

McCrory: Growth in northeast tied to Va.

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Monday, May 20, 2013

A key to economic growth in northeastern North Carolina will be capitalizing on its proximity to the Hampton Roads, Va. area, Gov. Pat McCrory said Monday during a two-hour stop in Elizabeth City.

During his first visit to Elizabeth City since taking office in January, McCrory said that recognizing the region's connection with Virginia is a first step toward a better local economy.

He told a group of invited community leaders at Cypress Grill Monday, that while a North Carolina governor's support of a partnership with Virginia may shock some people, the idea makes sense given the area's geography. The former Charlotte mayor related it to the success Rock Hill, S.C., had in capitalizing on growth in Charlotte.

"We believe the best economic strategy is for Elizabeth City and this region to have a connection between here and Norfolk, Va.," McCrory said in a 15-minute talk and a short question-answer session afterward.

He offered no specifics about how the region will accomplish the connection, but said an overhaul of the state's commerce department and funding formula for transportation projects will be a start.

During the question-answer session, local Republican activist Holly Koerber asked McCrory what makes northeastern North Carolina valuable to the rest of the state. An urban-leaning General Assembly and the governor's long-time association with metropolitan areas, have caused people to question if northeastern North Carolina might be forgotten, she said.

"During the campaign, it was a tough sell to convince people that the former mayor of Charlotte had any interest in the rural part of the state," said Koerber.

McCrory responded that the economic health of the state is affected by the region's lack of growth.

"One reason the budget is in bad shape is we don't have (tax revenue) coming in from northeastern North Carolina, and that is how we pay for teachers and roads and police and everything else. We have to rebuild the economy here, not just for revenue's sake, but for jobs," he said.

McCrory said part of his plan for lowering unemployment, now third highest in the nation, will include working with lawmakers on tax reform. To encourage business growth, the state needs to lower corporate taxes so that North Carolina can better compete with Tennessee, Virginia and South Carolina, he said.

A trade-off being proposed by state lawmakers would raise sales taxes to compensate for lower corporate and income taxes. When asked about how the changes might affect low-income families, McCrory said, "If we don't have jobs, no one will benefit."

During the question-answer session, McCrory voiced general support for wind energy and the Mid-Currituck Bridge, but stopped short of offering specifics. Before the session, some local officials said they hoped McCrory would talk about a proposed wind farm in Hales Lake, in Camden County, after new legislation threatens to delay, if not halt, the project's construction.

When asked about that project, McCrory shifted to talk about offshore wind projects and the prospect of off-shore drilling. McCrory said he's talked with three oil companies interested in off-shore exploration along the North Carolina coast, and has asked President Barack Obama to lift the federal moratorium on off-shore drilling to open up the possibility.

After the visit, local officials said McCrory's visit was the start of getting him acquainted with northeastern North Carolina.

"He knows we're here," said Mayor Joe Peel, adding that he's hopeful the visit will be the start of an ongoing dialogue with the governor.

Kelly Thorsby, president of the Elizabeth City Area Chamber of Commerce, who helped coordinate the event, said McCrory's support of a partnership between northeastern North Carolina and Virginia was an essential step in future economic development. She also liked "that (McCrory) took time out of his schedule to let us know we are on the map."

McCrory said he intends to return to the region.

"I will be back," he said before making a quick tour of two downtown shops. His visit to Shay Leslie Boutique and Selig's jewelry, was part of his statewide "main street walking tours" designed to spotlight the importance of small businesses.

At Shay Leslie Boutique, the governor quickly scanned the assortment of merchandise before greeting the sales staff.

"I'll have to keep my wife out of here. She could spend some money in here," said McCrory.

At Selig's, McCrory asked about the history of the downtown shop that's been in business since 1882. Allison Cianciulli offered McCrory an insulated cup with "Elizabeth City" on it as a memento of his visit. Cianciulli meant it as a gift, but McCrory quickly offered to pay for it, which he did.

The governor was scheduled to make two other stops in northeastern North Carolina on Monday.