

FOR THE RECORD

A rational pause

The 300 East Main Street project is big, both in size and in how it is likely to change the eastern edge of Carrboro's burgeoning downtown.

The project, the result of a decade of discussion and "visioning," and at least four years of serious back and forth between the town, developers and some of the key entities — mainly The ArtsCenter and Cat's Cradle — that will be affected.

The lengthy public hearing Tuesday night included the kind of passion you might expect, both for and against, and ended without a vote by the Carrboro Board of Aldermen.

There is a pause now, with a vote expected at a special meeting on Sept. 30. Given the heat and light from the hearing, a short pause makes sense in order to see that concerns raised have a chance to be thought through.

But it is clearly time to make a decision and, as many pointed out Tuesday night, time for the town to seize the opportunity and prepare the way for a new era.

Conservative thinking

Like a lot of government entities in the water business, the Orange Water and Sewer Authority is in a bit of a pickle. For years now, OWASA has been encouraging — and pleading and insisting and cajoling — its customers to conserve water. And, as during the aftermath of the 2002 drought, the authority is now feeling the financial pinch of the frugality of ratepayers. After 2002, overall demand failed to rise back to pre-drought levels. This year, the pattern is repeating.

In the OWASA service area, there now are thousands more rain barrels and cisterns, along with low-flow toilets, fixed leaks and 2.5-gallon-per-minute (or less) showerheads.

That's great, of course, because it means that people have adapted to drier conditions and adopted water-conserving habits. But conservation has hit OWASA's bottom line hard.

Positions are frozen, budgets tight and spending for infrastructure slowing.

We know it's difficult for many people in this community to feel empathy with anything defined as a utility, but this particular situation presents a conundrum worth contemplating and, if possible, solving.

OWASA's conservation-driven financial crunch is an example on a much smaller scale of what regulators are faced with in trying to craft a new energy policy.

Since conservation is the ultimate way to green up the power grid, it makes the most sense to start there. But power companies are having a hard time with the concept.

As a Duke Energy lobbyist reminded the Legislature's climate change committee when it opened hearings a couple years back, power companies are not accustomed to encouraging people to use less of their product.

That's probably why there is such a gulf between Duke's Save-a-Watt effort and other measures proposed by utilities and those who would like to hasten a sweeping restructuring of our energy systems.

Regulators are well aware that the costs of converting a significant chunk of this state's energy production to greener methods requires significant participation by the private sector.

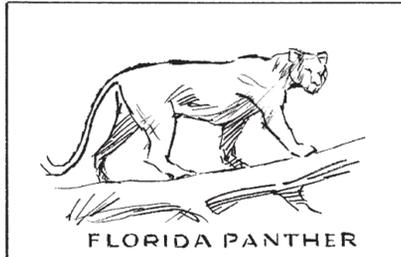
In less than two weeks, OWASA's rate increase takes effect and customers will reap their portion of the fruits of conservation. It will be interesting to see how this community responds to the increase and to the challenge of maintaining and growing infrastructure with slower revenues going forward.

No doubt, there are energy company officials keeping an eye on how their brethren in the water business fare.

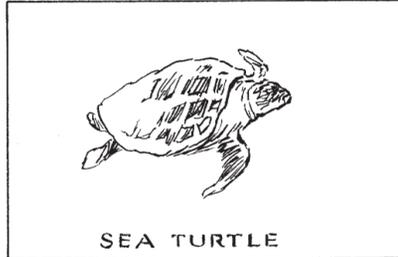
Get yer sweaters out

Fans of the autumnal equinox take note: Officially, fall starts Monday (Sept. 22) at 11:44 and 18 seconds. Fall weather, though, arrives a bit earlier with lows over the weekend in the mid-50s.

ENDANGERED SPECIES



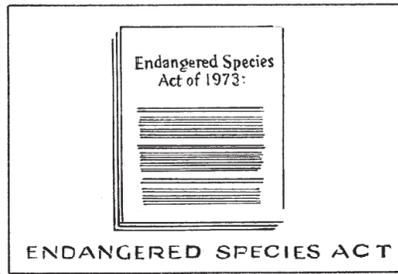
FLORIDA PANTHER



SEA TURTLE



WHOOPING CRANE



ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT

NC Revenue system reform needed

MEG GRAY WIEHE

In less than two months, North Carolinians will be electing our state's next leader. The gubernatorial candidates, Pat McCrory and Beverly Perdue, have different visions for the direction they want to take the state. They both, however, have touted plans to make new investments in the state, which means they need to have the resources to pay for them. Yet, there has been a lack of attention paid by either candidate to North Carolina's outdated revenue system. To ensure the state has the resources to implement their visions, we need a bipartisan debate about how to create a more adequate, equitable and modern revenue system and a commitment from both candidates to lead that reform upon taking office.

Today's North Carolina is the product of generations of investments made to promote the common good. By working together, North Carolinians have created a host of world-class public services and institutions in education, transportation, public safety, recreation and health care. In return, these investments have fueled North Carolina's growth, given North Carolinians an enviable quality of life and helped to make our state a player in the global economy.

Now, however, times are changing rapidly. Our economy, which was once based on agriculture and manufacturing, is now driven by technology, health care and other segments of the service economy. As a result, challenges and opportunities abound. With a booming population, our outdated revenue system is increasingly unable to keep up with the growing demand for roads, schools and services. Looking forward, it is

essential that we have the funds needed to maintain and improve the public structures upon which we all rely.

The imminent change in North Carolina's leadership presents an opportunity to build on past achievements as we face these new challenges. While some parts of our state and local revenue system are working well, rebuilding our revenue system so that it is more adequate and fair is paramount in order to support North Carolina's growth and ensure prosperity for future generations.

First and foremost, we need to rebuild our revenue system so that it grows with the changing economy and brings in enough money to pay for the investments and services that will enable the state to continually improve the quality of life for all. An updated system should also be equitable, meaning those with the smallest incomes are also paying the smallest share of their incomes in taxes. The lack of fairness in our current revenue system contributes significantly to its inadequacies.

An updated revenue system should continue a primary reliance on a progressive income tax because it is the fairest revenue source and will be the most adequate over time. Cutting income tax rates across the board, as McCrory suggests, does not amount to reform and would leave North Carolina in an even worse place than where we are headed. Rates could be lowered if we followed the lead of most states and broaden the income tax base. Adding more income tax brackets to the top would enhance the progressivity of the tax and promote greater adequacy. Perdue recently supported the new state version of the federal Earned Income Tax Credit, which will help to make our system fairer,

but more extensive changes need to be embraced to achieve meaningful reform.

Major changes must be made to our sales tax, which excludes most services due to a historical application of the tax rather than a deliberate policy decision. North Carolina should extend the sales tax to services and use the additional revenue to lower the state and local sales tax rates. Under Perdue's watch this year, the North Carolina Senate made a change in the wrong direction by passing a law to prohibit levying a sales tax on interior decorating services. Taxing services is inevitably necessary to ensure that the sales tax keeps pace with economic realities.

In recent years, North Carolina has fared relatively well compared to most other states in terms of having adequate resources to meet the needs of the state. As early as next year, the situation will not be so bright for us. Due primarily to slowing revenue growth, projected state revenues for next year will not be enough to maintain the current level of services, let alone pay for any new investments. There are inefficiencies in our state spending that the next governor can trim, but budget cuts alone will not be enough to free up the resources needed to fund a growing state.

This looming fiscal crisis should prompt the gubernatorial candidates to consider and promote a comprehensive overhaul of our revenue system as their top priority if elected. Without reform, both candidates will face difficulties in finding the resources to fulfill their campaign promises.

Meg Gray Wiehe is a policy analyst at the N.C. Budget and Tax Center.

Recovery and "The Peace within Yourself"

PETER KRAMER

September is celebrated nationally as Recovery Month, a time to recognize the possibilities and promise of a life free from addiction. This year's theme is "Join the Voices for Recovery; Real People, Real Recovery."

The National Survey on Drug Use and Health for 2007 had good news and bad news. On the one hand, cocaine and methamphetamine use were down among young adults, cocaine use by one-fourth and meth by one-third. Still, one in five reported using an illicit substance the month before. Among the 12-17 age group, drug use in the month prior to the survey decreased from 9.8 percent to 9.5 percent, continuing a five-year trend. Their alcohol and tobacco use was also down.

Significantly, use by the 50-59 age group increased, suggesting that baby boomers have not given up habits started 30 and more years ago. Of 20 million people over the age of 12 who admitted using an illicit substance, the great majority reported using marijuana. The study found a direct link between illicit drug use and incidents of depression.

Millions of individuals suffering from substance abuse have found comfort and success in Twelve Step programs, such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA).

The steps refer to a process whereby the individual, through attending group meetings, relentless reading, prayer and study, and with the support of a sponsor, conducts a "fearless moral inventory." The steps include admitting one's powerlessness over the problem, asking for help from a higher power ("God as we know him"), acknowledging wrong done to others, making amends and, finally, helping others in their own path to the better life possible through recovery.

By contacting the customer service number of

the OPC (Orange Person Chatham) Area Program — 913-4120 or 1-877-277-2303 — callers can locate an AA or NA meeting in the three-county area. We can also answer, in a confidential manner, all kinds of questions about issues and services pertaining to mental illness, substance abuse and developmental disabilities.

Donna Edmonds, a 34-year-old client of the UNC Horizons Program based in Carrboro, is a Voice for Recovery. Horizons, a component of the UNC School of Medicine, provides treatment for women addicted to substances. Its support includes outpatient support groups; prenatal and postnatal OB-GYN treatment; classes in relationships, job skills, nutrition and money management; a residential program for the women and their children; and onsite day-care and other comprehensive services for the participants' children. After years of significant cocaine use, Ms. Edmonds has experienced success with Horizons.

Ms. Edmonds wrote an essay recently about what recovery has meant to her:

"The most amazing lesson I've learned while on the journey of recovery is how to become a source of comfort to those around me, thanks to my sharing of the story of my addiction. When I was crushed and overwhelmed by life during active addiction, it was then I received the gift of desperation.

"No one needs to fear the trials of life. No matter how great a hardship you face, there is a Higher Power to strengthen you, making you better equipped to provide understanding and acceptance to those around you who've encountered the same hardships.

"Release your burdens, return to reason and normality ... and you'll find that recovery is the counselor of peace within yourself."

Peter Kramer works for the OPC Area Program.

Drilling deception

PRICEY HARRISON

Americans are still hurting because of the high cost of gas. Here in North Carolina, we're still paying over a dollar per gallon more than we were one year ago today.



In response, North Carolinians are driving less, because they know they need to save money to pay for other expenses, like rising food costs and health care.

As a state legislator, it's easy to see how rising gas prices impact people's bottom lines. It's too bad those engaged in the national debate about energy don't get the simple truth that we need to move beyond a drilling debate. Expanding offshore drilling is the one thing we could do that would guarantee demand goes up and prices remain high. More drilling can't produce enough, takes too long, continues our unsustainable dependence on fossil fuels and only benefits a small number of oil executives.

With less than three percent of the world's oil, the United States could drill every national park, wildlife refuge and coastline and still need to import 60 percent of the oil we use — and that's just based on current energy demand. It is deceptive to imply that we can drill enough to offset growing demand or drive down gas prices — in North Carolina or across the country. Besides, drilling won't deliver a drop of new oil for 10 years.

Most of all, more drilling just deepens our addiction to oil, which is good for Big Oil but bad for people here in North Carolina. We know more drilling doesn't mean lower gas prices — because we've already tried. The number of new offshore drilling permits has tripled since 2001 — and yet we're also paying triple what we were in 2001. Meanwhile, Big Oil is enjoying record profits.

The recent price gouging experienced during the run-up to and aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Ike has demonstrated the precariousness of locating offshore oil drilling and refineries in harm's way. North Carolina's coast is the most vulnerable on the Atlantic Coast; and if Hurricane Ike is any example, just the threat of a storm will result in higher prices.

It's also surprising to learn that the oil and gas industry already has access to more drilling than it knows what to do with. Oil companies are sitting on 68 million acres of American oil-producing land that they could have started drilling yesterday, already more than can be drilled effectively. The industry should responsibly drill in those areas before we hand over more of the public's land and coasts.

What we need is to relieve the pain at the pump (through federal energy rebates) and get moving with solutions from clean technology that already exist, so that when Americans drive past a gas station — they can just keep on driving. We need cars that go farther on a tank of gas and we need them to be affordable. Most of all, we need a comprehensive American energy-production plan that increases our energy independence and boosts our local economy.

Right now, 200,000 green jobs are in peril because Big Oil and a majority of the members of Congress refuse to extend incentives to American renewable-energy companies. Right now, we are importing wind turbines, solar panels and other clean technologies from our global competitors that could be built by American workers right here in North Carolina. It's time to invest in clean, homegrown energy sources that will wean us off our addiction to oil, create local jobs and allow us to compete with China, India and Europe in the new global economy.

North Carolina has taken important steps in the right direction by adopting a renewable-energy portfolio standard requiring that 12.5 percent of our future energy needs come from increased efficiencies and renewable energy sources, setting up the Biofuels Center, funding important energy research at our universities and other important energy measures. While we are doing what we can, we cannot solve the energy crisis at the state level; we need leadership at the federal level.

If we get started now, we can create millions of new clean-energy jobs, make America safer, head off the worst of irreversible catastrophic climate change and clean up the air. It's time for real relief, not recycled rhetoric.

There's no reason to think more drilling will lower gas prices — but there's every reason to think the people talking the loudest are really looking to boost Big Oil's already sky-high profits. Now that Congress has returned, it should move forward with a policy that doesn't benefit oil executives but instead helps families by investing in renewable technology and insulating them from global oil spikes.

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THE CARRBORO CITIZEN

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