

State of Alexander County Message

I appreciate the opportunity to continue the tradition of presenting the State of the County message to the citizens of Alexander County. The State of the County was again extremely challenging in 2011. Despite a poor economy with high unemployment, there were a number of positive and negative signs indicating the road ahead.

Alexander County's average unemployment rate for 2011 decreased significantly from 2010. For the past year, the average rate was 11 percent which was a decrease from an average of 13 percent in 2010. In addition, Alexander County's monthly average unemployment rate for 2011 was the lowest among the Unifour Counties of Alexander, Burke, Caldwell and Catawba.

Work began on the development of a new site in the Alexander Industrial Park. With a zero interest loan from EnergyUnited, grading began in 2011 on a 25-acre industrial rail site on White Plains Road. Prior to completion of this site, the county did not have a graded industrial site which is critical in attracting new industry to the county.

As a result of funding from county government, the Economic Development Corporation continued with its second year of the Website Creation Grant Program. During 2011, this program provided critical funding which allowed 8 small businesses without websites to create a presence on the Internet. Since its inception, the program has assisted 18 local businesses.

Construction began in March of 2011 with site grading for the Alexander County Law Enforcement and Detention Center. At present the Law Enforcement Center is under roof. This portion of the project should be completed in July 2012. The Detention Center portion of the project is well underway. Block work is more than 70% complete. Precast roof panels were set the week of March 26, 2012. Projected completion date for the entire site is October 24, 2012 with total estimated cost of this project at just under 8 million.

In the past year waterline installation in the North East through Vashti Community has been completed. The Church Road water project has recently been completed connecting lines from US 64 to the area of Friendship Church Road as well as Corner Store and Sipe Road extensions. This project tied up dead ends on the system. To date, approximately 20 residential taps have been made on these new lines.

Construction on the Rocky Face Park project began in October of 2011. The park is located in the northeastern section of Alexander County, along Rocky Face Church Road at the site of the former quarry. Construction of the park is being funded by a North Carolina Parks & Recreation Trust Fund Grant and the match for those funds came from the park property, which was donated to Alexander County by Carolina Land and Lakes Resource Conservation and Development District. The first phase of this project will include approximately two miles of hiking trails across the mountain, along with a one-half-mile ADA-compliant walking trail, picnic shelter, restrooms, and a parking area for visitors. Construction is currently scheduled for completion by April 30 of this year.

The Alexander County School System is approaching the end of another exciting year at each of its member schools. The students and staff have been working with diligence and efficiency to provide another year of quality instruction for the students, thereby, giving every opportunity for learning to occur in each classroom. Here is an “Around the County Tour” of what’s been happening!

There have been many success stories from Alexander Central High School (ACHS) this year that exemplify the impact on the school’s culture and progress. ACHS is now offering students the opportunity to recover credit during the school day and "5th" period. This is providing a service to students that don't have transportation to the Alternative Learning Program (ALP), thus giving many students the opportunity to get back on track to graduate. Another initiative is the Minimum Credit Diploma which gives students who are at risk of not graduating an opportunity to do so.

The high school also used innovative ways to improve what can be offered to the students. For example, AHCS received a grant to get one social studies teacher AP certified over the summer, thus allowing ACHS the ability to offer AP US History. Reducing class size in many of the math classes has allowed the teachers more one-on-one time. This allows for a reduction in classroom disruptions which should drastically improve the success rate in Algebra 1.

With the focus on opportunities to gain credit, the successes of students at the Alexander County ALP come in small doses that slowly work to achieving the larger goal of graduation. Last year, approximately one out of every eight and a half Alexander Central High School graduates took at least one course at ALP. The average for the past for years has been about one out of every ten ACHS graduates. Although working under the radar for the most part, ALP has made strides in diminishing a potential higher dropout rate that has been slowly seeping into society. Working hand-in-hand with ACHS administration and staff, our goal is to continually make efforts to decrease the dropout rate.

West Alexander Middle added a new literacy program to address reading deficits. The Positive Behavior Intervention Support implementation has reduced suspensions as well. An emphasis was placed on the students being able to participate in club activities during the school day by creating a weekly “club schedule” to provide for this enriching social and extracurricular time. Through much collaboration and planning, the school created a transition program for rising 6th graders to include student visit/tours, counselor and band/chorus teachers’ visits to elementary schools, Parent Night and JumpStart. Also, throughout the year, the school participated in many extra-curricular activities such as Battle of the Books, Young Authors, and all middle school athletics.

East Alexander Middle was awarded the IMPACT V: Building 21st Century School Leadership grant. East is one of twelve schools to receive this grant. Over 226 schools met the eligibility requirements to apply for this grant. The goal of this project is to develop school and district leaders who have the knowledge and skills to implement

IMPACT: Guidelines for North Carolina Media and Technology Programs, fully embrace IMPACT's role in promoting student achievement through the use of technology, and media tools to support learning across the curriculum.

With this grant, four teachers from East will receive a free master's degree in Instructional Technology through UNCC and the principal will receive an Ed.S. through UNCG. These five, plus the school's media specialist and district technology facilitator, will receive coaching and extensive professional development which they will bring back to the county and share.

East has purchased 62 additional laptop computers for use in mobile labs and has worked with the technology department to upgrade the school's access points for almost optimal coverage. This grant is designed to have a far-reaching impact on Alexander County Schools and the community as a whole.

The Alexander County School System worked very hard on writing a grant that would help hire individuals to implement a program that helps with the county's dropout rate. The grant money was put into play with the hiring of three Transitional Student Advocates. Each of our middle schools (East and West Alexander Middle) has a student advocate and one lead student advocate was placed at ACHS. These three ladies hit the ground running on August 1st through identifying at-risk students and community member mentors for those students.

Throughout the first few months of school, the student advocates continued to work with the students on their new school transition, building relationships, staying up on school work, attendance, and discipline. While the student advocates worked during the school day with the students, their second mission after school hours was to recruit mentors for the students. The mentoring program is based off of the Communities in Schools mentoring model that is crowned the #1 accredited mentoring program and dropout prevention program in the nation.

The hope of the student advocates is to get enough funding, either through Communities in Schools (check it out on the web at www.cisnc.org) or another resource that will allow us to continue this program into next year. We need the support of our community to make this program possible!

In the 2010-2011 school year, 50% of Alexander County's schools made AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress). Of the counties surrounding Alexander, only Caldwell equaled that figure also having 50% making AYP. Iredell Statesville only had 31.4% make AYP, Wilkes had 45.5%, and Catawba was at a low 17.9% of their schools making AYP. As a system, Alexander managed to maintain 87% proficiency on math EOGs and grow our percent proficient on reading EOGs over a percentage point to 73.8%. Alexander Central High School grew their Algebra I EOC proficiency almost three percentage points to over 80%. Both East and West Middle Schools grew their math proficiency and West Middle grew their reading proficiency over four percentage points. Our elementary schools lowest math proficiency was 86.7% (Wittenburg Elementary), where the math proficiency last year was 82.5%, a growth of 4.2 percentage points. Another bright point

in math was at Stony Point Elementary which grew from 88.8% to 90.5% proficient in 2010-2011. Stony Point also grew their reading proficiency a huge 7.4 percentage points from 69.4% proficient to 76.8% proficient. Ellendale Elementary and Hiddenite Elementary also improved their reading proficiency by three and four percentage points respectively. Taylorsville Elementary, after being a school of improvement in math a few years ago, again raised their math proficiency to 87.4% while keeping their reading proficiency at 70%. Sugar Loaf raised reading proficiency over 11%. In a school year that reflected spending cuts and loss of staff statewide, Alexander County Schools once again put “Children First” and our students’ results reflect that commitment.

Beginning with the 2012-13 school year, Common Core Standards in math and English language arts and North Carolina Essential Standards in science, social studies, guidance, world languages, arts education, healthful living, career and technical education, and informational technology will be taught and assessed in the North Carolina public schools. All teachers in the Alexander County school system have worked this school year to complete five on-line modules provided by the state while also working in grade level teams and specific content areas to develop an understanding of the new standards in order to make changes in their teaching practices. These content and grade level teams are currently developing curriculum maps/pacing guides to teach the new curriculum beginning in August 2012. A school calendar was designed for the 2011-2012 school year to incorporate five required professional development days for all staff within the system (October 31st, January 20th, February 20th, March 27th, and June 12th). These professional development days have been a critical element in the training of staff as they prepare to teach these new curriculum standards. Implementation of the Common Core Standards in the state’s public schools is designed to directly address the relevance and rigor of what is being taught in classrooms. North Carolina is one of 45 states to adopt this set of standards.

The standards are designed to:

- be aligned with college and work expectations;
- be clear, understandable and consistent;
- include rigorous content and application of knowledge through higher-order thinking skills;
- build upon strengths and lessons of current state standards;
- be informed by other top-performing countries, so that all students are prepared to succeed in a global economy and society; and
- be evidence and research-based.

The Common Core and North Carolina Essential Standards are designed to define the knowledge and skills students should have throughout their K-12 education careers to help them graduate from high school fully prepared for college and careers.

Catawba Valley Community College Alexander Center for Education 2011

Accomplishments includes:

- 1st Paramedic Graduation in over 10 years
- 1st time to hold the BLET degree graduation in Alexander County (held in ACHS Auditorium)
- Selected "Large Business of the Year for 2011"
- Started a "FaceBook" presence for marketing purposes
- Provided additional lighting for the parking lot area (county paid)
- Provided a gravel parking lot for overflow parking (county paid)
- Upgraded computer software in all our classrooms and offices
- Added a new computer lab in one of our classrooms
- Installed Active/Smart Boards in three classrooms
- "First time offered" classes include: Summerscapes for elementary and middle aged students summer 2011, Digital Photography, Spanish for Healthcare Professionals, Flyfishing, Basic Law Enforcement Continuing Education classes, Paramedic 16 month degree
- Offered and continue to offer weekly "Starting Points" admissions sessions and COMPASS college placement testing as a weekly service to prevent students from driving to main campus to participate in the admissions process.
- Added a part time IT position to assist with the myriad of technology needs on our campus
- Partnered with the County IT to provide them with updated CVCC information to place on the government channel
- Offered scholarships through the CVCC Dream Believe Achieve Scholarship Program for students in need of financial assistance which included, for the first time, Continuing Education classes. To date, 13 students have received scholarships ranging from \$200 - \$600.00.

Alexander County Department of Social Service saw some concerning trends begin to unfold in 2011:

- 28% of children in DSS custody have been in our custody before
- 54% of children in DSS custody have at least one parent with a substance abuse problem
- MORE children in foster care and LESS foster homes to place them in.

Total number of families/children receiving Medicaid increased from 4761 to 4871 (110 more) AND total number of elderly and disabled adults receiving Medicaid increased from 6299 to 6484 (185 more).

Total number of persons receiving cash assistance through the Work First Program decreased from 70 to 67 (3 less), but the number of Work First/Child-ONLY cases went up from 46 to 51 (5 more).

Total number of children receiving daycare assistance decreased from 328 to 278 (50 less children served) because of funding, AND Alexander County was forced to create its

first-ever childcare waiting list (48 children waiting in July, 2010 up to 119 children waiting in June, 2011).

Total number of households receiving Food & Nutrition Services increased from 2329 on July 1, 2010 to 2753 on June 30, 2011 (424 more households and 951 more individuals receiving food assistance through our agency). A huge workload increase.

15 adoptions were completed – that means 15 children went to safe, permanent, FOREVER homes (with an average of 33 children in custody per month for the year in 2010/2011 . . . this means DSS moved almost HALF the total foster care caseload into permanence). THAT IS HUGE!!!

6 children came INTO custody during the year.

436 children were assisted by the DSS Angel Tree Program - supported by individuals, DSS employees, churches, and a number of local businesses in the community.

65 elderly and disabled adults received food boxes and new baskets were supplied for our home delivery routes through the Adult Christmas Project - supported by individuals, DSS employees, several local businesses, churches, and a girl scout group in the community.

- Percent of children living in poverty in Alexander County (25.7%) as compared to the state of North Carolina (24.6%) – we have a higher number of children living in poverty.
- Median Household income in Alexander is \$40,441 as compared to \$43,417 state average.
- 33.1 % of Alexander County children are food insecure (may be hungry) as compared to 27.3 % state average.
- 9.6% of our children are insured, as compared to 11.8% statewide average.
- Per 1000 girls ages 15-17, we have 18.4 pregnancies in Alexander County, as compared to 26.4 statewide in North Carolina.
- Per 1000 live births, Alexander County has 5.2 infant deaths, as compared to 7.0 statewide.
- We had NO confirmed child deaths due to abuse in 2011, as compared to 19 across the state.
- We confirm child maltreatment and facilitate mandatory services in 25.65 of our child protective services cases, as compared to 20% statewide in North Carolina.
- Turnover at the agency in 2010/2011 was 16%.
- Turnover in child welfare social workers continues to be a problem – lost 3 in 2010/2011 (pay increase, caseload, and opportunity for promotion were cited most frequently as reasons). That's 21%, and watch out for this percentage in 2011/2012 (much higher).

The Planning Department worked on several projects in 2011. A survey of the businesses in the county, that were located in residentially zoned areas, was completed with the help of an intern from ASU. This was an effort to determine the number of locally owned and operated businesses within the county. Unfortunately, we found many vacant buildings and businesses that had ceased to exist.

The Planning Department started the initial research into pursuing NCDENR grant monies available for the removal of abandoned manufactured homes. Preliminary surveys of the northern part of the county found close to 200 abandoned manufactured homes. This was done by visual survey, so those numbers have not been verified.

At the request of the commissioners, The Planning Department began researching minimum housing ordinances from other counties to determine an approach that was suitable for Alexander County.

Since January 2011 the Alexander County Emergency Services Office has responded to 33 fires for investigation purposes as assistance to our volunteer fire departments. Emergency Services have had a total of 22 Emergency Management responses. Incidents that include events such as a missing or lost person, tornado/storm damages, explosive devices and others.

Emergency Services office conducts a quarterly meeting of our Local Emergency Planning Committee which is made up of staff and volunteer community business partners. This group reviews incidents and plans to ensure our emergency service is truly addressing the needs of Alexander County residents.

Emergency Services office has utilized grant funds to conduct classes for volunteers and county staff required by State and Federal agencies, such as; incident management and Chief 101.

We have conducted or participated in no less than 3 exercises to strengthen and test our ability to respond and mitigate a variety of situations from Haz Mat to Winter Storms; i.e. Brushy Mountain Showdown (3 county Full Scale Exercise), Full Scale Haz Mat, Closed Point of Distribution and others.

Through the use of Homeland Security Grant monies we have been able to complete a County Wide Resource Typing Project, acquire equipment such as a Mass Casualty Incident Trailer and a Companion Animal Mobile Equipment Trailer.

Recycling numbers have continued to climb upward here in Alexander County. As a matter of fact Alexander County is now ranked #18, in the state, for its per capita recycling rate. We are now recycling 137 lbs per person per year. That is a long way from 2003 when we were ranked #76 and were recycling only 55lbs per person. This can partially be contributed to a lot of new and exciting recycling options that are now available. Citizens can now recycle electronics, fluorescent bulbs, waste cooking oil, and oil filters, along with many other items. The County is partnered with Cell Phones for

Soldiers, a charity that takes money made from recycling cells phones and buys calling cards for the men and women serving our country. The Alexander County School system continues to improve its recycling program. Last year the school system cut back by 742 dumpster pickups.

Now let's talk trash. Alexander County averaged exporting 1,790 tons of garbage per month in FY 2007, we are now averaging 1,420 tons per month. Some of this can be attributed to the economic downturn but the bottom line is, trash numbers are down and recycling numbers are up.

The Solid Waste Office continues to attack illegal dumping cleaning up almost 70 dumpsites or complaints in 2011.

No new debt has been incurred since the January 2011 loan for the project to construct a new jail/law enforcement center and renovate the existing courthouse. The County has applied for approximately \$3.2 million of loan funds from the NC Drinking Water State Revolving Fund for water system improvements. If approved by NCDENR and the Local Government Commission, the loan will be repaid over 20 years with an expected interest rate of 2.20%.

The school hold-harmless provision for sales tax revenue continues to result in Alexander County setting aside more money for the school system's share of Article 42 sales tax than the County actually receives from Article 42. The amount budgeted for the school hold-harmless in 2011-2012 is \$92,000.

Counties receive their share of local sales taxes each month and as of the March 2012 distribution, the County's portion of total sales tax revenue has increased almost 10% compared to the same time last year.

Some of the local sales taxes were not part of the State's action in 2009 to change the allocation method to local governments. Article 39 one-cent sales tax, Article 40 half-cent sales tax, and Article 46 quarter-cent sales tax are the three local sales taxes that still have the same allocation method. As of the March 2012 distribution, the County's portion of these three sales tax articles is up almost 8% in the last 10 months.

The fund balance of Alexander County's General Fund improved to 26.12% as of June 30, 2011, which is in line with the average fund balance for comparably sized counties. The Local Government Commission continues to recommend maintaining this level of fund balance to: 1) finance operations during periods of declining revenues, 2) address emergencies and unexpected expenditures, and 3) take advantage of financial opportunities, such as grants with local match requirements.

In closing, Alexander County continues to feel the economic pressure of the worst recession since the Great Depression. The challenges of the Alexander County budget will continue to be difficult, especially with our new Alexander County Law Enforcement / Detention Center and Rocky Face Mountain Park opening. We pledge to

do our best for the citizens of Alexander County. Thank you to my fellow commissioners and our county employees. May God bless you as we move ahead. Thank you!