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Lawmakers hear county concerns, vow to address

by Philip D. Brown
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Lawmakers descended on Rockingham and Hamlet Monday morning to hear the concerns of constituents, and offer reassurance they are hard at work to protect the county's interests.

Along with N.C. Sen. Bill Purcell and Rep. Ken Goodman, U.S. Rep. Larry Kissell met with the public at Chamber of Commerce, Pee Dee Electric-sponsored legislative breakfast at the

Cole Auditorium Monday morning, while the two state legislators stuck around for informal discussions with county commissioners and staff at the Cooperative Extension at noon.

At the breakfast, Purcell and Goodman addressed funding for public education in the state, while Kissell addressed the economy.

During his remarks, Goodman said keeping the temporary 1 cent sales tax "would shore up and protect classrooms in North Carolina."

Purcell said the education cuts being laid out in the General Assembly could put the state's school system backyears. He said these were the largest cuts in education in the history of the state, and the Senate budget would cut about 2,000 more jobs than the roughly 18,000 jobs eliminated in the House budget.

"This would destroy decades of progress in North Carolina," Purcell explained, saying the House budget would take N.C. down to 48th in per pupil spending in the country, while the Senate proposal drags it down to dead last.

For his part, Kissell said the economy "is on a slow, but shaky, upturn," and said job creation should be the nation's number one concern.

In response to a question from *Daily Journal* Publisher and Editor Rick Bacon, Kissell told the audience the newly-installed Republican majority in the U.S. House of Representatives has done nothing to create more jobs.

"This morning's event was another great way to let local residents and small business owners know what's happening in Washington and answer their

questions” Kissell said later Monday. “It’s important that we keep all lines of communication open between the public and their representatives, and I was glad to be a part of it.”

Later at the county’s meeting, Richmond County Board of Commissioners Chairman Kenneth Robinette welcomed Purcell and Goodman to what he described as “informal discussions” of some of the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners legislative goals for this year.

Among those issues addressed were a measure in the Senate turning over road maintenance to counties, a request for the General Assembly to restore money to local school systems through the lottery and several measures that could affect the county’s law enforcement and justice systems.

“This is a new day in Raleigh for those of us who happen to be Democrats,” Purcell told those in attendance as the meeting began. “It’s very discouraging to see some of the legislation that is coming out of there. Instead of doing what we said we were going to do and work on jobs and the economy, we’re doing all these crazy things like a bill to allow guns in bars and parks ... a bill for a new currency for North Carolina in case the dollar collapses ... and a lot of stuff that just doesn’t make any sense instead of working on economic development.”

“The other thing I’ve noticed is that in the House, there are just some people who are dead intent on destroying public schools,” Goodman said.

He attributed much of the success of General Assembly Republicans in getting their bills passed to “party discipline.”

“The majority party there in Raleigh has demonstrated tremendous party discipline, and I believe you could have a Republican introduce a bill to make Poison Ivy the state flower and it would pass. That’s the kind of party discipline they’ve shown. There have been bills that I was just sure there was no way this wouldn’t get defeated on merit, but they voted as one.”

Rick Sago, county manager, explained the philosophy behind the county’s approach to these issues

“Basically, this is just like everything else,” Sago said. “Anything that adversely affects the county’s ability to collect property taxes affects the us being able to do the jobs the state and federal government mandates us to do.”

Sheriff James Clemmons also addressed several issues that could affect the county’s law enforcement and judicial systems, including a measure to split Stanly County from this prosecutorial district and a measure that would house misdemeanor offenders in county jails rather than the state Department of Corrections.

“This is something that the state is looking at to save money, because these inmates wouldn’t go to DOC, but it would then shift the responsibility onto us,” Clemmons explained.

He said the Sheriff’s Association has been looking at ways to deal with this if it passes, and the county is looking at alternative sentences such as house arrest.

Another bill he said is on the Sheriff’s Association radar is a bill that would do away with the written promise to appear in court and the unsecured bond in the state of North Carolina.

“This is something the bail bondsmen are pushing, because it will put more money in their pockets, but it will then make it more difficult for me to keep the population in my jail down,” Clemmons said. “Oftentimes, when we’re housing someone who is not a violent offender and doesn’t pose a hazard to public safety, we’ll usually look at ways to try to release them to open up the space and save the county money.”

Finally, Clemmons discussed the measure which would leave Richmond and Anson counties with only two district court judges, saying public pressure had done much to slow the progress of the bill.

“There’s a strong possibility this legislation won’t go any farther,” Clemmons said.

“We’re not going to retreat on this issue,” Goodman responded. “Worst case scenario, and it passes - I think we would look at trying to get the Governor to veto it.”

Staff Writer Philip D. Brown can be reached at (910) 997-3111 ext. 15, or by e-mail at pbrown@heartlandpublications.com.