

DISTRIBUTION

Chuck Morton, Dylan Jarrell

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The forgotten education perspective

BY CHRIS FITZSIMON

The legislative budget process begins in public this week as appropriations subcommittees kick off their daily meetings to look for savings to balance next year’s budget. The conversation begins just days after news that Gov. Beverly Perdue now expects a \$3.6 billion shortfall next year, a deficit that experts with the N.C. Budget and Tax Center believe could exceed \$4 billion.

Perdue says cuts currently under consideration leave the budget \$500 million short next year even after accounting for the money provided by the federal stimulus package. And the cuts are substantial: according to the Associated Press, 10 percent in most state agencies, 7.5 percent in human services and higher education and 4.5 percent in public schools.

Those cuts are bad enough. Many will result in a loss of services for some of the most vulnerable people in the state. Reducing budgets by another \$500 million would rip wider holes in the state’s already tattered safety net and could reverse progress that’s been made in many areas, including education.

Public schools in North Carolina are most often brought up in policy circles to lament how they are failing, and there is plenty to complain about. Three out of 10 ninth graders leave high school without a diploma; academic achievement varies widely among schools and school districts, and generally correlates to poverty; and the standardized testing program is confusing at best.

The problems are ready ammunition for the market fundamentalists in their efforts to privatize public education and they are sources of understandable frustration to public school supporters, who often remain on the defensive, reluctant

to demand the investments that the schools need and the students deserve.

The conservative mantra is that we shouldn’t keep throwing money at schools that are failing our children and instead need radical reform, including tax credits or vouchers for private schools. Politicians who support public education often agree with the analysis of the problem without also acknowledging the improvements the schools have made, making greater investments far more difficult.

The ultimate measure of schools isn't a report comparing them with schools in other states, it's how well they are doing for North Carolina students.

Acknowledging those improvements is especially important this year as legislative leaders decide how much to reduce spending on education, which makes up more than half of the state’s annual operating budget, with public schools accounting for 37 percent of the total. It is worth noting that that percentage is less than the 41 percent of the state budget spent on K-12 education just six years ago.

The school privatizers will tell you the state hasn’t received the return on the education investment that it should have, pointing to the problems that are undeniable. But they also need to be reminded of what the schools have accomplished, using their own sources as measurements, particularly the report released recently by the American Legislative Exchange Council

(ALEC), the national organization of state legislators.

The group’s annual report card on public education ranked North Carolina 30th overall, despite ranking 44th in per-pupil expenditure. That was ahead of all neighboring states except Virginia, which spends 25 percent more per student.

North Carolina leads the country in the percentage of improvement in ACT scores in the last 10 years and is sixth in improvement on the SAT. Fourth-grade students ranked 19th in performance on a national math test and eighth-graders ranked 22nd. The reading test scores were 35th, leaving a lot of room for improvement, though North Carolina students did better than kids in Tennessee, South Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi and most other Southern states.

The report finds that even the state’s 66.6 percent high school graduation rate, though totally unacceptable, is higher than most of its neighbors. And North Carolina improved its ranking on the ALEC report 10 spots since 2000.

The ultimate measure of schools isn’t a report comparing them with schools in other states, it’s how well they are doing for North Carolina students.

But the ALEC report and others with similar results are important markers of not just how far the state public school system has to go, but how far it has come.

That progress has been made possible by important investments by state lawmakers, who shouldn’t turn back now, budget crisis or not.

Chris Fitzsimon is the director of NC Policy Watch.

The New Deal and the New New Deal:

Countering conservative claptrap
BY ROBERT REICH

The stock market reached a six-year low last week. Why? Some blame loose talk (including that of former Fed Chair Alan Greenspan) about nationalizing the nation’s banks. Others blame Obama’s new plan for helping homeowners who may not be able to pay their mortgages. But the real culprit is the accelerating decline in aggregate demand – consumers, businesses and exports. Companies are losing money because their customers are disappearing. That’s precisely why the stimulus is so important – indeed, why many of us fear it’s too small.

One of the oddest of right-wing claims is that FDR’s New Deal didn’t pull America out of the Great Depression, so Barack Obama’s “New New Deal” won’t either. While it’s true that the New Deal didn’t end the Great Depression, three points need to be impressed on the hard-pressed conservative mind:

1. The New Deal relieved a great deal of suffering by establishing social safety nets – Unemployment Insurance, Aid for Dependent Children and Social Security for retirees. Most have remained, a worthy legacy. But because the structure of the economy has changed (a much higher percentage of the working population is now employed part-time in several jobs or as independent contractors, for example), there are gaping holes in the safety net, which a New New Deal should fill in order that the Mini-Depression we’re experiencing not cause excessive harm.

2. FDR’s public works spending did help the economy somewhat. By 1936, the U.S. economy was showing some life. Unemployment was declining and consumers were beginning to buy. But FDR cut back on public-works spending and the economy sank back into its former torpor. A warning to Obama: Don’t worry about so-called “fiscal responsibility” when aggregate demand still falls far short of the economy’s total capacity.

3. The Second World War pulled the nation out of the Great Depression because it required that government spend on such a huge scale as to restart the nation’s factories, put Americans back to work and push the nation toward its productive capacity. By the end of the war, most Americans were better off than they were before its start. Yes, the national debt ballooned to 120 percent of GDP. But the debt-GDP ratio subsequently declined – not just because post-war spending dropped but because the economy continued to grow as war production converted to the production of consumer goods. Lesson: The danger isn’t too much stimulus, it’s too little stimulus.

Robert Reich was the nation's 22nd secretary of labor and is a professor at the University of California at Berkeley. His latest book is Supercapitalism.

LETTERS

Clarification needed

I read with astonishment the response by the Carrboro Planning Board’s James Carnahan to Alderman Dan Coleman’s remarks regarding the Colleton Crossing issue. Accordingly, I am addressing my response to Mr. Carnahan for some clarification.

Dear Mr. Carnahan: I am confused by your remarks regarding the Carrboro’s Connector Roads Policy regarding the Colleton Crossing issue. On one hand you agree that “a re-assessment of the Connector Roads Policy will benefit Carrboro,” yet on the other you indicate you “would oppose any effort to water it down.” So let me get his straight: you have determined your opposition to a policy that you support?

But you weren’t done. You determined that this mass connectivity actually realizes “a critical unstated goal.” A critical goal that is unstated? While it is in everyone’s interest for fewer miles to be traveled, it follows that the community’s interest is served by fewer cars clogging our roads. How can the “unstated goal” of reducing vehicle miles traveled be served by substantially increasing traffic?

You indicate the community’s need for common areas. Our com-

munity is our common area. We have block parties, children playing in the streets, interactivity among our residents. The absurd notion that hundreds of additional cars passing through our community will enhance the quality of our lives cannot be sensibly supported. But you’re consistent. Regarding the downtown condo project and the fact that Carrboro is the most densely populated town in North Carolina, you responded, “I think it’s great.” In support of that project, their marketing firm’s rep said, “Density is extremely important” to a town like Carrboro. Perhaps they are marketing the Colleton Crossing project also.

You claim to support a walkable transit oriented sustainable community. Is it your proposal that increasing the traffic through our community will enhance our walkability? Is it because there will be so much traffic we would rather walk two miles to the market than drive?

Our lives are enhanced. Our small community is more than adequately served connectivity wise. Your contention that adding hundreds, if not thousands, of car trips daily increases the quality of our lives is hardly a logical contention. Growth is easy when quality of life is not a consideration. It seems sensible that advocating for the “unstated goal” of reducing vehi-

cle miles traveled would be to oppose proposals for more vehicles in what already is the state’s most densely populated town, not support them. In fact, I am more than happy to make this a fully stated goal.

KEN WEISS
Carrboro

Thanks for the support

Even in a difficult economy, supporters of Cornucopia House Cancer Support Center stepped forward Feb. 8 to help ensure we continue to fulfill our promise to provide free, non-clinical cancer support services to anyone affected by cancer – patients, survivors, their families, friends and caregivers.

Nearly 500 people opened their hearts and wallets at this year’s A Chocolate Affaire, helping us raise nearly \$60,000 that goes toward our myriad services, including peer-to-peer and group support, yoga, massage therapy, forums, lending library and more.

Special thanks go to our honorary co-chairs, Dr. H. Shelton Earp, director of the UNC Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center; Dr. H. Kim Lyerly, director of Duke Comprehensive Cancer Center; and presenting sponsor, GlaxoSmithKline. Great appreciation also goes to the volunteer planning committee: Joy Bryde,

chair; Sara Baligh, Joan Boone, Sally Burke, Dale Flexner and Amy Leiser. We’re grateful to have all of these longtime supporters come together to assist many individuals who struggle with cancer’s impact every day.

And there are so many others: 34 individuals and organizations contributed event sponsorships, 48 restaurants gave scrumptious desserts and beverages, 168 companies and individuals donated auction items and more than 120 volunteers worked tirelessly over several months. Each one furthers our ability to provide encouragement and to empower individuals and families coping with cancer.

We’re grateful to all our supporters who help Cornucopia House fulfill our mission. For information, visit www.cornucopiahouse.org or call 919/401-9333.

MARY LAWRENCE
President and CEO Cornucopia House Cancer Support Center

CORRECTION

Last week in our Classified Trivia we ran a list of well-known persons and asked: living or dead? We regret to inform you that since the penning of the questions and their publication, pin-up queen Betty Page passed away.