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# Opinion

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## Our View

# Panthers tax hike is more than it appears

Plan brings in \$12 million beyond what's needed; let public debate

Thanks to the secrecy surrounding the city of Charlotte's talks with the Carolina Panthers, one essential fact has received little attention:

The City Council has thrown its early support behind a tax hike that would bring in more than double what the city would need to give the Panthers their full request. It gives the appearance of sneaking through a tax increase for unrelated projects under the cloak of keeping the city's NFL franchise from leaving.

Whether to give Panthers owner Jerry Richardson \$125 million in tax money for stadium renovations is, of course, the first question, and it's a debate the city and Panthers have locked the taxpaying public out of. Beyond that, however, is a not-so-small detail: The proposed tax is far larger than needed to accomplish the task.

Here's the math: The Panthers have asked the city for \$125 million. If the city financed that over 20 years (a typical, reasonable term for a big capital project) at a 3.05 percent interest rate (a rate it could probably obtain with its AAA credit rating), its annual payments would be somewhere close to \$8.5 million.

The City Council endorsed paying for the Panthers deal by adding a 1 percent tax on prepared foods and beverages to the existing 1 percent tax. The current 1 percent tax generates about \$20 million a year within the city limits, city treasurer Scott Greer told the Observer editorial board.

The new tax would bring in close to \$20 million more annually, but the city only needs \$8.5 million. Even if the numbers changed a bit, a huge gap remains.

This deserves a full public airing, but no one at the city is emphasizing it, or even commenting on it.

There are at least three options if the city decides to give the Panthers the money and use the prepared foods tax to do it:

- Raise the tax by a half-percent instead of a full percent. That would bring in around \$10 million annually, enough to cover the Panthers' request.



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**The Panthers want city help renovating Bank of America Stadium.**

- Impose the full 1 percent but provide that the tax is eliminated after six years, when the stadium renovations are paid off.
- Impose the full tax without a sunset provision, but be upfront with the public that it will generate \$12 million or more per year for projects that no one has specified.

Of course, the prepared foods tax is not the only way to get the deal done.

The Observer's Steve Harrison reports that the city's annual debt payments on the convention center have dropped by more than \$6 million over the past two years. Presumably, those payments will continue to drop as the debt is retired. The city and the Charlotte Regional Visitors Authority have not said how they plan to spend that windfall. It could cover about half of what the Panthers seek without raising taxes at all. Does the city have a plan for it, such as a 1,000-room hotel, that it won't share with the public?

Then there's the hotel-motel tax, primarily paid by visitors. Some City Council members expected it to be the funding source for the Panthers, but the city staff dismissed that idea, saying the tax, at 15.25 percent, was already high and shouldn't be raised. Another option would be raising the tax on tickets at for-profit entertainment venues.

There are still other ways to finance the deal, none of which involves hiking taxes twice as much as needed to cover the city's contribution to the Panthers. They should be debated, in public, without armed police blocking the doors.



KEVIN SIERS - CHARLOTTEOBSERVER.COM 2013

## The Observer Forum

■ In response to "Meck to fight state over Medicaid" (Jan. 9) and related articles:

**Mecklenburg, stop wasting my hard-earned tax dollars**

So, Harry Jones and Mecklenburg County are using my hard-earned tax dollars to sue the state of North Carolina, who will then use more of my hard-earned tax dollars to defend themselves?

This should not even be possible. Harry Jones should know better!

In this current environment, this money and time would be better spent on: a.) education, b.) roads, c.) jobs.

Please, let's not allow our county and state to feel like Washington, D.C.!

BETH MONAGHAN  
Charlotte

■ In response to "Panthers deliver hit, but city should listen" (Jan. 16 Editorial) and related articles:

**Set conditions before jumping in deep end on stadium**

You are right to criticize the Charlotte City Council for answering before the Panthers even popped the question.

I feel sure they do not care that the majority of us never attend those games but may be forced to pay a new food tax – forever.

Our self image is not tied up with the success or failure of the local "circus" options; we have day-to-day concerns which are much more important.

If we *must* hand over the community purse, apply some conditions so we can have hope that our "leadership" actually has such a skill set.

P.A. WILLIAMS  
Matthews

**It's 'Carolina' Panthers; S.C. should pitch in on renovations**

I question why Jerry Richardson has his palm out to only the City of Charlotte.

Sure, Charlotte will benefit the most in terms of image and eco-

nomics, and there are indications that Richardson will be asking the state of North Carolina for some additional contributions.

But let's remember that Mr. Richardson named the team the "Carolina" Panthers.

So if the team represents both North and South Carolina, and the whole region presumably benefits in some way from having an NFL team, then will he be asking South Carolina for a contribution?

How about splitting the \$125 million a little more equitably between the three.

JEFF WILSON  
Charlotte

■ In response to "White House criticizes NRA video with Obama daughters" (Jan. 17):

**Obama shows double standard in use of kids on gun issue**

So it's OK for the Anointed One to use Newtown, Conn., children for political impact in his much anticipated gun control package, but it's "repugnant and cowardly" when the NRA mentions that his children attend school with armed guards.

Really!

DON MARKOFSKI  
Charlotte

■ In response to "Obama proposes changes to reduce gun violence" (Jan. 17):

**Gun owners should have to prove need to own a weapon**

All this noise about the right of citizens to own arms is being touted by arms manufacturers and dealers for their own gain.

There will not be a problem for any one to own a gun if he can prove the need for one. It should be illegal for anyone to own a gun who cannot justify the need for it.

There are other countries where these guns are not easily available and they do not have the level of violence we have in the United States.

RAJ SAWHNEY  
Belmont

**Don't expect my support on gun control if you support abortion**

President Obama has some nerve surrounding himself with

children at his press conference and acting as the great protector, when the simple truth is that he considers a child in the womb as medical waste.

Any proponent of abortion has no credibility on the discussion of protecting innocent life through gun control.

This new push for restricting guns from law abiding citizens is clearly just a new chapter in the Left's incremental steps to restrict our freedoms and rights.

LARRY SCHMID  
Fort Mill, S.C.

**CATS making excuses, should drop veterans at VA clinic door**

CATS is again singing the same tune, saying buses cannot turn around in the VA Outpatient Clinic driveway on University East Drive and that the weight of the bus would damage the pavement.

Charlotte Fire Department vehicles are often on the property, along with garbage trucks, large delivery trucks and 18-wheelers. All have no problem, and the pavement is still intact after four-plus years.

Many disabled veterans are still walking the two-tenths of a mile from the bus stop to the clinic, which includes 27 steps or climbing a steep incline.

Please, CATS, relocate that bus stop to the clinic!

JOHN FENESEY  
Charlotte

**Having deputies scan car tags a waste of precious resources**

Mecklenburg County sheriff's deputies are now using cameras to scan license plates of parked cars in search of those who have not paid vehicle taxes.

I pay taxes in Mecklenburg – a pretty hefty sum, too – so that law enforcement can protect citizens. Now my tax dollars are going toward law enforcement chasing after more tax dollars?

The folks who owe taxes *know* that they owe taxes. If they need reminding, send 'em a postcard, Mr. Tax Collector. You can do that for about eight cents.

MATT MCGARRY  
Charlotte

## N.C. Opinions: Raleigh

# Keep the out-of-state cap in place at UNC

From an editorial Friday in the (Raleigh) News & Observer:

The argument that there should be a larger percentage of out-of-state students on North Carolina's public university campuses is at its strongest when proponents talk about how those students enrich campus life and broaden the horizons of their North Carolina-born classmates. It's true, absolutely.

Many students who graduate from state campuses recall as their most unforgettable mates those they at first found so different, those from other regions of the country or in fact from other countries. And because the competition for admission is even tougher for out-of-state students, they tend to be top-flight scholars.

If the admission of North Carolina students would not be affected, it might be fine to raise the 18 percent cap on out-of-state enrollees allowed on UNC system campuses. However, some campuses, including Chapel Hill, have waiting lists and turn down many applicants.

The University of North Carolina's campuses are attractive to students from every state. That's allowed the Chapel Hill campus, the flagship, to charge \$28,250 in tuition and fees to out-of-state students and have them waiting in line to pay it.

In-state students pay about \$7,500.

Almost all recent chancellors from Chapel Hill have supported the idea of admitting a larger percentage of out-of-state students. The idea is under discussion again among university officials and some on its Board of Governors.

That reflects, no doubt, a belief that having more such students would raise the quality of a given class, would add to the university's prestige nationwide, would make the campus more enriching for all.

But here's the rub: The university doesn't exist just to be a great institution for undergraduates and graduate students and faculty members. Its first mission is to serve the people of North Carolina.

Tom Ross, president of the UNC system, indicated there might be a way to have the 18 percent cap apply not to individual campuses, but systemwide, thus allowing some campuses to exceed it. That's not a good idea, and Ross knows full well that UNC Chapel Hill, given a loose rein, would immediately enroll a much larger percentage of out-of-state students.

North Carolina's cap on out-of-state freshmen has been in place for about 25 years. UNC Chapel Hill (the chief advocate for raising the cap) has continued to prosper and raise its academic standards. It's a tough admission to gain for all but the best students in the state now. There's not evidence that the cap has in some way hurt the quality of the public institutions.



Ross

## For the Record

# One effort to help stressed-out clergy care for themselves

From the Rev. Robb Webb, Rural Church program director for The Duke Endowment:

With recent headlines focusing on clergy burnout and stress, it's good to know that an effort based in North Carolina is at the forefront of addressing this serious problem. Called the Duke Clergy Health Initiative, it combines research and intervention to help pastors tend to their physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health. The Christian Century calls it the "largest and most comprehensive effort ever made to study clergy health and to improve it."

The effort is funded through a \$12 million grant from The Duke Endowment, a private charitable foundation in Charlotte, and administered by Duke Divinity School in Durham. The divinity school is collaborating with the West-

ern North Carolina Conference and the North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church to implement the project.

It began with extensive research and planning. In 2008, the initiative's research team held a series of gatherings to hear from clergy in small groups. They also conducted a survey that 95 percent of United Methodist clergy across North Carolina completed.

The results concerned us all. While pastors excelled at taking care of their flock, they had trouble taking care of themselves. Clergy were more likely to suffer from high blood pressure, diabetes, asthma and arthritis than the overall state population. The rate of depression was roughly double that of the U.S. population. More than 40 percent of respondents were obese, far above the state average. One pastor in the study group hadn't taken a vacation in 18 years.

Using lessons learned from a pilot intervention with 81 pastors in two United Methodist



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**Myers Park Baptist is without Rev. Steve Shoemaker, who is undergoing rehabilitation.**

districts, the Clergy Health Initiative developed Spirited Life, a statewide wellness program and behavioral health study. With pastors involved for two years, Spirited Life emphasizes stress management, healthy eating and exercise, and scripturally-based reasons for taking care of oneself. Pastors also receive coaching and sup-

port from specially trained wellness advocates.

More than 1,100 United Methodist clergy in North Carolina are enrolled in Spirited Life. Preliminary findings suggest that participants lost weight during their first six months in the program and kept it off seven months later. Nearly half of the clergy with high blood pressure and one-third of the clergy with high triglycerides succeeded in returning to normal levels.

When our trustees approved this work, their goal was to help foster a culture of health among pastors – to give them the tools, and the permission, to take care of themselves. As the Clergy Health Initiative is refined, we want to create a model for other denominations to use.

By increasing the spotlight on this issue, we hope the broader public begins to understand how stressful and complex clergy life can be. As the Rev. Jody Seymour told the Observer, "You can get awfully thirsty giving other people water."



Webb