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Group urges focus on N.C.'s growth

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North Carolina's rapid growth won't be healthy unless the state and its cities do more -- and spend more -- to accommodate expansion wisely, a new coalition of local governments and private groups says.

The Partnership for North Carolina's Future is calling on the General Assembly to approve more bonds and new or higher taxes to pay for improvements in five key areas: schools, roads, affordable housing, water and sewer service, and parks and open space.

"North Carolina is falling behind in areas critical to our quality of life and economy," the group said on its launch. "If this downward spiral is allowed to continue, it will cost our state jobs, damage our economy and adversely affect the livelihoods of families."

The group hasn't endorsed specific taxes, but highlights such possibilities as a "transfer tax" on the sale of homes and businesses, "impact fees" on new homes, sales tax hikes, higher fuel taxes, and state bonds for public schools, clean water, affordable housing and land conservation.

"Every fair and reasonable revenue source ought to be on the table for discussion," said Ellis Hankins, the group's president and executive director of the N.C. League of Municipalities. "Nothing should be off limits. Our needs are real and growing."

The group confronts conservative lawmakers opposed to tax hikes and an alliance of real estate agents and home builders who are working to block legislative proposals for transfer taxes and impact fees. Instead, those groups favor bond issues backed by broad-based sales taxes and property taxes.

Rep. Bill Owens, an Elizabeth City Democrat and businessman who participated in the new group's news conference Wednesday, said the legislature must face the demands of the state's growth.

"The General Assembly's got a tough job ahead of us to figure out a way to get the resources to make this happen," he said. "Everywhere you look, no matter what resource you look at, it's unpopular with one group or another."

Among the new coalition's members are the N.C. Association of County Commissioners, the N.C. Housing Coalition, several developers and public schools officials.

They cite estimates that North Carolina's population in 2030 will be about 4 million more than it was in 2000.

And they warn that North Carolina faces "a population tsunami" for which it is ill-prepared.

"Today we stand together to say to the public, 'Your future is at risk,' " said coalition member Tom Lambeth, chairman of the N.C. Rural Economic Development Center. "Meeting the needs of another 4 million people cannot be done by trying to hold this state together with baling wire, belt-tightening and Band-Aids."