

Economic Commissions seeking one-year reprieve

By Reggie Ponder
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EDENTON — The head of the Northeast Commission said his agency and other regional economic development partnerships in the state are asking legislators to keep the partnerships in place while details of a new system are ironed out.

Vann Rogerson, president and chief executive officer of the Northeast Commission, said the commission also hopes state officials will recognize the role that the partnership can continue to play in the new “prosperity zone” system.

Commerce Secretary Sharon Decker has proposed a system of eight regional groupings, known as prosperity zones, as part of an overhaul of the department’s economic development work under a public-private initiative called Partnership for Prosperity. The prosperity zones would replace the existing regional economic development partnerships that are eliminated by a bill introduced in the state Senate.

“I think it’s pretty obvious that the state leadership is dissatisfied with the current economic delivery system,” Rogerson said.

But Rogerson said the partnerships are working with lawmakers in the state House on a proposal to maintain the partnerships at least one more year to allow time for the new prosperity zones system to come together.

“We partnerships believe that if there is going to be a change, the Legislature needs to have a transition period to have the partnerships continue to operate so the state can continue to be competitive.”

Details of the new system are still being worked out and it’s not clear what the future of the partnerships will be, Rogerson said.

“We don’t really know yet what is envisioned out in the regions,” Rogerson said. “If there’s a better way of doing it we’re all for that. We want our region to be successful.”

Northeastern North Carolina is one of the more challenged regions in the state, Rogerson said.

“Each region has a unique regional economy,” he said. “We believe the partnerships can assist the regions in being as successful as possible.”

Rogerson said half the counties in the northeast do not have full-time economic developers. The Northeast Commission does a lot with tourism partners and also works with local Chambers of Commerce on business issues.

“There is a broad spectrum of things that we try to assist with,” Rogerson said. “When they develop these prosperity zones, we want to continue to be an integral part.”

Asked about the emphasis that state Rep. Bob Steinburg, R-Chowan, has placed on the planned foreign trade zone for northeastern North Carolina, Rogerson said the FTZ could be one more tool to boost economic development in the region.

"There are a number of things that can help you to be more competitive," Rogerson said. "The foreign trade zone is just another one of those things that can make our region more attractive. It's one more thing in our arsenal."

The Port of Virginia is an important economic partner for northeastern North Carolina, and the FTZ will enable the region to be a better partner for the port, Rogerson said.