

Editorial:

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Future tense

None too soon, a coalition has formed to urge state lawmakers to prepare for a population boom. It's a worthy message

North Carolina has been on the cusp of monumental change before -- when colonists stepped foot on these shores, when tobacco cultivation arrived from its base in Virginia, toward the end of the Civil Rights era. It's there again. A thoroughly modern North Carolina, at least in its urban centers, has just the economy, jobs, amenities, recreation and climate for people elsewhere in the nation looking for a better place to live.

Demographers largely agree that millions of new residents are headed to Tar Heel land in the next quarter century. That popularity is hardly news to the fast-growing Triangle.

Yet it's troubling that many cities and counties -- perhaps taking a cue from the General Assembly -- aren't planning as if they will have to serve such an influx of people. Maybe that's inevitable, as when parents are so tied up with feeding the kids and keeping the cars running that they miss saving for college or thinking about what to do when the minivan dies.

But North Carolina's local governments face a systemic problem. Even communities that want to prepare ahead for growth are hampered because the legislature tightly restricts the ways in which governments can raise revenues. The property tax, and a share of the sales tax, are their chief sources -- necessary, one could say, but not sufficient. Bills have been introduced regularly to help governments raise funds in a more diversified fashion, but that hasn't translated to passage.

It's fortunate, then, that a coalition of heavy-hitting government and civic groups has formed to make the point. The Partnership for North Carolina's Future calls on legislators to raise more money to improve critical infrastructure -- schools, for instance, and water and sewer service, roads and open space. Stint on such services and not just growth will be hampered, the group's leaders say: Quality-of-life factors will suffer for those who already have a North Carolina address.

The partnership bases its depressing predictions on figures used by the state: A population of more than 12 million in 2030, up from 8 million now. How drastic is that? It will be as if South Carolina's entire population moved here.

Aggressive action on the legislature's part is called for, as the partnership suggests. The state should consider issuing more bonds for critical infrastructure, a good idea while interest rates are low. All options should be on the table, including allowing local governments to supplement the property tax with land transfer taxes and development impact fees.

Such measures are controversial. But for local governments, so is a steady climb in property taxes. Moreover, some localities where needs are great have relatively meager property tax bases, meaning tax rates have to be jacked up to onerous levels to raise revenue for essential services. State assistance becomes vital.

North Carolinians expect their elected representatives, state and local, to prepare for the

tomorrows. The Partnership for North Carolina's Future forthrightly invites the legislature to proceed before an unwelcome future is upon us.

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