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N.C. needs to catch up

By Breeden Blackwell

North Carolina is rapidly falling behind in meeting the basic, fundamental needs of our citizens. Our water and sewer facilities, public schools, roads and other transportation systems are aging and deteriorating, and often obsolete. They are inadequate in meeting today's requirements, much less being able to accommodate the continuing growth that's coming our way.

We are facing a population tsunami. Between 2000 and 2030, our population is estimated to increase by 50 percent to more than 12 million people, according to the U.S. Census. We will become the seventh-largest state. We've already surpassed New Jersey, with Michigan and Ohio in sight.

Our population increase will nearly equal South Carolina's current population of around 4 million. In other words, during the next 23 years, we must build the infrastructure to support the equivalent of a new South Carolina within this state.

The General Assembly needs to help North Carolina be smart by taking bold steps to strengthen the basic foundation upon which our communities' quality of life and economies are built — schools, roads, clean water and land that protects our natural resources. They are critical areas that benefit many others, such as housing and health.

North Carolina's existing revenue sources are insufficient to keep up with the combination of aging facilities and extraordinary population growth. We are falling behind.

- We try to educate 178,000 K-12 students in mobile units, often in conditions that are neither safe nor conducive to learning. North Carolina needs to build 258 schools or one per week every week for five years.
- More than 3,000 miles of streams and rivers do not meet clean-water standards.
- Millions depend on wells for their drinking water, many of which contain contaminants that are potential health hazards.
- We're losing 100,000 acres of prime forest, farmlands and land protecting our natural resources to population pressure each year.
- Bad roads cost motorists \$5.3 billion a year in wrecks, delays and vehicle wear and tear.
- More than 2 million North Carolinians live in substandard housing or housing they can't afford, which contributes to increased health problems.
- It is difficult for economic prosperity to reach rural areas when 114 mostly smaller communities are under growth restrictions because of inadequate and aging water and sewer facilities.

That's why a coalition of advocates for education, conservation, water and sewer facilities, transportation and affordable housing called Partnership for North Carolina's Future is asking members of the General Assembly to find long-term solutions to fund the state's long-term capital investments. The North Carolina Association of County Commissioners is one of these partners.

As citizens of this great state, we need to make sure our elected representatives know we support creating additional long-term sources of revenues for good schools and roads, land and water conservation, the Housing Trust Fund, and water and sewer facilities. Tell your legislators to let the people vote on this new funding.

To continue to enjoy an exceptional business climate and quality of life for our future, and the futures of our children

and grandchildren, we need to invest in the future now — before it's too late.

For more information on the Partnership for North Carolina's Future, visit www.ncfuturenow.org.

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