

FORUM

A telling defense of a woefully inadequate budget

Chris Fitzsimon
Guest Columnist

One of the most telling things about the woeful budget agreement crafted in secret and unveiled last week by legislative leaders is how they defend it, spending as much time boasting about things they didn't cut as they do talking about new investments they made.

The headlines from the first few days of the budget coverage made the same point, emphasizing that the budget "protects teacher assistants and driver's ed," or "restores education items and tax credits."

You'd think the state was still struggling with the worst of the Great Recession with state revenues plummeting and lawmakers scrambling to keep schools open.

The opposite is true, of course. The recession is over and state revenues have rebounded, but the Republican majority in the House and Senate has decided not to reinvest in education and human services that were slashed during the downturn, but instead to cut taxes again, giving still more breaks to millionaires and out-of-state corporations that received huge windfalls in the 2013 tax changes.

It is true that the budget fully funds teacher assistants at least year's level, but thanks to cuts in recent sessions, there are 7,000 fewer TAs in classrooms across the state than there were in 2008. Not cutting more hardly seems worthy of a celebration.

Lawmakers boasting about increasing overall funding for education

never mention that the vast majority of the new money pays for increased enrollment at public schools and universities, keeping the TAs and funding driver's ed for one more year.

Those enrollment and inflationary increases used to be part of what's called the base budget. It was assumed that they would be funded, but lawmakers changed the budget process so they could claim credit for meeting their basic funding responsibilities and keeping state services at the same level as the year before.

Even with the "new funding," there are still more cuts in education, another big reduction for the university system, another round of cuts for the Department of Public Instruction that many rural school systems rely on for support.

In spite of all the bluster about raising teacher pay, many veteran teachers will receive no salary increase at all, only a one-time \$750 bonus, which comes to about \$62 a month before taxes.

The bonus is less than half the ongoing \$1,800 break millionaires will receive from the tax changes, a contrast that perfectly illustrates the priorities of the folks currently running things in Raleigh.

State employees will receive the same small bonus. Retired state workers will get nothing, no cost of living increase at all.

Overall the budget leaves state spending as a share of the economy down for the seventh consecutive year and at a 40-year low. It's hard to make progress without supporting the people and institutions that make progress possible.

There's plenty of ideology spread through the 400-plus pages of the budget document, too: more funding for the completely unaccountable private school voucher scheme while state support is ended for the Hunt Institute for Educational Leadership simply because of its association with former governor and prominent Democrat Jim Hunt.

There's money set aside to transition the

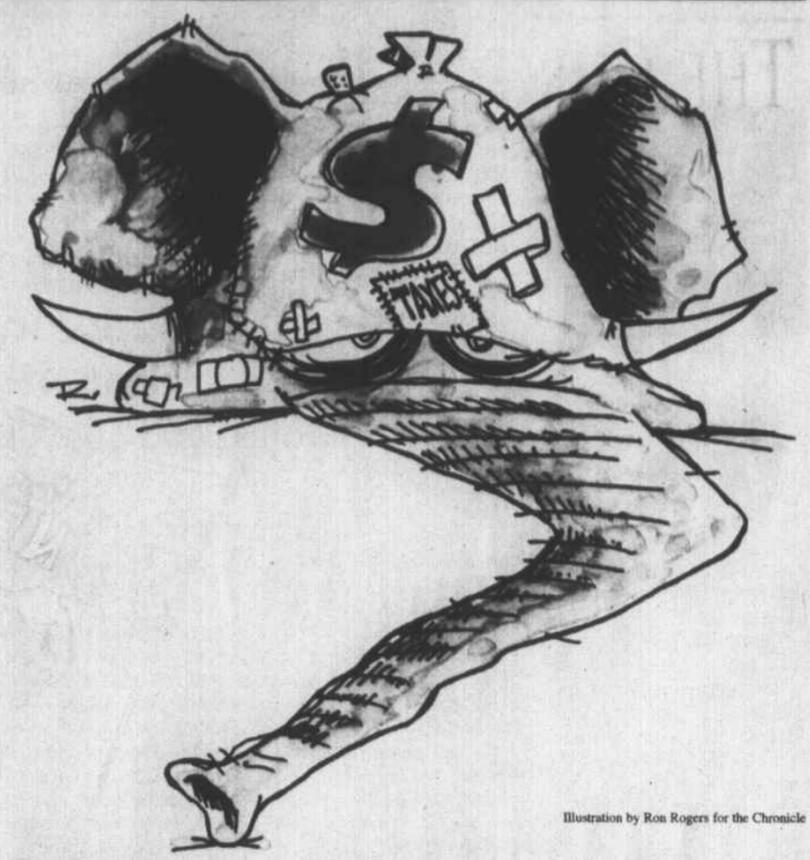


Illustration by Ron Rogers for the Chronicle

undoubtedly cost the state jobs, though, with the elimination of the highly successful renewable energy tax credit and the credit for research and development.

Lawmakers did renew the historic preservation tax credit, though at a lower level than last year.

There's plenty more, of course. There's no way to

transparent process is part of this year's budget story. Most members of the Senate first saw the massive budget bill online at just before midnight Monday — if they were still awake — and were forced to vote on it just after 2 Tuesday afternoon.

There's no way that most senators knew what they were considering. Claims by Senate President Pro Tem Phil Berger that the provisions had been around for months were proven false Tuesday morning when the News & Observer reported that the budget includes a never before seen provision that cripples plans for a light-rail line between Durham and Chapel Hill.

Legislative leaders don't like mass transit but would rather not make their case in public, in a democratic process where everyone can hear the debate and their constituents can have a say. The lawmakers will decide transportation policy in secret and use a budget provision to implement it.

That's why they would rather not give people time to read the budget. Who knows how many more big policy decisions have been made in the backrooms and slipped into the spending plan?

The process is broken and the budget is inadequate, despite the blizzard of talking points and press releases defending it.

Not making more drastic cuts doesn't mean making the overdue investments the state needs. Not doing worse is not doing better and not moving backwards as fast is not moving forward.

Giving more tax cuts to the folks at the top while claiming credit for not slashing state services and hurting the folks at the bottom more is a sad summary of the long overdue budget.

But that's exactly what this year's budget does, no matter how hard legislative leaders try to convince us otherwise.

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state's Medicaid program to a for-profit managed care system that has failed in other states but no mention of Medicaid expansion that would provide health care for coverage for 500,000 low-income adults with the federal government picking up most of the tab.

Legislative leaders claim the spending plan is all about economic development, that more tax cuts will create more jobs, but there's little evidence of that. The budget will

cover everything in a 400-plus-page budget crafted in secret that spends \$21.74 billion dollars and makes dozens of significant policy decisions.

News stories can't do it, either. Legislative leaders know that. That's why they stuff so many important provisions into the massive budget document, many of which have never been seen by the public or the media, not to mention rank and file lawmakers themselves.

This absurdly non-

After 41 years, The Chronicle is still much needed

Lenwood G. Davis
Guest Columnist

In a previous issue of The Winston-Salem Chronicle, Ernest H. Pitt, publisher and founder, wrote in an editorial: "We remain committed after 41 years."

In the editorial, he gave the history of the origins and transformation of The Chronicle. He pointed out the mission of the newspaper. The newspaper has the same mission as the first African-American owned newspaper, The Freedom's Journal, founded in 1827, in New York by John Russwurm and Samuel Cornish.

In their first issue, they stated the mission: "We wish to plead our cause. Too long have others spoken for us. Too long has the public been deceived by misrepresentations, in things which concern us dearly..." They affirmed the rights and responsibility for African-Americans to speak for themselves.

The Chronicle also expanded on the mission of The Freedom's Journal. Its mission is "dedicated to serving the residents of

Winston-Salem and Forsyth County by giving voice to the voiceless, speaking truth to power, standing for integrity and encouraging open communication and lively debate throughout the community."

Today some people argue that The Chronicle and other African-American newspapers are obsolete and are no longer needed.

"Today some people argue that The Chronicle and other African-American newspapers are obsolete and are no longer needed."

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needed. Some people believe that the mainstream dailies cover major events in the African-American community. Needless to say, the mainstream dailies omit so much of what is relevant to the African-American community.

The Chronicle and other African-American newspapers are still needed because they disseminate information in the African-American community that is often overlooked by the white press. Many times the white newspapers do

not report on the achievements and accomplishments of African-Americans.

Conversely, if The Chronicle and other African-American newspapers did not report the stories, they would not be known. The Chronicle, like other African-American newspapers, have held faithfully to the mission of the first African-American newspaper.

The African-American community also has an obligation to The Chronicle and other African-American newspapers, to support them by purchasing their newspapers as well as supporting businesses that advertise in them. The African-American community must also hold The Chronicle and their African-American newspapers to the same high professional standards of journalism and reporting that they hold to other newspapers.

Black lives matter. White lives matter. All lives matter. The Chronicle matters and is needed.

Dr. Lenwood G. Davis, a professor emeritus of history at Winston-Salem State University, is the author of 30 books that can be found in 50 states and over 50 foreign countries.

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The NC State Board of Elections public comments hearing drew in a large crowd of interested parties prepared to speak on behalf of the 2013 Voter Information Verification Act (S.L. 2013-381) on Tuesday, June 9, at the Forsyth County Government Center in downtown Winston-Salem. The Voter Information Verification Act (S.L. 2013-381), passed in 2013 by the NC General Assembly, requires photo identification for in-person voting starting in 2016.

ID law hearing draws large crowd

State elections board gets painful from public

requires citizens of North Carolina to have valid photo identification in order to vote. This law will take effect on Jan. 1, 2016, during the year of the presidential election.

The room was filled with people — college students, middle-aged and senior citizens — that were present to listen or speak.

Public Information Officer John Lawson, Jennifer Faulkner and Greg Michalek, who are with Voter Outreach, were seated in front of the crowd, taking notes and listening.

Three pages of citizens signed up to have their two-minute time slot to speak. Those who signed up either had a speech written or were verbally expressing their opinions and concerns.

NATIONAL BLACK THEATER FESTIVAL

"That's a long walk"
At final WSTA meeting, new bus routes displease many

BY TOKO LUCK
THE CHRONICLE

The final comment meeting on the new proposed Winston-Salem Transit Authority bus routes held at the Chuck Campbell Transportation Center was filled with passengers asking about which of the new routes will serve them.

Some didn't care for the answer.

"That's a long walk," said one woman who will have to walk further to get to the closest proposed bus

"This process is far from over," he said, while assuring attendees that they will have ample notice when the finalized routes go into effect.

It was the last out of 21 comment meetings held by WSTA. The new proposed routes were created using passenger surveys, passenger counter data and looking at which destinations generate the most passengers. The new routes would operate.

"We know that people will be inconvenienced and convinced no matter what we do in the end," he said. "There are people who will be happy and there are people who won't be happy. It's not going to be a perfect system that serves everyone because we're limited to our current resources, the number of hours or miles that we operate now."

Carolyn Wright was among the attendees. The 68-year-old has no car or driver's license and has used the bus to get around