

*****SPAM*** For Immediate Release**

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From the Office of Sen. Joyce Waddell, NC Senate
Mecklenburg County

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Greetings:

As we celebrate Black History Month during the month of February, it is important to note African Americans have contributed to our society in major ways. From the creation and assistance of medical devices, air conditioners, every day items such as soap, hair products, to physics with caller ID for phones, touch tone phones, alarm systems, as well as, the mass availability of blood banks and blood plasma banks and the list goes on.

Last week I read a senatorial statement on the floor recognizing the celebration of Black History Month. We recognize February as such every year with the full knowledge and understanding that the contributions of African Americans should be celebrated throughout the year.

Sincerely,
Joyce Waddell

Unemployment Committee

The legislature's unemployment oversight committee approved language for a draft bill. That bill would extend the cutoff date for

federal COVID relief related to unemployment, called Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation or PEUC. It expired at the end of 2020, but this bill would extend it until the end of this year, unless the Governor rescinds the state of emergency for coronavirus before then. The bill would also help businesses out by stopping a planned increase in the base rate they pay for taxes that help fund the unemployment system. Instead of a rate increase this year, the bill would keep the base rate at 1.9%. However, the final amount businesses pay into the program could still go up or down, depending on factors like how many workers they have file for unemployment.

The committee also discussed news that the federal government is asking for \$7 million back from North Carolinians who received unemployment benefits in 2020 or 2021. Lawmakers aren't too happy about it. The head of the Division of Employment Security, told legislators they have several options during a meeting Wednesday of the Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on Unemployment Insurance. They could try to take back the money from the approximately 200,000 North Carolinians who the feds say owe them, he said, which would average out to about \$35 per person — and in many cases would be \$10 or less. Or, he said, state government could pay the money itself, or simply wait and see if the federal government will waive the debt. If the feds don't waive the payments, though, support the state paying the funds, instead of going after individuals to take money back. The state has the money, because it has a good amount in the reserve fund.

The committee also pressed the head of the Department of Employment Security on when they will once again require people on unemployment to prove they're looking for a job, in order to keep getting benefits. The Governor waived that requirement last spring, as part of the same executive order that contained his first wide-ranging business restrictions. On Wednesday, it was expressed that there is desire among some lawmakers to put the work search requirement back into place. It was stated that lawmakers are "getting close" but didn't give an exact target date. They added that lawmakers considered doing it in late 2020, until a second wave of coronavirus cases hit the state.

Vaccine Delivery

The President's administration told North Carolina and other states on Friday afternoon that they will see further delays in shipments of COVID-19 vaccine doses. North Carolina public health officials said

they now expect more deliveries of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines to resume at the start of next week. The state health department also warned that some providers may choose not to go forward with plans to vaccinate teachers and school staff once eligibility opens up to that group on Wednesday. Severe winter weather has fueled delays across the country, causing tens of thousands of North Carolinians scheduled to be vaccinated last week to have their appointments pushed back. “What we are being informed by Operation Warp Speed is that shipments are being held by the producers and distributors until they are sure shipments won’t be delayed,” the department said in a statement to The Associated Press late Friday morning. “To our knowledge, operations are being planned to help ensure spoilage isn’t an issue. We understand Operation Warp Speed is closely monitoring and coordinating across the supply chain.”

First doses typically arrive in North Carolina on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, while second doses arrive on Thursdays and Fridays. First doses that had been expected to arrive last week but were not shipped are now scheduled to be delivered to North Carolina providers between Monday and Wednesday of next week. Data provided by the state on Thursday showed 41,925 of the roughly 127,000 Pfizer vaccines expected to arrive last week had left the manufacturer or distributor. None of the more than 163,000 expected Moderna doses had been delivered.

The delay could affect North Carolina’s transition to its third phase of vaccine distribution, which expands eligibility on Wednesday to child care workers, preK-12 educators and school staff. A far more expansive group of “frontline essential workers” ranging from mail carriers to elected officials are scheduled to become eligible for the vaccine starting March 10.

It’s unclear how many providers will delay the implementation of the Phase 3 rollout in order to meet the high demand among those currently eligible for a shot but still unvaccinated. Health care workers and people over age 65 can presently get the vaccine, though some have struggled to book and come in for an initial appointment. This week’s federal allocations of doses are expected to arrive during the same time period as the delayed shipments, according to the state health department.

Prison Staff

A little over a third of North Carolina’s correctional staff want to be

vaccinated against COVID-19, according to an informal survey by state prison leaders. The remaining employees, about 65 percent of detention staff, don't want the COVID-19 vaccine. Vaccination is currently optional for correctional staff. "Most will not be getting it," said "Kristine," who worked as a medical supervisor at one of the prisons and a corrections employee for the state for 11 years before retiring three months ago. NC Health News is giving her a pseudonym, as her husband still works within the prison system, and she said state employees who speak to journalists will usually "get a hand slap."

The Department of Public Safety, which oversees state prisons, may consider offering incentives for staff to get vaccinated "down the road," according to a spokesperson for the agency, which oversees state prisons. The spokesperson noted that the survey was "unscientific." The figure is derived from wardens and senior leaders, he said, who have "repeated and ongoing" discussions with staff and "have a general sense of the situation in their prisons." "Similar to what we see across the country, staff continue to consider multiple factors in making their decision, including some hesitancy to being in the first wave of those vaccinated," he said. DPS expects more staff will be willing to take the vaccine over time.

"We expect the vaccination participation rate to increase, as more individuals are vaccinated and we continue to provide extensive education and assistance to staff in answering their vaccine-related questions," the spokesperson said in an emailed statement.

Another officer, who also asked to remain anonymous, said he quit his job at another institution about three weeks ago after feeling pressured to get inoculated. NC Health News confirmed he had worked at the agency through the public DPS employee directory. "I will not be coerced into taking a vaccine," he wrote in a Facebook message to NC Health News. He cited distrust in the government and disbelief in what he called a "fake pandemic," and said the vaccine was a scheme for the elite to stay in power by causing people to be scared "like a bunch of kindergartners worrying about cooties."

By nature of the job, correctional officers come in and out of detention facilities and return to the outside community every day. It's one of the reasons they've been prioritized for the COVID-19 vaccine under North Carolina's distribution plan – they're often credited as the source of the initial spread of COVID-19 into prisons and jails and face a high risk of being exposed to the virus and spreading it to the larger community once it's inside their workplace.

Unemployment Requirements

Republican legislators have drafted a bill that would reinstate the requirement that jobless people actively seek work in order to receive unemployment benefits. In a March 10 executive order, the Governor authorized the Department of Commerce, which houses the state unemployment agency, to waive these requirements. The draft bill filed by legislators on Wednesday would reintroduce those requirements, exempting people who are out of work for COVID-19-related reasons.

A spokesperson for the Governor expressed hesitations about reintroducing the requirement. “We want people safely back to work as soon as possible and work requirements can help with that. However, during this pandemic these requirements are difficult for some and we don’t want to deny them benefits that help keep families afloat and stimulate our economy,” the press secretary said Friday in an email to The News & Observer. The Division of Employment Security has the authority to reactivate the work search requirements, even without legislation. The assistant secretary of Commerce for Employment Security, said at the Wednesday legislative meeting that his office’s goal is to reintroduce the work search requirement “within days, certainly within weeks.” At the very least, he said, they hope to reintroduce the work registration provision, which requires people receiving benefits to be registered with the state’s job service office, NC Works. He said this change, whenever it takes place, should be implemented for everyone. “Separating COVID from non-COVID job loss would have so complicated our system, [which] was already overburdened,” he said. “Communicating those unique characteristics would have caused more confusion, more panic.”

The bill proposed by legislators would make work search mandatory for people out of work for non-COVID-19 reasons but waive it for those out of work for COVID-related reasons. A member of the committee, expressed his support for the bill in a phone interview with The N&O. “The Assistant DES Secretary has sincerely held concerns and I appreciate them but I don’t think we can let great be the enemy of good, and I think we have to make some progress on this front and give employers some hope.” He also voiced concerns that people may not be ready to go back to work. Some workers “[have] a very, very sincere and real fear of returning to a workplace because of many reasons — preexisting conditions, age of the worker, uncertainty of what all this means, fear of vaccine,” he said. “We have to please recognize that the worker in North Carolina that we all cherish and

need — they are different now after what they’ve been through in this pandemic, as is everything else.”

Reopening Bill

The Governor said Thursday he wants to have further discussions with legislative leaders before deciding what to do with a bill that would require school districts to give students the option of in-person learning. He said bills should require schools to comply with the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services’ guidelines for returning to in-person learning while also allowing local leaders to respond to emergencies. “The bill that legislators just passed fails on both of these fronts,” the Governor said. “It is critical for teachers and students that we get this right.”

The General Assembly passed Senate Bill 37 this week, requiring school systems to offer Plan A to special needs students and either Plan A or Plan B for all students. There is a mask requirement at all schools. Plan B includes six feet of social distancing, while Plan A does not. The Governor has objected to the minimal social distancing in Plan A for older students. The current state guidance calls for Plan A for K-5 and Plan B or C for 6-12. SB 37 allows both plans for K-12. Both the Governor’s plan and the bill include still offering an online-only option for students statewide.

Most school systems already have offered in-person learning, though some had paused it after winter break. The Governor has urged school systems that had been closed to in-person classes to reopen, though he stopped short of mandating it. Several more school districts have chosen to reopen in recent weeks. The Republican-sponsored bill received enough bipartisan support from Democratic lawmakers that they could override a veto, if he vetoes it. The governor has 10 days to sign or veto a bill, or if he does nothing by that time, it becomes law without his signature. The Governor said Thursday he could sign different legislation “or let this run its course.”

The governor said by mid-March, 95 of the state’s 115 local school districts would have some in-person instruction. Teachers and other school staff are next in line for vaccines, starting Feb. 24. They will be the first group of front-line essential workers eligible in the next phase of vaccinations.

Oversight Elimination

The North Carolina legislature's nonpartisan division tasked with evaluating the efficiency and effectiveness of public services is being dissolved, Republican leaders confirmed after a former staffer broke the news on Twitter this week. The nearly 15-year-old unit said to have saved the state millions, known as the Program Evaluation Division, has more than a dozen staffers. They will be replaced by partisan staff tasked with similar duties in the coming weeks. Legislative leaders did not say whether staff would be laid off or transferred.

Most state legislatures have a similar division — often sheltered from political influence — with a mandate of assisting lawmakers with oversight and accountability. North Carolina was one of the last states to create such a unit. Eliminating it would put the state back in the minority of state legislatures without one. The goal in eliminating it, however, is to improve efficiency when it comes to exposing problems and finding solutions within the government, House Speaker's spokesperson, said in a phone interview Wednesday. Eliminating the Program Evaluation Division will also remove “bureaucratic red tape” in the oversight process, he said.

A State Senate Democratic Whip, said the decision was made without Democratic input. Democrats aren't alone in their discontent with the sudden change. A former Republican, who worked closely with the division as a chair of the committee that oversees it, said he was disappointed in the decision to eliminate the division. “Transparency wasn't always in the best interest of some,” he said. “To me, that is the very essence of what we're to do. That was our charge. When you start stepping on toes, people scream. I'm not surprised there was some considerable pressure on legislative leadership to put PED out of business.”

Established in 2007 after receiving unanimous support from the General Assembly, the Program Evaluation Division was led by a bipartisan employee until his retirement in September and has produced well over 100 reports. It operates like Congress's U.S. Government Accountability Office, evaluating agencies or programs at the request of legislators. Division staffers have a wealth of public policy experience; at least three staffers have PhDs, and two are lawyers. Many previously worked for state agencies. All evaluators hold advanced degrees or are certified or licensed professionals, according to the division's website.

“I found PED to be very useful,” said a former House member. “It

helped me solve problems where we didn't have full time staff to do the types of studies that really need to be the predicate for legislation that might need to be filed." But the division also sparked frustration among both lawmakers and state agencies. In one case, he said, the unit found the Department of Administration was selling laptops instead of providing them to needy students. The department was "not very happy with PED for uncovering many of the examples of waste, fraud and abuse," the House member said. He said he has contacted legislative leaders about the elimination. "I see it as a mistake," he said. "I don't think that it's in the best interest of either the General Assembly or the people of the state."

Senator Waddell served on the PED Committee for two election cycles and was disappointed to hear about the changes. She has plans to continue to be informed with committee actions.

Budget Outlook

North Carolina state lawmakers will start the budget process this spring with promising news amid a pandemic: \$4.1 billion more revenue than they expected. House and Senate budget writers learned where the state stands financially and how much room they have for more spending during a joint appropriations committee meeting Wednesday.

The two-year state revenue forecast that came out earlier this month expects "modest economic growth" and stability as the pandemic begins to wane, assuming there is more federal COVID-19 relief coming soon. Congress is still negotiating the next round of federal money. Already, North Carolina has received an estimated \$18 billion for households and \$12.5 billion for businesses from the federal CARES Act, according to the forecast.

The consensus revenue forecast is a joint forecast of the Office of State Budget and Management, which is part of the executive branch, and the Fiscal Research Division of the General Assembly. Expected revenue collections are 17.6% higher than the May 2020 revenue forecast, or \$4.1 billion. That anticipated revenue surplus is due to sales tax collections still increasing despite the pandemic, along with delayed tax payments after the deadline had been extended from April 15 to July 15 in 2020.

The forecast says the economy is in a "recovery phase" after a quick recession precipitated by the pandemic. The top economist at the

legislature, said that the state economy could be at a pre-pandemic level by the middle of 2022 or by 2023. “For the rest of the year we don’t really see any shift up or down in the economy,” he said. Replacing permanent employment losses take time, the economist told lawmakers. He said the growth has not been a full recovery. Sales tax collections went up 8% because online shopping has skyrocketed. And court cases and recent laws requiring online retailers to stop sidestepping tax collections have helped the state benefit from the growth in online shopping, he said. Unlike other states, North Carolina did not have layoffs or extreme cuts to agencies because it used existing funds or federal funds for costs this past year. Now budget writers have more money for budget items like raises or disaster relief. A General Assembly employee, who works in the legislature’s fiscal research division, cautioned that it’s one-time money.

Not all state employees received raises during the last budget process in 2019. Teachers received step increases and bonuses in 2020, however. And the Governor has said he wants more bonuses. The governor has proposed new one-time bonuses of \$2,500 for teachers and principals, \$1,500 for non-certified school personnel in public K-12 schools and \$2,000 for workers in the state’s community colleges and the UNC system, The News & Observer previously reported. He included those employees because they didn’t get raises in the last budget.

Most of the jobs the state has lost are on the lower end of the pay scale, the economist said, and most income tax revenue comes from people with middle and upper class incomes. So that means that in terms of state revenue, “2021 ended up a whole lot better than we thought because those people did not suffer as much as we thought they would,” he said. He also told lawmakers that even businesses that are allowed to be fully open still aren’t operating at their full capacity because customers are still making choices based on COVID-19.

Learner’s Permits

The Senate Transportation Committee unanimously approved some minor tweaks Wednesday to a bill that would reduce the amount of time teens must have a learner’s permit before they can be fully licensed to drive, and would allow them to drive at night sooner. It would also allow driving tests to be administered by third-party groups and not just the DMV. The bill sponsor said that because of the coronavirus pandemic, DMV offices haven’t been scheduling as many

driving tests. “Our offices have been plagued by calls from desperate parents,” she said, adding: “Instead of eliminating driving tests altogether, this is a compromise saying DMV can work with third-party vendors.”

On the timing aspect, the sponsor said only five states other than North Carolina require teens to have a learner’s permit for a year, while most require six months like her bill proposes. The bill could also help teens needing to drive to or from work, by shortening the period in which people with learner’s permits are banned from driving after 9 p.m. That ban currently lasts for the first six months of a learner’s permit, but this bill would reduce it to three months. Another Senator asked if DMV officials had any safety concerns or other issues. A legislative liaison for the Department of Transportation which oversees the DMV, said they generally support the changes. “This is a good start, and we want to keep working with them as this bill progresses, and fine-tune some issues,” he told the committee. While the bill would cut the amount of time for a learner’s permit from a year to six months, it keeps the current requirement that teens have to spend 60 hours behind the wheel before they can be fully licensed. With its approval Wednesday, the bill now heads to the Senate Commerce and Insurance Committee.

Election Delays

The state’s elections director said this week that lawmakers might need to consider moving all local elections to 2022, while potentially moving next year’s congressional primaries from March to May. State Board of Elections Executive Director said that the U.S. Census Bureau’s plan to delay the release of redistricting population data until late September is to blame. She said in an interview with the Spectrum News show “Capital Tonight” that once the data arrives, town and city governments typically need six to eight weeks to redraw their election districts. Then it takes the state elections board about two more months to process the maps and voter data to ensure each voter gets the correct ballot.

“We’re looking at a very difficult timeline to carry out municipal elections,” she said. State law already allows municipalities that can’t redistrict in time for their regularly scheduled elections to pass a resolution moving them to the following year’s primary. A total of 62 municipalities, including Raleigh, Durham, Greensboro and Charlotte, have some form of district system for electing their governing boards. But the State Board of Elections Executive Director pointed out that

the impact of the delays could go beyond those communities. Smaller towns often share election costs, such as early voting sites, with their larger neighbors. So, if Raleigh postpones its municipal election, neighbors like Knightdale and Wendell that don't use a district system would see much higher costs to hold their elections this year. The legislature would have the power to postpone those too. "Those are all the kind of factors that we're considering and discussing," she said. The Executive Director said her agency is working with legislators and the N.C. League of Municipalities to figure out the best solution. If elections get delayed, current municipal board members would see their current terms extended until the new election is held.

It would seem that we are in moving in the right direction with the rate of those developing COVID-19. The numbers are creeping downwards. Please continue to wash those hands, wear your masks, and socially distancing yourselves. Pay close attention to the vaccine schedule and be ready to sign up when your time comes. I completed my second vaccine on Thursday and feel optimistic about the results.

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