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N.C. Progress Board releases new guide to the state budget

RALEIGH — The North Carolina Progress Board has released a unique, user-friendly guide to the state budget designed to give average North Carolinians a better understanding of how their tax money is being spent.

The guide, produced by the Progress Board as a public service, was paid for with private money and contains no political agendas. The 34-page guide is thought to be the first of its kind in North Carolina. It is titled:

Our State, Our Money

A Citizens' Guide to the North Carolina Budget

The guide can be downloaded by any North Carolinian — free of charge — from the Progress Board website (www.theprogressboard.org). In addition, a limited number are available in printed form and on compact disc. With the help of the North Carolina Press Association, those copies are being distributed to each newspaper in the state. Copies also will be made available to each member of the General Assembly and to local government officials throughout North Carolina.

Burley Mitchell Jr., former chief justice of the N.C. Supreme Court and vice-chairman of the Progress Board, said the guide cuts through the often-confusing layers of bureaucracy that surround the budget process.

"This document will be of real value to any citizen who wants to understand what the legislature really faces, instead of relying on sound bites from the left- and right-wingers," said Mitchell. "Simply put, it demystifies the budget process."

Using text blocks, colorful graphics and a sprinkling of budget "factoids," the guide attempts to do the following:

- Show taxpayers how the North Carolina budget affects them and their families.



- Unsnarl the complexities of which government — local, state or federal — pays for which services.
- Show where the state's money comes from and where it goes.
- Compare program costs from 10 years ago to those of today, while seeking to explain not only how, but also why they have changed.
- Take a look at the decade ahead to identify the factors that may affect budget decisions in the future.

Republican House Speaker Richard Morgan said the guide should be a valuable resource for all the state's citizens.

"The Citizens' Guide is all about putting useful, straight-forward information in the hands of North Carolinians," he said. "Each year folks across the state dutifully send their hard-earned money to Raleigh. This guide will help explain what happens to it once it gets there."

Democratic House Speaker Jim Black agreed, adding that he hopes legislators also will benefit from the guide.

"The important point about this material, in my opinion, is the value it has for members as they are asked questions about how the budget is put together — what causes the budget to increase, how the tax structure works and so forth," he said.

The guide focuses primarily on the General Fund, which covers most state government operations, including education, health and human services, and justice and public safety. The General Fund is financed nearly entirely through state taxes and fees.

The guide relies primarily on information from FY 2001-02 and FY 2002-03, because those numbers are the most current. However, the guide also gleans some key information from the \$14.8 billion 2003-04 General Fund budget that was approved by the General Assembly in June.

Senate President Pro Tem Marc Basnight said: "I'm really happy to see the Progress Board do this guide. It is so important for North Carolinians to understand and participate in their government. This guide will help people better understand how the budget affects their lives every day."

Sen. Steve Metcalf of Asheville, who sits on the Progress Board, said it's critical for North Carolinians to understand how their tax money is being used.

"It's the people who pay for state government and state services," Metcalf said. "So they should know as much as possible about how that government works



and how those services are funded. I have to say I am very proud of the fact that the Asheville Citizens-Times newspaper in my district is planning to publish the guide as a special insert in one of its editions. I hope other newspapers will do the same."

Sen. A.B. Swindell of Nashville, another Progress Board member, said North Carolinians are acutely aware of budgetary issues these days.

"Spending issues are always important," Swindell said. "But with the economy struggling, it's more crucial than ever that people have a good sense of what's happening to their tax money. This guide can help with that."

The N.C. Progress Board was created by the North Carolina General Assembly in 1995, after being recommended by the Commission for a Competitive North Carolina. The commission saw its role as government's compass, setting broad directions for the state. Commission members envisioned the Progress Board as a body that would create a detailed map toward meeting certain goals; would measure the state's progress in meeting those goals; and would report any progress — or lack of progress — to state leaders and residents.

The Progress Board is a 24-member commission chaired ex-officio by the governor. Its purpose, powers, duties and membership are set out in GS 143B-372.1ff. Members are appointed by the governor, speaker of the N.C. House of Representatives, president pro tempore of the N.C. Senate and other board members. Membership is intended to represent a cross-section of the state.

As defined by the General Assembly, the Progress Board's mission is to "encourage the ... understanding of critical global, national and local ... trends that will affect North Carolina in the coming decades."

Specifically, the Legislature charged the Progress Board with tracking the state's progress in eight key areas: healthy children and families; quality education for all; a high performance workforce; a prosperous economy; a sustainable environment; a 21st century infrastructure; safe and vibrant communities; and active citizenship and accountable government. The Citizens' Guide pertains primarily to the area of active citizenship and accountable government.

The guide is the Progress Board's most significant undertaking since December 2001, when the board released its first major report, called North Carolina 20/20. That report defined the eight key areas, assessed current conditions and outlined goals for the year 2020. Praised for its breadth and clarity, the report was widely distributed and is available on the Progress Board website.



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Those who wish to receive the guide can do so by contacting the Progress Board office; by visiting the Progress Board website (www.theprogressboard.org); or by contacting their local legislators.

In other news involving the N.C. Progress Board, WUNC-TV has scheduled Oct. 21 at 8 p.m. for the broadcast of a program designed to summarize the North Carolina 20/20 report. Following the one-hour program, WUNC-TV will air a panel discussion devoted to the report and its key findings. More details about both programs will be available in the coming weeks.

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