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GOP Leader Downplays School Layoffs: Sen. Jerry Tillman said Tuesday the number of layoffs reaching public school classrooms this year will be much lower than what was reported to educators when classes started in August. The forecast by Tillman, R-Randolph and one of the legislature's key budget-writers, is the latest twist in a state budget that GOP leaders said contained enough funding for local school districts to preserve teacher and teaching assistant positions.

Democrats disagree, pointing to data from the NC Department of Public Instruction showing that 534 teachers and 1,260 teaching assistants were cut. Tillman said the figure of almost 1,800 cuts is inaccurate because districts hire people in the first few weeks of classes as they determine staffing needs. State employment figures for September, to be released later this month, should prove it, he said. "You will see that there are few if any teacher positions lost or teacher assistants," Tillman told reporters before a meeting of the Legislature's education oversight committee.

The senator's views don't square with what's happening in the school districts, said Brian Lewis, a lobbyist for the North Carolina Association of Educators. Although the Republican-written budget gives \$61.7 million to local school districts to hire another 1,124 teachers in grades 1-3, Lewis said the size of third-grade classes swell above the fiscal allotment to provide one teacher for every 18 students.

The budget required school districts to find an additional \$124 million in spending cuts this school year, as well as to cut funds for assistant principals, central office staff and clerical and janitorial workers. Tillman and other Republicans have said school district leaders had flexibility to preserve classroom positions if they want to do so.

State Property Sales Eyed to Bolster Public Schools Funding: House Speaker Thom Tillis suggested at a town hall meeting recently that the cash-strapped state should look at unneeded assets before raising taxes to reinstate school funding. The legislature voted this year to cut the state education budget by about 5.8 percent as part of an effort to close a multi-billion dollar budget gap. Speaking at a Union County school, Tillis, R-Mecklenburg, said he is looking for ways to put money back into the school budget that do not include raising taxes.

Tillis suggested selling Rex Hospital in Raleigh. "We own a hospital that is valued at somewhere over \$1.2 billion. We are looking at: should we continue be in that business, it's a very contentious issue."

The speaker also mentioned a potential sale of the North Carolina Railroad. "We are the only state in the country that owns a railroad," he said, noting its value at between \$200 million and 250 million. "If other states figured out how not to own a railroad, and do just fine, could we?" Still, the speaker's office said that Tillis' isn't taking a stand on whether to sell the UNC-owned Rex or the railroad, but just floating ideas.

It's Official – Almost: Republican Pat McCrory, a sure bet to run again for governor, eliminated any lingering doubts this week when he said he plans to announce after the first of the year. McCrory announced his announcement in a video posted on his website and sent to supporters. "Why the delay?" he said. "Well in the first place, campaigns have become too long and too costly...Elections are barely over before candidates are off and running again. Frankly the continuous political season wears on everybody, especially during these tough times."

In 2008, McCrory narrowly lost to Democrat Beverly Perdue. Since then, he is crisscrossing the state, meeting voters and raising money. Through the first half of the year, he raised \$1 million to Perdue's \$1.3 million. In the video, McCrory laid out a likely campaign theme. "One thing I've seen in every part of our state is the need for leadership in the governor's office," he said. "We have almost a half-million people unemployed ... (and) one of the poorest records for economic expansion ... in the nation. This is unacceptable."

What the Polls Say: McCrory continues to lead Perdue in a hypothetical rematch of their 2008 gubernatorial race, according to the latest poll conducted for the Civitas Institute. The poll, however, shows McCrory's lead to be in single digits. And he has less than 50 percent support of likely North Carolina voters surveyed. McCrory leads Purdue by 47 percent to 38 percent, according to M2M Politics.

At the same time, a new survey by Public Policy Polling says that Perdue is in good shape to turn away a Democratic primary challenger. Perdue would defeat Rep. Bill Faison by a 62-18 margin in a primary, the poll found. While Perdue trails likely McCrory significantly in a number of polls of North Carolina voters, most other Democrats whose names have been bandied about as potential Perdue alternatives do not fare any better.

How the Presidential Candidates Stack Up in NC: Herman Cain is at the front of the field of GOP presidential candidates in North Carolina, according to a new survey by Democratic firm Public Policy Polling. The poll of 400 likely Republican primary voters found Cain had the support of 27 percent, with Mitt Romney and Newt Gingrich each trailing behind him with the support of 17 percent. They were followed by Rick Perry with 15 percent, Ron Paul and Michele Bachmann with 6 percent and John Huntsman and Rick Santorum with 2 percent.

Politics Flare Over Loss to SC of Big Tire Plant: Finger-pointing over North Carolina's loss of a tire plant began Thursday among the state's top elected leaders hours before South Carolina's governor announced Continental Tire's plans to bring 1,600 jobs to her state. Senate leader Phil Berger, R-Rockingham, blamed Democratic Gov. Perdue for the loss, noting reports that the Brunswick County land proposed for the factory was owned by a Democratic legislator and political donors who had given more than \$52,000 to Perdue's campaigns.

Perdue contended that she had no involvement in picking the tract for the project and faulted Senate Republicans for not committing to an incentives package that would have included almost \$100 million in taxpayer money, tax breaks, infrastructure improvements and other enticements. Berger "is making reckless accusations in order to evade responsibility for his own decision, a decision that cost North Carolina 1,300 jobs," Perdue said in a statement.

House Speaker Tillis released a statement expressing disappointment that an opportunity to create jobs for the state's struggling economy was missed. "We made every effort to work in concert with the governor's office, but requests for critical information were often delayed or sometimes ignored," Tillis said.

Lawmaker Edgy: The bright glare of the spotlight that Sen. Jim Forrester has been getting these days is wearing on him. Following lawmakers agreeing last month to ask voters next May whether to ban state recognition of gay couples, Forrester said he is getting hostile phone calls, emails and letters that he never expected. "The homosexual people I know are pretty nice people, they are intelligent people, but I didn't expect this," said Forrester, R-Gaston and a key backer of the referendum.

Hatteras Access Update: State transportation officials say the Hatteras Island highway, ripped apart when Hurricane Irene cut channels across the barrier island, will be opened by next Tuesday. The NC Department of Transportation said the first layer of asphalt has been put down on state Highway 12 nearing the breach north of Rodanthe. Crews are also getting closer to finishing a temporary bridge over the largest portion of the breach.

Quotes of the Week: *"Procrastination is opportunity's assassin."*

- Victor Kiam, American business leader

"My dog Mo ... is getting curious about living in a much bigger house in Raleigh."

- Republican Pat McCrory, in a video announcing his plans to announce his bid for the GOP nomination for governor (The Charlotte Observer, 10/05/11)