

NCACC Youth Summit Report—Ruth H. Vorder Bruegge, Cumberland County

I have been doing field biology and ecology work at UNC-Charlotte this summer as well as lifeguarding at Fantasy Lake in Hope Mills, Cumberland County. Therefore, my interview with one of the commissioners, Cumberland County Commission, will be after 15 July.

During breakfast every morning when I am home, I read *The Fayetteville Observer*. By reading the local paper, I am able to learn about many issues that our county faces. I shall be asking the following questions during our interview:

--What are the best things going for our county?

- **Military** – We are home to Fort Bragg, the largest US Army post by population. The post and Pope Army Air Field are large contributors to the local economy with wages and salaries to civilian and military personnel and commercial contracts awarded to local businesses.
- **Retail and commercial center**- this is the primary retail market for a 15-county area.
- **Health care industry** – Our medical facilities provide services to citizens across the region.
- **Education**: award-winning public school system, two universities, community college.
- **Fiscally responsible** – the county has been fiscally responsible, keeping the tax rate steady and maintaining a AA+ bond rating from Standard and Poor's

--What county issues are most important to the Board?

- Our mission is to provide quality services to our citizens while being fiscally responsible. We have to provide mandated services as set out in the General Statutes and additional services as passed on to the county by state and federal governments.
- Our vision is to grow as a regional destination for employment, economic development, commerce and cultural pursuits.
- **FIVE GOALS SET OUT IN STRAGETIC PLAN**
 - Ensuring a safe and healthy community
 - Public safety
 - Health and well being
 - Infrastructure
 - Economic Development – bringing in industry and jobs

- Citizen Engagement/Communication - educating, engaging and informing citizens, employees and elected and appointed officials
- Employees who embody our core values - PRIDE
 - Professionalism
 - Respect
 - Integrity with accountability
 - Diversity
 - Excellent Customer Service

--What are the biggest issues for Cumberland County citizens?

- Unemployment/Economic development
- Crime – property crimes

--What are the hardest decisions you have faced as a commissioner?

- Funding decisions
- Zoning requests

--Why did you decide to become a commissioner?

After serving as a Fayetteville City Councilman from 2001-2005, I decided to run for county commissioner in 2008 and have so far been elected twice. I believe that it each of our responsibility to be involved in our community. After serving on city, county and state boards, I chose to run for public office.

--What are the biggest limitations in your budget?

The biggest limitation in our budget is the simple economic principle of limited tax revenues to fund all the services we offer, including state-mandated services required by the North Carolina General Assembly, such as money for public schools and human services. Added to these services are the personnel costs associated with a staff of county employees who carry out these important duties.

Just to name a few of our services:

- Department of Social Services
- Department of Public Health
- Sheriff's Office
- Emergency Services
- Planning and Inspections
- Animal Control

--What can be done about our Fayetteville property crime rate, which is reported to be the 5th highest in the country?

The Cumberland County Sheriff's Office is dedicated to the protection of lives and property through a professional, qualified force of sheriff's deputies who work hard and use their world-class training to provide law enforcement.

But the Sheriff can't do it alone. He needs the help of our citizens, who can take simple measures to reduce crime, such as ensuring that property is secured. You can also help the sheriff by reporting illegal activity and keeping a close eye on not only your property, but your neighbor's property as well.

--How can we address and solve our county's problem with opiate dependence?

We can address the issue and work to improve it, but solving a behavioral issue like substance abuse is dependent on an individual's personal actions, not those of a governmental agency.

Ways the county can address the drug problem:

- Enforcement of laws
- Continue to support Drug Court programs that divert offenders from jail and to treatment programs
- Fund mental health programs targeting substance abuse
- Educating the public on the dangers and the signs to look for in others who may be addicted

--How can we address our county's problem with veteran PTSD and suicide?

The military and Department of Veterans Affairs are working to address these issues among our services members and veterans. But, we realize we have to work on the local level and partner with state, federal and mental health agencies to deal with these issues.

- We are seeking grant funding for a veterans court that will divert veterans with mental health issues who enter the court system to a treatment program rather than jail.
- The county funds a Veterans Services Office to help veterans and their dependents obtain the benefits to which they are entitled. The Veterans Services Officers assist veterans in applying for benefits and referring them to other area resources for services.
- Cape Fear Valley Health System is actively recruiting psychologists and psychiatrists to work for the Community Mental Health Center at Cape Fear Valley.

- Cape Fear Valley is also expanding the Roxie Center to include a Crisis Intervention Assessment Center.
- Doug Webster, Service Line Director of Psychiatric Services at Cape Fear Valley Behavioral Healthcare, has announced plans to bring in suicide prevention experts to conduct training in the community.

--How can we address our county's poverty and hunger problems?

- More jobs. Work to improve the unemployment rate.
- Ensure those experiencing poverty and hunger are aware of services available to help them. Examples include:
 - Cumberland County Community Development which offers First-time Homebuyers Assistance, Home Repair Assistance, Transitional Housing for the Homeless, etc.
 - Public Health Department offers WIC program (Women, Infants and Children)
 - The Department of Social Services offers:
 - Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly known as food stamps)
 - Energy Assistance Program
 - Medicaid
 - Work First Family Assistance Program

-- How do we improve our county as a visitor destination? Presently, our biggest draws seem to be the Airborne Museum, the Cape Fear Botanical Garden, the Cape Fear River Trail, and Fourth Friday events and Festival Park.

The Fayetteville Area Convention & Visitors Bureau receives funding from the hotel occupancy tax and is charged with marketing our community to visitors. The bureau works to promote the county's attractions, several of which you mentioned.

The Tourism and Development Authority also receives part of the occupancy tax and offers grant funding to agencies to assist them in marketing their events to areas outside the county.

Upcoming changes at the Crown Center are expected to bring in additional shows and events to attract visitors. The coliseum board is on the verge of converting the complex to private management.

--How can we attract business to the county so that it is not so dependent on Fort Bragg for economic survival?

As a business owner, I know what it takes to attract and retain those good businesses that bring good jobs. Cumberland County is already home to major employers that provide thousands of jobs and tax revenue that helps us deliver our services.

We can attract business by utilizing the infrastructure we already have, such as Interstate 95. We can make sure to provide top-quality public utilities and work to keep our tax rate low by good budget management and sound fiscal policy.

--How can we encourage more high school students to either pursue technical education at FTCC or going to college?

We created a Career and Technical Education Task Force last year with representatives from FTCC, Cumberland County Schools, the Fayetteville Regional Chamber of Commerce and Cumberland County Government. The group identified strategies to reach students and their parents in order to market the benefits of technical education in today's job market. For example, today's high-tech manufacturing jobs require a highly trained workforce. These are not the "factory" jobs of generations past.

FTCC partners with the Cumberland County Schools with the Career and Technical Education Pathways, or CTE program, which provides high school students with the opportunity to earn a certificate in a particular career or technical field.

--What do you think will be the biggest changes to Cumberland County over the next fifty years?

- Population. I expect we will continue to grow as we attract more industry and businesses.
- This will have an impact on our rural areas as the population spreads.
- Demographics. We have a relatively diverse population with many different cultures represented here because of our military-connected population. I expect we will follow the national trends and see growth in our Hispanic population.
- I think we will see our vision come true and we will grow as a regional destination for employment, economic development, commerce and cultural pursuits.