

*****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:

The month of March is Women's History Month and women have significantly contributed to society. We are leaders, developers, CEOs, COOs, Heads of Household, Plumbers, Electricians, and hold many other community titles. Senator Waddell brought to the attention the importance of recognizing all of the contributions women have provided, when she presented on the Senate Floor.

"It is important that women are recognized for all that we do in today's society. I believe that those that paved the way for women following should be celebrated and I do so as often as possible. We want our young girls to know that all things are possible."

Sincerely,
Joyce Waddell

Coronavirus Restrictions

North Carolina will return to a semblance of pre-pandemic normalcy

as the Governor said Tuesday he will ease several COVID-19 restrictions, including increasing the size of gatherings and capacity limits in retail and restaurants. “We can move forward with easing restrictions if we do it safely,” he said. The state has created three categories of occupancy restrictions: 50% capacity, 75% capacity and 100%. A range of establishments — everything from sports arenas to pools to movie theaters — have been divided into each category, depending on the level of risk they present in spreading the coronavirus. A mask mandate will remain in effect. All businesses will still be expected to maintain social distancing measures, which could limit the capacity of some establishments. The order goes into effect Friday at 5 p.m. and will remain in place on April 30 at 5 p.m.

- The gathering size limit will increase to 50 people indoors and 100 people outdoors. (Previous limits have been 25 indoors and 50 people outdoors).
- Retail stores, salons, museums and aquariums will be allowed to open at 100% capacity (up from 50%).
- Restaurants, breweries, gyms, recreation facilities (bowling and rock climbing), pools and amusement parks will be open at 75% capacity indoors and 100% outdoors.
- Bars, movie theaters, gaming facilities, conference centers, music venues and sports arenas will be allowed to open at 50% capacity. Movie theaters and gaming facilities can operate at 75% outdoors.
- The alcohol curfew is being removed. (The curfew has been 11 p.m. since Feb. 26).

“We are in a promising place,” said the Secretary of the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services. The Governor’s most recent executive order was set to expire on Friday. North Carolina has been under coronavirus-related executive orders limiting activities for more than a year when the first coronavirus cases were detected in North Carolina.

- DHHS Secretary warned, though, that North Carolina needs to remain cautious, particularly as more contagious forms of the virus have been found in the state. So far, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 77 samples from North Carolina have contained the variant that was first found in the United Kingdom while eight samples have contained the variant first found in South Africa. Furthermore, the Secretary noted, only a small percentage of North Carolina’s positive tests are being sequenced, the process that lets scientists know if someone is carrying a more contagious form of the virus.

Restrictions Lifted

Earlier this month the state rescinded a health order that restricted visits to residents in long-term care facilities like nursing homes after new federal guidance indicated in-person visits in nursing homes and other care settings could resume. “Facilities should allow responsible indoor visitation at all times and for all residents,” the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services said a little more than a week ago, regardless of vaccination status of the visitor or resident.

In North Carolina, some nursing home residents started getting vaccinated in December. More than 80% of residents have had their first dose of one of the COVID-19 vaccines, said an epidemiologist with the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services. Coronavirus cases and outbreaks have also dropped in the past couple of months. “One of the other positives that we’ve seen is the length of time that an outbreak is ongoing in facilities, that length of time has also been decreasing,” the epidemiologist said. Early in the pandemic, some outbreaks lasted longer than six weeks. Though visits are now allowed, she recommends people continue to wear masks, wash their hands and stay physically distant. “There is a caveat in there that if, particularly if both parties are vaccinated, if they choose to have that close physical contact, they can do so,” she said, as long as both parties wear well-fitting face masks. A person is fully vaccinated two weeks after receiving the second dose of either the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine or two weeks after receiving the single-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine, the epidemiologist said.

Senator Waddell participates in a press conference regarding voter suppression.



Utility Rates

The N.C. House voted 74-40 on Tuesday to allow private water and sewer utilities to secure multi-year rate hike approvals from the N.C. Utilities Commission. House Bill 219 sets out a process for utilities to

present rate proposals for a three-year period that include the cost of planned infrastructure upgrades. The utilities would be able to avoid going back before the commission each year, but the rate increase would be capped at 5% per year, and customers would be due a refund if the planned upgrades do not happen.

Democrats voiced concerns that the bill would allow for additional rate increases without adequate review from the Utilities Commission. A State House Representative, proposed an amendment that would have directed the commission to instead study the potential impacts of the change, but House the Speaker ruled the amendment out of order. All but nine Democrats voted against the bill. One House Representative said the bill has more consumer safeguards than previous legislation that would have allowed multi-year electric rate hikes, but he still opposed the change. The bill now comes to the Senate, where an identical bill cleared the Agriculture, Energy and Environment Committee on Tuesday morning.

Housing Assistance

The North Carolina office in charge of administering a program designed to help people impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic catch up on rent and utility bills is changing how it handles cases, as more than \$60 million meant to help people sits unspent. The Governor announced the HOPE program last fall. The program would use federal money to make grants to people who were impacted by the pandemic and unable to pay their rent and utility bills. The initial allocation for the program was \$160 million. Just \$94 million had been disbursed by the program as of Friday, according to staff at the North Carolina Office of Recovery and Resiliency, which oversees the HOPE grants. The leader of NCORR, said another \$26 million is ready for payment and an additional \$20 million had been awarded, for a total of \$140 million having been disbursed, ready to be disbursed or awarded but not yet ready for payment. The figures represent a jump in activity for the program since early February, when just \$42 million in checks had been cut.

The leader, who runs the office that administers the grant, said changes have been made to the program aimed at speeding up distribution of money and increasing customer service. The biggest change is that NCORR took over managing all of the HOPE grant files. Previously, the state agency was partnering with nonprofit organizations across the state for case management. "Sometimes the payment was delayed because we were working through that partner,"

she said. “Now that we’ve taken all the files back, I think you can see the increased speed because we are able to issue those checks as a state agency.” The leader also said NCORR was working to set up a call center so people could be connected with their caseworkers by phone. These changes come as the HOPE program receives additional federal funds and looks to continue as people continue to reel from the pandemic.

Remedial Plan

A multibillion-dollar plan presented by North Carolina officials and designed to comply with legal rulings that declare the state has failed to meet constitutional obligations in public education is now in the hands of a judge. The State Board of Education and the Governor’s administration filed last week in Wake County court a detailed action plan that envisions spending at least \$5.6 billion on new education expenditures through 2028. The “comprehensive remedial plan” includes funding improvements to help low-income students and those with disabilities, and to hire more school support personnel. Increased pay proposed for teachers, principals and assistant principal are not part of the monetary total because no amounts are given, The News & Observer of Raleigh reported.

The plan also explains how the state would increase teacher diversity and require competent teachers and principals in every school. Making sure at least 75% of 4-year-olds are enrolled in prekindergarten in every county is another recommended goal. The plan was given to a Superior Court Judge, who will consider the proposal. The judge is overseeing compliance with the school funding litigation known as “Leandro.” The legislature would have to appropriate funds to carry out the proposal, and it’s difficult for the judicial branch to force lawmakers to spend the money. The Leandro case started in 1994 when families from five low-wealth counties sued the state, claiming North Carolina was not providing their children with the same educational opportunities as students in higher-income districts. By 2004, the state Supreme Court had issued rulings saying the state’s children have a fundamental right to the “opportunity to receive a sound basic education,” and that North Carolina had not lived up to that mandate.

Interest in compliance with the rulings grew in 2019 when a consultant’s report declared little progress had been made to meet the North Carolina Constitution’s directive. In fact, the WestEd report’s authors said the state was farther behind at meeting its obligation

than in the 1990s. The consultant proposed spending scenarios. The Judge signed an order in September calling for \$427 million in short-term education spending. Republican lawmakers in charge of the General Assembly have pushed back on declarations that education spending has declined in real dollars over the past decade. Instead, they point to figures showing GOP legislators increased K-12 funding cumulatively by several billion dollars during the 2010s. “Even though the legislature is the only body with the constitutional authority to implement many of the suggestions contained in the document, its authors have not engaged in any meaningful way with legislators for a year,” a spokesman for the Republican Senate leader said.

Every Child NC, comprised of community advocacy groups supporting education improvements through Leandro, called the plan “readily affordable.” “The plan can easily be funded if North Carolina’s leaders increase this effort by prioritizing their constitutional obligations to students over tax cuts benefiting corporations and the wealthy,” Every Child NC said in a statement.

Medicaid Expansion

The Governor urged legislators to finally expand Medicaid during a tour of a large-scale vaccination clinic in Greenville on Friday. The governor also said he will include \$28 million in initial funding for East Carolina University’s new medical school in his pending budget and add the remaining \$215 million in construction dollars in a bond he wants to pursue. He visited the Vidant/Pitt County Large Scale Vaccine Clinic at the Greenville Convention Center to see how vaccine distribution is proceeding in eastern North Carolina.

The center will have administered 50,000 doses of the vaccine as of Saturday, said a CEO of Vidant Health, the primary health care provider in 29 eastern counties. “The vaccination center has brought together all kinds of people and to hear the voices of people who have just got their shots, knowing that they are a little more protected, and all said they are coming back for their second one,” the Governor said. But for all the renewed hope brought about through the vaccinations, the pandemic shined light on challenges that already existed. “Too many North Carolinians don’t have health care coverage; too many North Carolinians don’t have access to high-speed internet. These problems need to be tackled and we have an extraordinary opportunity right now to do those things,” he said.

The recent round of federal stimulus would provide North Carolinians with billions of dollars for Medicaid expansion, the Governor said,

which would allow 500,000 to 600,000 more people to receive health care coverage if approved. He said his recent negotiations with Republican legislative leaders that produced a plan to reopen schools gives him hope that a similar deal can be struck on expansion. The Governor's last effort to expand Medicaid was rejected by Republican leaders and resulted in him vetoing the state budget in 2019 and the General Assembly being unable to overturn the action.



Senator Waddell presents on the Senate floor a message about observing Women's History Month.

In her presentation she celebrated women and the many important contributions they have made throughout history.

Affordable Housing

Affordable housing has long been a top issue for North Carolina's cities, but now the legislature is looking for ways to address the problem. A bill moving in the House calls for the Legislative Research Commission, which consists of five senators and five representatives, to tackle a detailed study of affordable housing. The marching orders under House Bill 232 would be broad: "Examine the financial, social and logistical challenges facing those in need of affordable housing. Assess the ability of local governments to leverage existing laws and resources."

"Housing stability is something that's been top of mind for a lot of us in the pandemic," said the bill's sponsor. "It's a problem we need to understand better." A representative from Habitat for Humanity told the House Commerce Committee, which approved the bill Tuesday, that his group wants to be involved in the study. A similar study bill

passed the House last session but didn't get a hearing in the Senate.

Driver's Licenses

Most senators voted Monday night to allow teens to move ahead faster from a learner's permit to a provisional driver's license, in part due to the impacts of COVID-19 on the driver's education process. Senate Bill 69 passed 43-6, with several Democrats opposed, and would reduce the waiting period for teen drivers seeking a provisional license from 12 months to nine months. The bill would also allow private driving schools to administer required road tests to address the backlog at the DMV.

The bill's sponsor told her colleagues to "remember back to that day when you first got your driver's license and you were able to shed the protection of your parents and get back on the open road. For most of us, it was when we were 16." Her bill, she argued, would make sure teens don't have to wait too much longer because of COVID before they can "enjoy the same freedoms we did when we were 16." The bill now goes to the House.

***Senator Waddell
representing her
constituents during session
in the Senate Chamber***



Tax Reductions

North Carolina Senate Republicans will pitch more individual income tax reductions this spring, a key lawmaker said Monday while asserting that the state's fiscal health emerging from the pandemic and past tax cuts make such proposals possible. Senate GOP leaders plan to push legislation that would decrease the state's income tax rate of 5.25% to 4.99% next year, according to the finance committee co-chairman.

They also want to again increase the amount of income not subject to

taxes, so standard deductions will match those offered for federal tax filers when 2022 taxes are filled out in early 2023. For example, the standard deduction for a married couple filing jointly would increase from \$21,500 to \$25,500 in 2022 under the proposal. Republicans have made it a top priority to scale back income taxes since taking charge of the General Assembly in 2011. Just eight years ago, the state had a three-tiered tax system with rates that reached 7.75% for the highest earners. They credit these and corporate tax changes for attracting more big industries from out of state and retaining businesses — which pay their own taxes — and for surpluses. “We have yet another year of excess revenues and we are going to be proposing to the rest of the legislature and the governor that we reduce taxes as a result,” a Senator told the AP. “We have incredible headroom because of the economic growth and prosperity in North Carolina.”

Senate Republicans endorsed a tax package proposed by the Senator in a caucus meeting late Monday, according to a spokeswoman for the Senate leader. The soon-to-be-filed bill is likely to advance through the chamber, then get incorporated into the Senate GOP’s state budget proposal that could surface in late April. While economic uncertainty associated with the coronavirus remains, cash levels within North Carolina’s tax coffers have soared in recent months. Even if his proposed tax changes are carried out, the Senator said, lawmakers would have \$29 billion to operate state government for the next fiscal year starting July 1. That compares to the \$24.9 billion getting spent this year, Senate Leader’s office said.

Still, the price tag for the income tax changes — an estimated \$1.86 billion that the state would otherwise collect through mid-2023 — should raise scrutiny from Democrats including the Governor and his legislative allies. He has criticized Republicans for taking away government revenues, especially those paid by top earners and corporations, when he says needs for education, infrastructure and health care are great. And the Governor has downplayed the importance of tax rates in attracting companies.

Eminent Domain

The House’s Judiciary 1 committee passed a bill that, if signed into law and approved by voters, would amend North Carolina’s constitution and allow the government to seize private property only for “public use.” State law currently allows condemnation of private property for

public “use or benefit.”

House Bill 271, would also require just compensation for the condemnation of private property. A House Representative said North Carolina is the only state that does not have “just compensation” enshrined in the constitution. “The taking of property has to be very carefully guarded,” the Representative said. “And what we’re doing with this is elevating the protection of property rights across the state for every North Carolina citizen to a level where they have not met before.”

The committee also swiftly passed a bill that would allow people to trade or exchange liquor without a permit, along with a bill that would allow shareholder meetings, insurance policyholder meetings, nonprofit meetings and others to permanently be held remotely.

Senator Waddell receives information regarding skill based opportunities in NC



School Budgets

As school districts across North Carolina prepare their budgets, tens of millions of public dollars are riding on whether — and where — the students who left public schools during the pandemic return. Public school enrollment projections are the foundation for allocating teacher positions and doling out a big chunk of the state budget. Normally it is pretty straightforward. But just over a year ago the pandemic closed schools. In August, most districts reopened in remote mode, and most saw a steep drop in enrollment. The state’s school business director says that makes it more important — and more difficult — to project what’s coming in August.

“What we do know is that there will be an increase in average daily membership next year,” the business director said at a recent state Board of Education meeting. “The question is what number will return and what grades will they return in.” Before the pandemic, most

school districts were seeing enrollment inch down. He says that's because of declining birth rates and growing numbers of families opting for charter schools or homeschooling. This year, North Carolina school districts on average saw an unusually steep enrollment drop of 5% — and kindergarten enrollment dropped 15%. Many school officials believe the lack of in-person classes led families to seek alternatives, and they hope students return as in-person classes resume. Ideally, the business director says, state budget planners would have a good idea of how many students are coming back to each district in August and how that will break down by grade level. That makes a difference for budgeting. He noted that the state pays for one teacher for every 18 kindergarten students, but only one for every 29 high school seniors.



Senator Waddell receives the "Friends of Residents in Long Term Care" award

With the vaccine efforts ramping up, we are marching forward to provide everyone some safety against this deadly virus. The NC DHHS is pushing efforts to increase our access to the vaccine. This is an important step towards eradicating COVID-19.

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