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# NC speeds up building projects to create jobs

By GARY D. ROBERTSON Associated Press Writer  
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North Carolina's top elected officials agreed Tuesday to speed up more than \$740 million in government building projects, a decision outgoing Gov. Mike Easley said will hurry the creation of more than 25,000 new jobs.

Billed as a stimulus package for North Carolina's sagging economy, Easley said the actions by the Council of State - comprised of the Democratic governor and nine other statewide elected officials - will accelerate construction projects including prisons, university buildings and a museum complex by a month or two.

Easley, who gives way to Lt. Gov. Beverly Perdue this weekend, said the move will make a difference in a state whose 7.9 percent unemployment rate is the highest in 25 years.

"It may not sound like much, but if you're without a job, 30 more days makes a big difference," Easley told reporters after the council's vote. "We're trying to make sure to get as many people re-employed as soon as possible in North Carolina."

The panel voted in favor of authorizing the issuance of \$507 million in new debt, already approved either by the General Assembly or indirectly by voters. The council had to formally sign off on the borrowing, as well as agree to the projects to be paid for with the proceeds of the debt offering.

These projects, which were approved by the Legislature last summer, include five prisons, 14 university capital improvements and a \$107 million office and museum complex in downtown Raleigh. A \$2.7 million renovation of the North Carolina Zoo's polar bear exhibit in Asheboro also made the list.

"If you don't have a job, you don't care whether you're building a prison, a university building or a polar bear exhibit," Easley said. "You need that job and you need that income."

Two Republican council members - State Auditor Les Merritt and Labor Commissioner Cherie Berry - voted no on the borrowing. Merritt questioned whether it's a good time to borrow given the sour economy and falling revenues. He

suggested the Legislature be given the chance to reconsider the scope of the projects.

"What would be the harm of taking a little prudent step back?" Merritt asked. "Once (the projects) go forward a certain way, it makes it harder to go back."

But many of the projects listed already have received money for planning, design and other preliminary cite work, said Jim Lora with the Office of State Management and Budget.

State Treasurer Richard Moore, a council member, told Merritt that even with the additional borrowing this year the state remains within its self-imposed debt limit as a percentage of total state revenue. The first interest payment on the additional debt of about \$2 million will come in November, Easley's office said.

Lt. Gov. Beverly Perdue, a council member who will be sworn in as governor Saturday, asked that the council urge formally that jobs generated by the borrowing would go toward North Carolina residents.

The council meeting was the last for Easley, Moore, Merritt and Insurance Commissioner Jim Long, prompting jokes and old stories at the meeting's close.

Merritt lost in the November election to Democrat Beth Wood, while Moore unsuccessfully ran against Perdue for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination. Long declined to run for re-election after 24 years as commissioner.

Easley, who hasn't unveiled any detailed future plans, got one warning from Moore, whose agency oversees the state's pension funds.

"When your retirement check is late, don't call me," Moore quipped.

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