

Does Columbus Need a Sales-Tax Increase?

County already has almost \$14.2 million in available funds

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The Columbus County commissioners are asking county residents to approve a sale-tax increase on November 4. County officials indicate that more revenue is needed to pay for pressing capital projects.
- Statements by county officials regarding the possible use of new sales-tax revenue are not legally binding. Once passed, all new revenue, by law, may be used for any legal purpose.
- This *Regional Brief* finds that Columbus County's problems are not created by a lack of funding. The almost \$14.2 million in savings and revenues identified in this report is almost 15 times the amount that the proposed sales-tax increase is estimated to produce (see Figure 1). If the county used this money instead, it could delay a sales-tax increase for about 15 years.
- The state requires all counties to have eight percent of their budgets held in cash for emergencies, but Columbus County is in violation of this state rule. Instead of an eight percent "rainy day fund," the county has a \$703,000 deficit. This deficit gives county voters little confidence that the county would responsibly handle the funds from the proposed tax increase.
- County revenues have grown 29 percent faster than population and

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inflation since Fiscal Year (FY) 2002 (see Figure 2). The total amount of revenue for FY 2007 was over \$10 million more than in FY 2002. By FY 2007, the average family of four paid \$736 more in taxes than in FY 2002. It would take a 47 percent increase in family income (current dollars) to match the increase in revenues that the county has received over those five years.

- ✦ If Columbus County were to adjust its revenue stream for only population and inflation increases, the county's revenues would increase 29 percent over the next ten years.
- ✦ Also over the next ten years, student population is expected to *decrease* by 519, or by about 7.5 percent.
- ✦ If the school district has facility needs, the county commission and school board need to show taxpayers how they would spend the almost \$12.4 million in state money provided for capital improvements over the next ten years.
- ✦ Columbus County benefited from the Medicaid swap above the state's promised "hold harmless" amount of \$500,000 a year for ten years. Columbus County receives more than \$2.7 million the first full year and a total of over \$56 million over ten years (see Figure 1).
- ✦ From FY 2004 to FY 2006, Columbus

County gave over \$55,000 in incentives to a few selected private businesses. This practice is unfair to the hundreds of businesses in the county who are, at times, forced to compete with tax-subsidized businesses.

BACKGROUND

In its 2007 session, the North Carolina General Assembly relieved all counties of paying the portion of Medicaid expenses that had been forced on counties, in exchange for the half-cent sales tax that the counties levied to help pay those expenses.¹ In addition, the legislature voted to give counties the option to ask voters to approve new tax increases. Options include increasing the sales tax by one-quarter cent, tripling the land-transfer tax rate from 0.2 to 0.6 percent, or not hiking taxes at all.

The legislature also required counties to put those tax increases to an advisory vote of the people. If voters approved, county commissioners were allowed but not required to increase taxes. If both tax increases were on the same ballot and both were approved, commissioners could impose only one tax increase, not both.

Since November 2007, county voters across North Carolina have voted 58 times on such tax increases, rejecting nearly all of them. Voters have approved only eight of

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Figure 1. Columbus County Projected Revenue and Savings

Revenue Gains	1 year	10 years
Gain from Medicaid swap (FY 2008-09)	\$2,702,073	\$56,045,936
Estimated school capital (Avg based on projections)	\$1,337,414	\$12,377,767
Potential Savings		
Eliminate economic incentive giveaways (2004-2006 Avg)	\$55,447	\$554,467
Revenue Growth		
Revenue in excess of population and inflation (FY 2007)	\$10,034,876	\$100,348,763
TOTAL	\$14,129,811	\$169,326,933
Potential extra availability	\$14,129,811	\$169,326,933
Revenue from Sales Tax Increase	\$954,886	\$12,584,107

those 58 proposed tax increases. Undeterred by voter rejection of the tax increase last November, Columbus County commissions have put the tax increases on this November's ballot.

There is no limit to the number of times that county commissioners can place a proposed tax increase on the ballot, or how much tax money commissions can spend on public "education" campaigns requesting that voters approve the tax increase.

PUBLIC SCHOOL SPENDING²

By far, counties spend more money on public education than any other area. Total local government spending on public education was \$2.68 billion or \$1,934 per pupil for the 2006-07 school year. Nearly 25 percent of all expenditures on public schools come from local tax revenue. Given the amount of taxpayer money involved, sympathetic appeals for school funding should not come at the expense of sound fiscal policy

County governments and school boards should spend local tax dollars for education in proportion to changes in their school population. In Columbus County, from 2002 to 2007, there was a one percent decrease in student population. At the same time, there was a three percent decrease in local, inflation-adjusted per-pupil expenditures.

Over the last five years, the state increased per-pupil expenditures in Columbus County by 11 percent, adjusted for inflation. Federal per-pupil expenditures increased by 18 percent during the same period. Thus, state and federal spending on the Columbus County Schools significantly outpaced changes in enrollment.

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (DPI) projects that Columbus County Schools will lose 519 students over the next ten years, a 7.5 percent decrease. The state's Public School Building Capital Fund, which includes lottery funds, will provide Columbus County with an estimated \$12.4 million over the next ten years.

If new school facilities are needed, the school system should redirect funds away from low-priority projects, reduce the size of the school bureaucracy, pursue ways to reduce construction costs, redirect existing revenue streams, and implement sound facilities alternatives. With proper planning and "out of the box" thinking, the school district can manage enrollment growth using proven, cost-effective construction, renovation, and maintenance solutions that are taxpayer-friendly and enhance educational opportunities for students.

In addition, the county should consider these options, which would dramatically increase school capacity at minimal cost:

1. Implement an Early College program at a local community college
2. Create an offsite ninth-grade center
3. Use public/private partnerships to build and renovate schools
4. Adapt vacant facilities and office buildings to schools
5. Create satellite campuses for students interested in specialized programs
6. Increase participation in the NC Virtual Public School

PER-CAPITA REVENUE INCREASES

Between FY 2002 and FY 2007, Columbus County's per-capita revenues increased by 29 percent after adjusting for inflation³ (see Figure 2). This means that new county residents are contributing more than their fair share of county revenues. In other words, population growth has been "paying for itself" because county revenues are growing at a faster rate than population. In addition, if the county had lived within its means — that is, if its budget increases had been in line with population and inflation increases, rather than exceeded them — over those five years, the county's FY 2007 revenues could have been over \$10 million lower. That surplus amount could and should be returned to the taxpayers in the form of tax cuts.

If the county started living within the

means of its citizens and held revenue increases in line with increases in population and inflation, county revenues would increase 29 percent over the next ten years.

ECONOMIC INCENTIVE GIVEAWAYS

Columbus County has given over \$55,000 in economic incentives to businesses and corporations from FY 2004 to FY 2006. Giving large corporations economic incentives, also known as corporate welfare or corporate socialism, is taking much-needed money from county taxpayers and local small businesses and giving it to large corporations in exchange for promises of creating new jobs. Often the promised jobs go to outsiders. The long-term impact of these incentives on economic growth is questionable, to say the least. It is unfair to force existing businesses to pay taxes that, at times, go to a competing subsidized business.

MEDICAID SWAP

The state is taking over the county portion

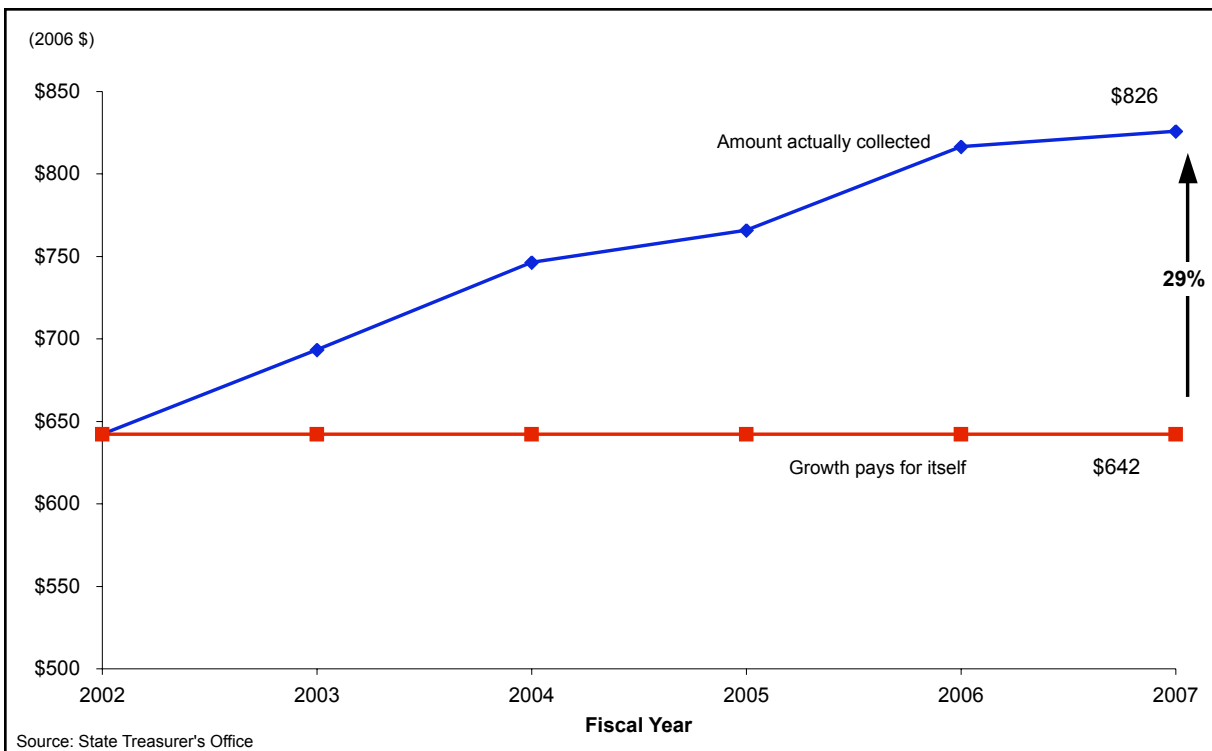
of Medicaid over three years, but it is also taking a portion of revenues from counties, too. The legislature included a “hold harmless” provision to guarantee that each county ends up with at least \$500,000 more available in its budget each year for ten years.⁷ Because Columbus County’s net Medicaid savings were more than the \$500,000 “hold harmless” amount, the county gains over \$2.7 million in additional funds to spend the first full year and over \$56 million over the next ten years.

CONCLUSION

This report shows that Columbus County is not in financial difficulty. In fact, most North Carolina counties do not face revenue crises that require tax increases. Nevertheless, county commissioners have placed tax increases on the ballot 58 times since the legislature authorized county residents to vote on tax increases.

In all the counties voting on tax increases, revenues grew faster than population and

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Figure 2. Columbus County Locally Generated Revenue Per Person, FY 2002–FY 2007 (adjusted for inflation, FY 2006 dollars)



inflation between FY 2002 and FY 2007. The average increase is almost 19 percent. In addition, state government has grown six percent faster than population and inflation between FY 2002 and FY 2007. Obviously, this government growth rate rapidly outstripping population and inflation growth cannot be sustainable.

The November 4 vote provides the opportunity for Columbus County citizens to be heard. The results of the 58 county tax votes since last November are informative. County voters rejected 50 of the 58 requests for tax increases. Citizens, when given the chance, are rejecting tax increases.

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NOTES

1. Over the next three years, the state will take over the 15 percent of Medicaid expenses that the counties had previously been required to fund; see State Law 2007-323 (House Bill 1473, Sections 31.16 and 31.17).
2. N.C. Department of Public Instruction (NC DPI), School Planning Division, “ADM Growth Analysis, 2007–2017,” September 2007; NC DPI, School Planning Division, “Public School Building Capital Fund: 10 Year Planning Projections, 2007–2016,” June 27, 2007; NC DPI, Division of School Business Services, “FY 2007-08 Estimated Lottery Distribution,” August 2007; NC DPI, “Statistical Profiles,” 2003–2007, accessed September 2008; NC DPI, Division of School Business, “2006–2007 Selected Financial Data,” accessed September 2008; NC DPI, Education Statistics Access System, “Final ADM,” accessed September 2008. Inflation adjustments used the GDP Deflator published by the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. Public School Building Capital Fund projections are based on 10 years of corporate income tax and lottery funding at the 2008-2009 level (estimated), adjusted for projected enrollment growth over ten years.
3. County Annual Financial Information Report (AFIR) from the N.C. Department of the State Treasurer, www.nctreasurer.com/lgc/units/unitlistjs.htm.
4. North Carolina General Assembly, Fiscal Research Division, “Medicaid 3 Year 500K” projections, 2007.