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## Initiatives to boost N.C. as 'the entrepreneurial state'

RALEIGH – Entrepreneurship gained greater recognition as an engine of the North Carolina economy Tuesday during a statewide conference in Raleigh. Leaders of the General Assembly, the state's top educators, the N.C. Bar Association and economic development agencies announced measures to encourage business startup and growth.

"The leadership coming together here today shows that we are united in a commitment to making North Carolina the entrepreneurial state," said Billy Ray Hall, president of the N.C. Rural Economic Development Center. "Entrepreneurs and small business people have always been a critical part of this state's economy, but they haven't always gotten the attention or the support they deserve. That changes today."

The announcements came as part of the 2007 Entrepreneurship Summit, organized by the Rural Center, the N.C. Business Resource Alliance and the N.C. Entrepreneurial Association. About 600 people – including entrepreneurs, policymakers and business service providers – attended the event.

Economic development strategies focusing on entrepreneurship are attracting favor as widespread factory layoffs and escalating incentive packages point to the need for more comprehensive strategies. An array of statistics shows the potential for "homegrown" growth. The N.C. Secretary of State's Office, for example, reports that 5,000 new private businesses are incorporated in North Carolina every month. In addition, North Carolina's small businesses – those employing fewer than 50 people – account for \$11.6 billion in annual wages and 95 percent of North Carolina employee-based businesses. More than half a million other North Carolinians are self-employed, and their numbers are increasing. A Rural Center report last year also showed that North Carolina has a high proportion of fast-growing small businesses.

"Entrepreneurs hold the key to creating jobs, building wealth and improving lives," Hall said. "As a state, we need to be about the business of creating new entrepreneurs every day and giving them the tools they need to succeed."

A dozen individual initiatives in support of entrepreneurship were unveiled Tuesday. Among them:

- N.C. Senate leader Marc Basnight and House Speaker Joe Hackney have appointed standing committees on commerce, small business and entrepreneurship in their respective chambers. The committees, previously designated only as commerce, put entrepreneurship and small business on a par with other aspects of commerce and economic development in matters before the General Assembly. Sen. R.C. Soles Jr. and Rep. Margaret Highsmith Dickson chair the panels.
- The state's leading educational institutions committed to working together in the newly organized N.C. Consortium for Entrepreneurship Education. The consortium will develop and implement a curriculum that incorporates entrepreneurial skills beginning in kindergarten and continuing through adult education programs. On stage together making the announcement were UNC system President Erskine Bowles, Superintendent of Public Instruction June Atkinson, Hope Williams, president of N.C. Independent Colleges and Universities, and community college system Vice President Larry Keen.
- The Rural Venture Fund represents a new source of capital for businesses in economically distressed counties in North Carolina. The fund will offer a range of financial options, including equity financing and secondary loans, with less stringent terms than those available from traditional sources. The Rural Economic Development Center is creating the fund with a \$3 million investment pool. Patrick Woodie, the center's vice president of business development and natural resources, said the goal is to build the fund to \$7.5 million. Valeria Lee, president of the Golden LEAF Foundation, announced the foundation's participation in initial funding of the program.

- The N.C. Bar Association Foundation will provide free, business-related legal services for low-wealth entrepreneurs through the N.C. Lawyers for Entrepreneurs Assistance Program. Business attorneys and those specializing in related fields are being recruited for the pro bono projects.
- The e-NC Authority is developing manuals and training programs on the Internet as business tools. The manuals will be available free from the authority's website, and training workshops will be offered at sites across the state. The authority is a state-funded agency that encourages use of the Internet and access to affordable broadband service statewide.
- The state commerce department, through its Division of Community Assistance, will offer grants to communities seeking to create development strategies based on entrepreneurship.
- Four individual UNC campuses announced new programs to encourage business formation or growth. They ranged from technical assistance programs at N.C. State and East Carolina universities to educational initiatives at Appalachian State and Western Carolina.
- AdvantageWest, the regional development agency for 23 western counties, will develop a program to provide certification for communities that embrace entrepreneurship as their economic strategy.

Lt. Gov. Beverly Perdue called attention to the N.C. Military Foundation, which her office created in December. Made up of retired military leaders and business people, it is intended to help North Carolina businesses capture a larger share of the nation's defense spending. She also announced plans for a new state fund to invest \$15 million in environmentally friendly businesses.

In addition to providing a platform for announcements of new programs, the summit unveiled an ongoing agenda for improving the entrepreneurial climate in North Carolina. The agenda culminated a yearlong planning process involving 50 agencies and organizations involved in business services and education. It calls for future action on items such as reform of the state tax code to encourage business investment, increased funding for the Small Business Center Network and other service providers, and creation of an independent entrepreneurial policy think tank with a governing board made up of entrepreneurs.

Some of those entrepreneurs took part in the closing panel of the summit in which they responded to initiatives outlined during the day. Panelists included Donna Lowry of Caring Touch Home Health Care in Pembroke, Jim Luther of Landmark Industries in Asheboro, Chris Jones of Moulding Solutions in Chiquapin, Sheila Ogle of Integrated Clinical Trial Services in Cary, Ryan Allis of Broadwick Corp. in Durham, Jose Isasi of Que Pasa Media in Greensboro and Lenna Hobson of RagApple Lassie Vineyard in Boonville.

Earlier in the day, 4<sup>th</sup> District Congressman David Price received an award recognizing his contributions to entrepreneurship education. It was presented by the National Consortium for Entrepreneurship Education.

Jim Blasingame, host of the nationally syndicated radio talk show "The Small Business Advocate," spoke on "Why this is the century of the entrepreneur."

The N.C. Rural Economic Development Center is a private, nonprofit organization whose mission is to develop sound economic strategies that improve the quality of life in rural North Carolina, with a special focus on individuals with low to moderate incomes and communities with limited resources. The center's Institute for Rural Entrepreneurship works with numerous partners to stimulate and support the development of micro, small and medium sized enterprises in North Carolina's 85 rural counties.

The N.C. Business Resource Alliance is an organization of more than 50 business service providers statewide. The organizations are committed to creating a comprehensive, integrated network of services that may be accessed easily in every area of the state.

The N.C. Entrepreneurial Association is a statewide trade association representing North Carolina's innovation-based start-up companies. The association was formed in 2004 and has advocated for a variety of policy changes aimed at supporting North Carolina's innovation economy.