

# ONE VOICE



Teamwork makes the dream work. That popular saying applies to sports and business. Industry groups and organizations bring together their members, uniting their voices to solve challenges and push forward agendas. *Business North Carolina* recently gathered a group of leaders and representatives of some of the state's most-prominent ones to discuss how their collective efforts help them and North Carolina as a whole, including navigating the recent election results, addressing workforce needs and supporting the ongoing Hurricane Helene response. The conversation was moderated by Publisher Ben Kinney. The transcript was edited for brevity and clarity.

## PANELISTS



**Albert Eckel**  
co-founder and partner  
Eckel and Vaughan



**Tina Gordon**  
CEO  
North Carolina Nurses Association



**Joshua Grant**  
director of public policy and government relations  
Smith Anderson



**Ardis Watkins**  
executive director  
State Employees Association of North Carolina



**Patrick Woodie**  
CEO and president  
NC Rural Center

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The discussion was sponsored by:

- Electricities of North Carolina
  - North Carolina Nurses Association
  - State Employees Association of North Carolina
  - NC Rural Center
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## WHAT'S ADVOCACY'S ROLE IN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT?

**GRANT:** Smith Anderson represents the North Carolina Economic Development Association. It has more than 950 members, the most it has ever had. About half are practitioners — senior developers, community members and tangential entities. NCEDA's advocacy initiative has increased during the past five years. Its legislative agenda is sorted into three buckets: product development, site development and workforce

readiness. We also work on North Carolina's competitive posture in relation to other states, and that includes taxes, infrastructure and more.

The state can play a larger role in economic development. That has become more apparent as other states, especially those in direct competition for projects, have invested large sums of money in infrastructure and workforce. One issue underlined by our legislative survey this year is childcare. We had a couple members mention it in the past, but it lacked consensus across our membership. We look forward to seeing proposals for feasible solutions.

Our members' biggest priority is state investment in infrastructure and sites. We have been encouraging the legislature to invest in product development. Get some sites ready. North Carolina has had tremendous economic development success, and those wins have depleted business-ready sites. Having them is

significant. Getting the legislature to identify and invest in sites has been significant. Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina did a megasite study, which identified seven sites. There are nearly 15 properties, all less than 1,000 acres, in the Selectsite Readiness Program.

**ECKEL:** I worked for Corning for 14 years, when fiber optics was going strong. We had to continually expand capacity. At the end of the day, incentives matter. But infrastructure and site readiness will make a deal. If I was told here's your site and you develop it, that would be big. That is such an important investment. It's the build it and they will come mentality.

**WOODIE:** We look at North Carolina through an economic development lens. That's our mindset. NC Rural's mission is to improve communities and the quality of life for the people who call them home. We have a broad network — local



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government, economic development, education, healthcare, nonprofits, faith community and regional institutions. We must address issues and challenges through regional frameworks and increase our ability to work through them.

North Carolina has had success with megasites. They put a lot of our rural workforce closer to more employment opportunities, including ones associated with supply chains that ripple from those successes. While some rural counties will never be proximate to a megasite, they still have economic development potential. Realizing it requires state support, developing sites and buildings that can lead to local investment and job creation.

We support megasite efforts and the diversification brought by Selectsites. One size does not fit all when it comes to economic development. State policy must reflect that and be poised to invest in small and isolated places. It's vital that they, too, can attract investment and jobs.

### HOW CAN A UNITED VOICE ADDRESS THE STATE'S WORKFORCE NEEDS?

**GRANT:** Workforce is vital to economic development success. The community college system has been a tremendous ally in that space. It's new funding model — Propel NC — is more efficient, responsive and flexible to future workforce demands. Our members strongly support it. They want to continue to explore apprenticeship opportunities and K-12 programs. It's important to work side by side.

**GORDON:** North Carolina Nurses Association represents and advocates for registered nurses in the state. They number more than 160,000, the largest healthcare workforce component by a wide margin. But even that isn't enough to meet healthcare needs.

Workforce is No. 1 in all our healthcare conversations. We must expand the pipeline for new registered nurses along with strengthening workplace safety and protection of our current workforce.

We're not going to produce our way out of the current nursing shortage — about 12,500 by 2033. So, we're pursuing a multifaceted approach.

Nursing has had many workforce shortages over the years. What makes this one unique is North Carolina's numbers look different compared to other parts of the country. Not every place is experiencing the shortage or facing the severity of projections that we are. It's important that we investigate why, not only from the healthcare workforce standpoint but also what it means to attracting and retaining businesses and families.

Last year's North Carolina Institute of Medicine report has many strong recommendations. The healthcare community's challenge is figuring out which is tackled first. We're digesting the nursing workforce recommendations. NCNA has opinions to offer, but it's a big conversation that requires attention in many different places. Workforce has become a conversation for every industry and profession, so we run the risk of becoming background noise when everyone is talking about it.

**WOODIE:** There are severe shortages of providers in almost any healthcare category that you want to discuss. We need more boots on the ground, and we need to get the most from every pair. One way to do that is modernizing and expanding the scope of advanced practice nurses, who are trained to take on more responsibility but restricted or prohibited from doing so by state regulations. We strongly support that move for North Carolina. More than half of the states have traveled that road, and none have turned back.

**WATKINS:** State government's job vacancy rate has hovered between 23% and 25% since the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been more than 60% at some prisons. That is astounding. State government touches almost every industry, so it needs to be able to respond to the needs of residents and businesses. Hurricane Helene drove

that point home. While every workforce is important, state government workers have it a bit different when disaster strikes. They're the ones asked to save lives then rebuild them.

State employees are doing a yeoman's job responding to Hurricane Helene. It was a huge disaster and different than any that the state has dealt with previously. It wasn't just a hurricane. There were so many other things to deal with. State government workers were asked to do unpleasant things well beyond their job descriptions. We'll see the mental health effects from that for a long time.

Mental health needs to be a priority across North Carolina, because at the end of the day, it affects workforce, too. You can't build a house with a broken arm, but you can't do anything if your mind is broken. Mental health has to be a bigger priority.

### WHAT ISSUES WILL YOU FOCUS ON THIS YEAR?

**WOODIE:** We administer the State Small Business Credit Initiative, which is a federal program funded by the U.S. Treasury. We've built a real capital base. We operate several programs in partnership with banks, credit unions, community development finance institutions and fund managers on the equity side. They reach small business owners regardless of where they are in the business lifecycle. They support capital access for those small businesses, filling in some of the identified gaps. It was designed to be evergreen. It has given us opportunity as time has gone on.

We have a working group within our board of directors that's investigating some new lines of small business financing, perhaps even housing or project financing. It's a reflection of what we hear in our advocacy efforts and will allow us to address other gaps in capital-access markets and make a greater impact on the communities that we serve.

As a state-level organization that's focused on rural regions, we're unique on the national level. We're a private nonprofit. There are other nonprofits, but they're based in state government or at a university, often the state's land grant institution. We have greater flexibility in how we do things, the experiments we try and programs we implement. We offer a host of different standing programs, all relevant to rural residents and leaders. We increasingly are looking at exporting that work to others that are focused on rural regions, enabling them to take what we have learned, along with some of our approaches, and implement their own versions, whether at the state or regional level.

Our faith work has led us to partner with rural churches, offering programs that help their congregations tackle local economic and community development issues. Bringing a congregation to bear on some of these community issues, then exporting that approach nationally, is a new experiment for us. We're looking forward to seeing where it takes us.

**WATKINS:** State Employees Association of North Carolina represents active and retired state employees from every agency, university and community college. We're in public schools, too.

Our work extends to residents who aren't a state employee or related to one. The state's economic engine depends on its infrastructure, and state employees are that infrastructure.

There are many issues that concern us. Healthcare has consumed much of our group's time, because its cost to the economy is out of control.

**ECKEL:** We all have issues that we must address, either killing them or making them happen. But the really effective organizations are always advocating, and that has different meanings. It's not only advocating for a piece of policy. It's advocating for local change. Sometimes that's change to soften the ground for something else. So, many people are moving into action. People are ready to tell their story. This will be an interesting

and fun year for people who engage in policy, public affairs and similar types of work.

**WHAT ARE YOUR POLICY GOALS FOR THE UPCOMING LEGISLATIVE SESSION? WHAT ARE YOUR CONCERNS?**

**WATKINS:** The state's current fiscal situation is my biggest worry. About half a billion dollars were approved for Opportunity Scholarships just prior to Hurricane Helene's arrival. Hurricane recovery's price tag is inching toward \$60 billion. Revenue from 27 western counties is pretty much decimated for the second quarter of the state's fiscal year, and it probably won't be any better in the third quarter. There are discussions at the federal level about pushing costs down to state and local governments. That's a big question. And Medicaid expansion, which was passed in 2023, is overlaying all of it.

No one could have foreseen this series of events happening in step with big



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policy changes. I've never seen anything like it. It's a perfect storm. It will force us all to focus. Everyone will have to show why whatever they're advocating for is a priority in what will be a limited pot of money.

**WOODIE:** We're gearing up for a new legislative session and new elected leadership on the state and federal levels. This past fall was dedicated to engaging as much of our rural network as possible, determining our priorities.

We held 15 listening sessions across the state. Every rural resident was no more than a 45-minute drive from one. We heard a lot. Our rural poll had its largest response. It's an informal process that lets us gauge the thoughts of people on the ground and the leaders that we work with in our network. We also heard a lot of consistency.

There were seven issues of greatest concern; more than 50% of respondents listed them. None were a surprise. But

what was surprising is that there's seven. That's more than we've seen in recent polls. But they make a lot of sense.

Affordable housing was named by 72% of respondents. Access to affordable childcare, which we see as a workforce-development challenge, public education funding, opioid drug abuse, availability of qualified workforce, high cost of doing business and effective local leadership were also listed. Our policy agenda will reflect those concerns. That's a lot to keep up with.

Our state doesn't face many small challenges; everything is high magnitude. That was true before Hurricane Helene and remains that way today. It isn't an exaggeration to say we never have seen a storm bring the same devastating impact, and we've had some bad ones in eastern North Carolina.

I recently met with the North Carolina and South Carolina transportation secretaries. South Carolina expects

repairs to Helene-damaged roads and bridges will cost \$50 million. North Carolina's estimate for similar work is \$5 billion. This is a problem. How are we going to prioritize things?

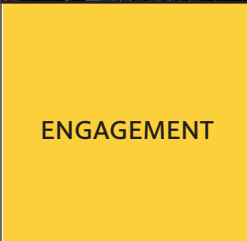
North Carolina has a well-defined system of emergency management and disaster recovery. It's a process, and it's expanding. It's bureaucratic. It doesn't always work well, including for those it's intended to help. That's concerning.

We want to think that we can build back smarter, in a way that's more resilient, so that next storm doesn't have the same effects as Helene. That's incredibly challenging, even without considering the other issues on the table that can't be ignored. Each of our seven areas of greatest concern, for example, could potentially carry a big price tag. We must decide how to fund everything on the table.

## BUILDING VIBRANT COMMUNITIES



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**GRANT:** North Carolina would benefit from greater certainty from Congress in regards to its commitment to hurricane recovery. Will that push a budget timeline out further? State legislative leadership has said only Congress can pick up a tab this big. Having healthy reserves was significant. Sen. Phil Berger said we had a very rainy day.

But that's not to say we won't be hit with a hurricane or some other catastrophe again in the near future. If we had this conversation in isolation, then people could feel good about every one of the initiatives mentioned. I'm not envious of those who must weigh each against the others to decide their worth. That's a difficult position.

**GORDON:** State funding would help some of our workforce priorities. But we have other requests that wouldn't cost the legislature a dime. Some would save the state money. Better use of advanced practice nurses, for example, continues to increase in importance, both in

regards to the state's ongoing healthcare needs and those exacerbated by Helene. We believe legislators should remove regulatory barriers for these advanced practice nurses, so they can do what they've been trained to do. Doing that will increase healthcare access statewide but especially in rural communities. It also will cut costs, returning money to the state coffers from state health plan savings for Medicaid. It's a simple money-saving move that about half the country has already undertaken. It's already underway in western North Carolina, where emergency waivers were enacted. Let's make those permanent and move forward.

**ECKEL:** Everybody basically sat on their hands from July through November, wondering what to do. But they weren't doing nothing. They were gaming out different scenarios. Now we have certainty at the state and federal levels. People are moving into action. They want to mobilize themselves and begin to

understand how they can make an impact. How do they hit their target? Many times they're looking for us to develop that plan and the needed content.

We're at a big moment. A lot of leadership will be needed from our local, state and federal officials to address hurricane recovery in western North Carolina, population changes statewide and other issues. I'm a positive person, so it's a moment of opportunity to continue to define who we are as North Carolina. We do things well, and that's what I'm excited about. ■



## Thankful for Our Nurses

From Manteo to Murphy, North Carolina's nurses are providing quality healthcare 24/7. Nurses practicing to the full extent of their training increase access and reduce costs. Business NC readers rely on a healthy workforce, and we are dedicated to ensuring that workforce receives the care it needs.

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