

State legislators investigate increase in oil prices

By GLENN O'NEAL
Staff Writer

N.C. Attorney General Lacy Thornburg has requested an investigation of major oil companies in response to price increases in motor fuel and heating oil that have affected the trucking industry and homeowners who heat their homes with propane gas.

Between Christmas and the week of Jan. 11, conventional gasoline prices rose four to five cents per gallon, while diesel fuel prices went up 23 percent in North and South Carolina, an increase of 25 cents, said Quentin Anderson, public relations director for the Ameri-

can Automobile Association.

The cold weather in the last week of December created a heavy demand for heating oil, which is closely related to diesel, said Anderson. A greater amount of oil intended for the production of diesel was diverted into the production of heating oil, which resulted in higher prices for diesel.

Bill Tucker, investigator for the attorney general's office, said in a telephone interview Wednesday that he believes some of the price increase is justified because of the cold weather, but he questions whether the entire increase is necessary.

Earlier this year, the attorney general called on N.C. congressional delegates to investigate the increases, said Tucker. The attorney general also has asked the U.S. Justice Department to launch an investigation into the matter, he said.

Several N.C. congressmen have publicly called for an investigation of the petroleum industry, Tucker said. The congressmen have questioned why the oil companies have increased their prices the same amount at the same time, he said.

There is no direct evidence of collusion or price fixing on the part of the oil

companies, but North Carolina does not have access to company records because oil is not produced in the state, said Tucker.

Tucker also added that the price increases in propane gas have placed a tremendous burden on the residents of North Carolina, particularly retired people and others on fixed incomes.

Wayne Riddle, traffic manager for the N.C. Trucking Association Inc., said the increase in diesel fuel has had a devastating effect on trucking operations, but that some of the carriers are presently getting relief.

However, some trucking carriers will

not be able to continue because of the price increases, Tucker said.

Anderson said two recent oil spills off the coasts of New England and Africa and a fire in an oil refinery in Baton Rouge, La., have added to the necessity of the increases. The unusually cold weather has also resulted in a 21 percent decrease in the output of refineries, he said.

Anderson also attributed the rising fuel prices to increases in crude oil prices at the end of the year. The Soviet Union exported 25 percent less crude oil to European countries, and this resulted in those countries bidding up

prices in an effort to make up the difference. The oil sold to European countries was originally intended for the U.S., he said.

Mike Kimmitt, spokesman for Mobil Oil Corp., said the price increases were the result of a sharp and unexpected rise in demand for oil and gas in a short time frame that put a strain on supply. The mechanisms for distributing oil could not anticipate the cold weather, the coldest in 60 years, he said.

Kimmitt also added that fuel prices could be stabilized if additional fuel supplies, such as natural gas from off the N.C. coast, are discovered.

Proposal offers solution to overcrowded prison problem

By KYLE YORK SPENCER
Staff Writer

N.C. Sen. Bob Shaw, R-Guilford, suggested last week building inexpensive barracks like those used to house prisoners of war to ease problems with North Carolina's overcrowded prisons.

The proposal, made to the Joint Legislative Governmental Operations Commission, was met with support from other members of the General Assembly who are concerned about the "revolving door" that prematurely releases prisoners to allow room for incoming ones, Shaw said.

"We can only accept someone new if someone else goes out," said Bill Posten, deputy public information officer for the N.C. Department of Corrections.

"We are continually in this situation," Posten said.

In order to prevent a takeover by the federal government, the General Assembly voluntarily placed a cap on the state's prison population. Because of this 18,000 inmate limit, the N.C. Parole Commission must release approximately 2,000 inmates a month, said

Louis Colombo, chairman of the panel.

Last Thursday, the state exceeded its cap for the ninth time. The result is that sentences will be shortened, and in some cases dangerous criminals housed in the 84 state prisons will be let out onto the streets, Posten said.

"For a ten-year sentence, a prisoner who keeps his nose clean with good time and gain time can be out in 12 to 15 months," Shaw said.

"We are putting people on the street that the general public probably wouldn't want there," he said.

Because the state has been involved in a number of lawsuits involving prisoners, it is extremely important that new facilities meet standards set by the federal court system, said Rep. Anne Barnes, D-Orange, a member of the House prisons committee.

These requirements include 50 square feet of space per inmate, adequate ventilation, medical care, and humane conditions, Barnes said.

The state is currently involved in the costly project of eliminating triple bunking in many of its prisons due to a lawsuit which labeled them unconstitutional, she said. This has cost the state

\$150 million in recent years.

Shaw said the barracks could be built cost efficiently in approximately one year, would avoid expensive construction and materials, and would meet federal court demands.

The wooden barracks, which would not be as secure as other prisons, are intended for white collar criminals, drunk drivers, drug criminals, and nonviolent offenders, Shaw said.

In support of Shaw's plan, Sen. Richard Conder, D-Richmond, argued that he would rather see prisoners slip out the back door in these minimum security prisons than turn convicted murderers loose from maximum security prisons because of a lack of cell space.

While the state's leaders have been concentrating on the overcrowding issue, some activists do not see it as a major problem.

"There are more urgent things than that," said Joe Dipierro, co-director of the Prisons Rights Project at UNC.

"At best it would be a drop in the bucket of the total prison problem," he said.

Educators oppose Channel One

By JENNIFER BLACKWELL
Staff Writer

Much controversy surrounds the decision by some N.C. high schools to enter into a contractual agreement involving the daily use of Whittier Communication's new 12-minute news program in return for some television equipment and a satellite dish.

Under the contract, high schools will be required daily to show Channel One, a 10 minute news and information program including four 30 second commercials, to a negotiated number of students, said David Jarrard, a spokesman for Whittier Communications. The contract will also enable the schools to receive a classroom and educators' channel, color televisions for almost every classroom, VCRs and a satellite dish. The system will be set up so that all sets can be turned on at once, or just two or three, depending on need. This will also enable the schools to receive local and national cable services, which is "a very important aspect," said Jarrard.

The contract is funded by the advertisers on the Channel One news program, he said. All of the ads will have to meet certain standards.

Eighty-nine N.C. schools have al-

ready agreed to sign-up for Channel One, which Whittier offered to local schools nationwide beginning in September. However, several top administrators have said that they do not want local schools to sign the contract.

Bob Etheridge, state superintendent of schools, said he was "personally opposed" to the use of Channel One. He said he objects to the requirement of schoolwide viewing on a daily basis and the use of commercials. "It sends the wrong message to our students both educationally and ethically."

Several members on the Board of Education share his opinion, including Howard Haworth, chairman of the panel leading an investigation on the use of Channel One.

Gov. Jim Martin upheld the chairman's opinion, saying he did not feel the program was appropriate in schools, said David Prather, assistant press secretary for the governor. He said that he objected to the lack of control by local administrators over the program's content, and that it would cut too much into class time, Prather said.

Etheridge said he planned to investigate the facts about Channel One and would recommend action at the next Board of Education meeting on Jan. 31

and Feb. 1. He has asked the attorney general's office to help determine how much authority the state board has over local school systems.

Kay Williams, a spokeswoman for the Department of Public Instruction, said Etheridge was also concerned about the opinions of local schools and school boards. He plans to incorporate their opinions about Channel One into his recommendation to the board, she added.

Eddie Spees, the director of the Office of Education in the attorney general's office, said he plans to discuss the legalities of the board's decisions at the meeting this week.

Jarrard said that there are two levels of debate concerning the contract. Gallup polls used by Whittier showed that 79 percent of adults polled in North Carolina were interested in using the program in their children's schools. Teachers and administrators have also shown a "terrific acceptance of Channel One," he said.

Most states are leaving the decision to the local schools, he said.

Jarrard did not view the advertisements as being a problem. Students are exposed to it at all other times, on TV, in magazines, newspapers and clothes, he said.

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