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(Editors: This is the first in a new series of op-ed pieces from the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research. The Center is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to informing the public and making state government more effective and accountable. This editorial is based on research to be published in a forthcoming issue of North Carolina Insight, the Center's journal. For more information, contact Insight's associate editor, Tom Mather, at (919) 832-2839.)

Environmental Index a Worthy Expense

By Tom Mather

Tucked away in a state appropriations bill is \$50,000 for a program that could save money and help protect the environment. The funds -- if approved by the joint House-Senate committee that is now hashing out a final state budget -- would enable the state to finish its long-awaited environmental indicators report.

Two years ago, North Carolina appeared well on its way to becoming the first state to devise a so-called Environmental Index. Now, the proposal lies in a bureaucratic limbo. Although still alive on paper, the project is foundering for lack of money, staffing, and administrative leadership. Meanwhile, at least three other states have completed comparable environmental index reports -- dropping North Carolina from front-runner status to one of a pack of states considering such reports.

The index was first proposed by the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research in 1988. It would consist of a series of indicators for gauging environmental quality -- similar to the leading indicators used to track the health of the economy.

If you're old enough to cash a paycheck, chances are you can understand the basic economic indicators that are published regularly -- the inflation rate, the unemployment rate, and interest rates. But the state hasn't published regular indicators on whether North Carolina's environment is getting better or worse in terms of air quality, water quality, use of land resources, or how we handle hazardous wastes.

The concept has won broad support from scientists, environmentalists, and business leaders because a well-designed index could help settle disputes over environmental problems. It

also could help lawmakers identify the most serious pollution problems and spend money where it is needed the most.

Such reasoning led former Governor James G. Martin to endorse the concept in his 1989 Inaugural Address. Martin later appointed a blue-ribbon panel on environmental indicators, which released its recommendations in December 1990. Yet, after more than four years of study, the state still hasn't published its first environmental index and has no firm schedule for doing so, according to a new study in the forthcoming issue of *North Carolina Insight*, the Center's quarterly journal.

The state Department of Environment, Health, and Natural Resources has plenty of reasons to explain its lack of progress in completing the index report. The state's recent budget shortfalls undoubtedly contributed to the delay, as well as the complexity of the subject. But similar problems haven't stopped other states from making the modest financial commitments needed to complete environmental index reports during the time that North Carolina officials have been talking about the concept. Now it's time to produce.

The \$50,000 appropriation, proposed in a bill by Rep. Karen Gottovi (D-New Hanover), would get the index back on track. Although approved by the state House, the Senate's budget bill doesn't include money for the project. The two chambers are now negotiating a final budget, and we urge citizens to write their legislators in support of funding for an Environmental Index.

The funds would enable the department to hire and equip the full-time researcher that is needed to produce the report. The money would be a mere drop-in-the-bucket compared to the department's total expenses, amounting to less than .02 percent of its \$488 million budget proposed for the 1993-94 fiscal year.

It also would be money well spent. That's because the index could identify spending priorities and provide objective numbers for measuring the success of programs for curbing pollution and managing natural resources. Plus, the money compares favorably with amounts spent by other states that have produced index reports -- an estimated \$50,000 in Florida, \$80,000 in Kentucky, and \$75,000 to \$100,000 in Washington.

Gov. Jim Hunt and state legislators should heed the advice of Dave Moreau, who chaired Martin's environmental indicators panel and directs the University of North Carolina's Water Resources Research Institute. "This is not simply a good idea," Moreau says. "It is essential to the setting of environmental policy, to the allocation of financial resources, and to the administration of environmental programs. We run the risk of making costly errors in setting policy without the kind of information called for in the report."

Letters supporting the state Environmental Index can be sent to your local legislators or to the Chair, Appropriations Committee, N.C. House & Senate, Legislative Building, Raleigh, NC 27601-1096.