



## Legislative Update

#0018 for July 2, 2007

What do Yellowstone National Park and the North Carolina General Assembly have in common? I've been to the General Assembly more times than I can count, and when I made my first visit to Yellowstone last month, the similarities between the two environments startled me.

**BOTH HAVE GEOTHERMAL FEATURES:** Yellowstone has spouting geysers like Old Faithful, steaming fumaroles that emit noxious gases, and bubbling cauldrons of volcanic muck. The NCGA has its own hot spots. Some of them are elected officials who do a pretty good job of venting their own hot gases and slinging mud. (I won't name names. That would be rude.) Then there are hot issues. For example, the House & Senate conferees are at odds over whether or not to rescind a one-quarter per cent sales tax and a one-quarter per cent surcharge on high income earners. The House wants to keep the taxes going; the Senate wants to end them. About \$300 million dollars are at stake, and the issue has stalled budget negotiations and forced both chambers to enact continuing resolutions to keep state government running while the solons sort things out. The same is true for the dispute over how to provide Medicaid relief for the counties. Fortunately, they are debating *how to* provide Medicaid relief rather than *whether to*, and there are signs that the rival chambers may reach a compromise acceptable to the N.C. Association of County Commissioners (and to us). The fuss is over when and how to start and how much of which state/county revenues will be swapped to make it happen.

**BOTH ARE GOING TO BLOW.** The geology types assure us that the volcanic Yellowstone area blew up about 640,000 years ago, and they say that pressures are building that will inevitably blow it up again – but no one knows when. As for the General Assembly, the pressure on the House-Senate conferees is building too, and at some point it will blow up the obstacles between them, force an agreement and set the solons on the short road to adjournment.

**BOTH ARE INHABITED BY 500-LB BEARS.** Yellowstone National Park boasts one of the largest concentrations of grizzlies and black bears in the lower forty-eight states. The General Assembly has its own stock of dominant mammals. Two of these – one from the Fayetteville area and another from the Charlotte area – have put forward rival formulas for Medicaid relief to counties. These two may do what bears don't do, which is compromise, but don't count on it. My money is on the man from Fayetteville, but the Charlotte guy has a banking background and is a formidable adversary on any fiscal issue.

**BOTH SUPPORT LARGE HERDS OF GRAZING BOVINES.** A buffalo is a cross between a cow, a Volkswagen and a throw rug. There are more bison in Yellowstone than you'll see in *Dances With Wolves*, and these critters aren't the least bit afraid of Kevin Costner or anything else. The massive beasts wander fearlessly near geysers, fumaroles, ponds of boiling mud and tourists from Michigan. The General Assembly has no bison, but it has lobbyists. I don't know what they are a cross of, but some of them are quite large, while others are as diminutive as calves. It is debatable

whether lobbyists are fearless or just dumb, but they wander into dangerous places, graze as best they can, and sometimes they change the landscape – if only with their droppings.

**BOTH FEATURE INSTANCES OF DISAPPOINTMENT AND TRIUMPH.** In Yellowstone you'll see bluebells blossom amid the rubble of fallen mountains and alpine heather thriving on wind-blasted ridges too barren to hide a rabbit. As an association, our recent experience at the N.C. General Assembly also shows mixed results – though I would argue that the glass is more than half full. We're not going to get any *new* money this session for the Child Welfare Education Program or for the administrative costs of providing guardianship for incapacitated adults. On the plus side, we defeated SB 821, SB 824, SB 1077 and, most important, SB 1538 – the county boards authority bill – and we're all but certain to win more funds for child daycare slots, expanded Medicaid coverage for foster kids up to age 20, a House study committee on the crisis in DSS services, some version of county Medicaid relief, and more. . . .

**CONCLUSION.** The fire tower on Yellowstone's Mt. Washburn sits at an elevation of 10,243 feet – far higher than Mount Mitchell – and it affords a spectacular view of most of the park. The N.C. General Assembly has no such perch, but sometimes, when I'm sitting in the galleries overlooking the House or Senate chambers, I can see new vistas of opportunity for DSS directors and those they serve.

It's no mirage. We can get there. We just have to plan our hikes carefully and hit the trail together. When we do that, no one can stop us.

**THE UNVARNISHED TRUTH.** A little boy gets lost in a shopping mall and, being a smart lad, he hurries up to the first uniformed policeman he sees.

The boy says, "I'm lost! I can't find my dad!"

The policeman asks, "What's he like?"

The boy replies, "Women, beer and NASCAR."



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