

Introduction and Commentary

North Carolina 20/20

“Th' thigh bone's connected to th' leg bone...th' leg bone's connected to th' knee bone... th' knee bone's connected to th' shin bone...th' shin bone's connected to th' ankle bone... th' ankle bone's connected to th'....”

Just like the old song, each element that defines the “good life” in North Carolina is connected to all the others.

A good quality of life is related, generally, to a good salary...

A good salary depends on a good job...

Good jobs depend on a strong, well-diversified economy...

A strong economy depends on high quality education...

Quality education depends on healthy children and families...

Healthy families and children depend on safe and vibrant communities;

Those communities depend on a sustainable environment, and on a first-class infrastructure of roads, rail, airports, adequate water supplies, clean air, solid waste disposal, high-speed interconnectivity for information technologies and communication, and smart growth strategies.

Safe and vibrant communities, infrastructure, and a sustainable environment depend *decidedly* on an engaged, active citizenship and on accountable governments. Active citizenship and accountable government are fundamental elements that sustain and grow our democracy... so we can, in turn, choose to participate in a good quality of life.

And the cycle continues...

All these elements and conditions working together create and insure the good life each of us wants - for those we love, and for ourselves.

In establishing the N.C. Progress Board, the General Assembly recognized that for North Carolina to be a strong, beautiful, dynamic state in the future, we would need to set goals aimed toward that future, and keep a careful score of our progress. The General Assembly set eight key issue areas for this goal-setting and score-keeping work:

- Healthy Children and Families
- Safe and Vibrant Communities
- Quality Education for All
- A High Performance Workforce
- A Prosperous Economy
- A Sustainable Environment
- A 21st Century Infrastructure
- Active Citizenship and Accountable Government

These issue areas were first established by the Competitiveness Commission of North Carolina, chaired by former Governor James B. Hunt, Jr. and co-chaired by Dr. Julianne Still Thrift and Mack B. Pearsall.

There are critical interrelationships among the issue areas. That's one big lesson the North Carolina Progress Board has learned in putting together this report. As we researched, interviewed, compiled and organized the data summarized in these pages, we have been struck, repeatedly, by the interconnections and the interdependencies required for any real progress to occur. In fact, we believe it is a serious error to consider any of these issue areas or their related visions, goals, measures, or targets, without considering them all! In fact, we have come to call the issue areas "imperatives" because we feel that none of them is dispensable; each one is essential.

As you'll see throughout the report, we've tried to "connect the dots" between related areas. Keep these interrelationships in mind as you become familiar with the report.

What North Carolina is becoming is quite different from what we've ever been. We know that more change is coming. But just look at how profoundly the state has changed already:

- Once most of us lived in small towns and rural areas - now we live in big cities and rapidly growing urban corridors.
- Once our culture was homogenous - now we come from different backgrounds, speak other languages and practice many religions.
- Once our skins could be sorted into two or three shades - now our skins come in a wide array of shades.
- Once we worked in textiles, furniture and agriculture - now more of us are employed in the services sectors of our economy.
- Once we made things. Now we make deals. We arrange this or that, package and move around money, ideas, and information, brands and markets; heal and help the sick; legislate, litigate, medicate, and recreate.
- Once our families could get by on a single salary - now it takes two for most of us, and sometimes extra jobs on the side.
- Once we were surrounded by extended family, friends and neighbors; we sat on our porches on afternoons and evenings - now we are more mobile, more dispersed, distracted - and more isolated...and lately...more anxious...
- Once, *if we had* a telephone, we had to dial a "long-distance" operator to place a call to a loved one in the next town. Now, we pull out this small gadget from our pockets, and with voice-activated circuitry, speak their names into it to call the loved one, almost anywhere on the planet, for a fraction of the cost.
- Once, if we had a computer, it might have had 126Kb of memory and been a bit bigger than a breadbox. It was slow, and cost about \$4,999. Now, laptop computers process information at almost a *billion* bytes per second, and store several billion bytes of information, and can zip that information around the world at almost the speed of light. The cost is about \$1,000 or less.

These changes have had a profound impact on what researchers call “social capital” - that network of special relationships that provides us with information, support, and a sense of belonging - a sense of "place." It is just as necessary and critical to us as financial capital - if not more so - for our wellbeing, and the state’s wellbeing.

As far as our state's wellbeing is concerned, we found that while North Carolina has certainly made some progress, we're in a precarious situation with regard to many areas, including:

- Our health, especially with diseases that are killing us that can be prevented;
- The quality of our air;
- The depletion of our forests;
- Our rural infrastructure;
- Our water supply and future water quality; and
- Our skills as workers - we simply are not keeping up with training and re-training North Carolina's workforce for 21st century job skills.

And, we learned that:

- About 13% of all North Carolinians live below the Federal poverty level*
- A third of those **below** the 200% of poverty level are children;
- *One million* of us cannot read or write well enough to hold a job;
- *Each year*, about 16% of the high school population (23,000-25,000) drops out of school and,
- Suicide *still ranks* among the top 10 causes of death among North Carolinians.

Why You Should Care. Information technology, e-commerce, e-government, ethnic diversity, biotechnology, bad ozone days, water quality and supply problems, an aging infrastructure, the "digital divide," illiteracy, poverty, losses in manufacturing jobs, retraining the workforce, and after the horrible tragedies in New York and Washington, DC - terrorism: The challenges we confront right now, **today**, in North Carolina have never been more complex **nor** more **interconnected**.

In the past North Carolina has developed innovative policy initiatives to confront its challenges head-on. Today, as then, the big ideas must come from good people who are able to see trends that are not yet visible to others.

We must give our strongest support and commitment to leaders who will look beyond today’s headlines, dig out the underlying trends, find creative ways to address those trends, and then reset our course.

The Progress Board can play a key role on our journey into the 21st century. We **can ask** the hard questions. But we **cannot answer** the hard questions. **You** must answer these questions and others:

- Are we willing to pay the price to improve our schools, colleges and universities?
- Are we willing to invest in our children? To help them think about their "futures"?
- Are we willing to invest in our older citizens so all can have access to a set of basic long-term care services?
- Are we willing to invest even more to eliminate illiteracy among about 1 million North Carolinians?

* The current Federal poverty level is computed in terms of costs of living in the 1960's; by using today's costs about 28% of North Carolinians live in poverty

- Are we willing to focus our workforce development programs so those who need new training and retraining will be able to find and choose effective training programs for the jobs of the future?
- Are we willing to discipline ourselves to preserve clean air, streams, estuaries, forests and fishing grounds?
- Are we willing to invest in ensuring clean ground water for a population that may reach 10 million in 2020?
- Are we willing to re-invest in the traditional industries of North Carolina - including creative initiatives for agriculture?
- Are we willing to get involved in the business of government and *insist* its programs, and program managers, and its elected officials become more accountable?
- Are we willing to do our very best to elect the best among us to represent and govern us?
- Are we willing to make a real effort to understand other people, other customs, other cultures?
- Are we willing to imagine a better future, beginning now?

It is time to reach back to the beginnings of this great state and to the spirit of folks who carved those beginnings out of the wilderness.

It is time to engage the future fully, and to accept our clear responsibility for *getting to the results we want*. It is time to choose - to imagine the answers, solutions, and long-term benefits to the question: "What *is* best for North Carolina?"

It's way past time to settle for the expedient solution; the short-term fix. Neither worked - nor ever will.

Looking toward a time and a future that has not arrived isn't easy. It's risky, there are few incentives and no guarantees of success. We spend a lot of our days thinking about the "here and now." There is nothing wrong with that - on its face. But if we *fail* to pause, reflect, look, dream, then act toward a possible "*then and there*," the here and now will arrive and leave before we know it - and be nothing like we've ever imagined.

In his Inaugural, Governor Mike Easley made several references to his commitment to "One North Carolina." He said:

"Today we celebrate one North Carolina. One North Carolina when every community matters, where every family can contribute and where every individual counts...."

"Let us stay our minds on one North Carolina--today and tomorrow. We have all the resources to be the best: bold and aggressive leadership in both parties, wonderful people of great spirit...We must instill in all our people such knowledge, wisdom, and optimism that the spirit within them can at last be unleashed to build a higher quality of life---a life that breaks the bonds of poverty, builds economic prosperity, and lets the human spirit soar."

Governor, the North Carolina Progress Board's members and staff send you a raucous "RIGHT ON!" But we would be remiss in our duty if we did not report to you, the General Assembly, and to all North Carolinians that in our judgment, we are heading in directions away from "One North Carolina." Unless we fail to act - soon and decisively - it may be too late. The title of an old bluegrass song describes very well our concern for North Carolina today:

"...I ain't broke (but I'm badly bent!)"

In the construction and content of our vision statements, our goals, measures, and targets, we call for a simple, renewed commitment to North Carolina's timeless motto:

Esse quam videri
To be, rather than to seem.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Jim Cooper". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the title "Executive Director".

Executive Director