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## Next Steps on Path to a Clean Energy and Equitable Economy for All North Carolinians

On Friday, January 7 Governor Roy Cooper issued Executive Order No. 246 affirming North Carolina's commitment to a clean energy economy and directing next steps in the state's plan to achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions and create economic opportunities for North Carolinians across the state, especially in underserved communities.

"Transforming North Carolina toward a clean energy and more equitable economy will provide good jobs and a healthy environment for generations of families across our state. To achieve our goals we must be clear, intentional and determined," said Governor Cooper. "We've made monumental progress by developing a clean energy plan tailored to our state's unique challenges and opportunities and passing into law required carbon reduction goals for utility providers. This order will assess our progress reducing climate pollution, and direct ways to curb environmental injustices, increase clean transportation options, and build more resilient communities in North Carolina."

Executive Order No. 246 updates North Carolina's economy-wide carbon reduction emissions goals to align with climate science, reduce pollution, create good jobs and protect communities. The Order strengthens North Carolina's commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, increasing the statewide goal to a 50% reduction from 2005 levels by 2030 and achieving net-zero greenhouse gas emissions as soon as possible, no later than 2050. To meet these goals, the Order directs the Governor's administration to update a statewide greenhouse gas inventory to measure current levels of greenhouse gas emissions, as well as analyze potential pathways for achieving net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.

Executive Order No. 246 also takes steps to encourage and prepare for North Carolina's transition to a clean transportation future. The Order calls for an increase in registered zero-emission vehicles (ZEVs) to at least 1,250,000 by 2030 and for 50% of sales of new vehicles in North Carolina to be zero-emission by 2030. It also directs the North Carolina Department of Transportation to develop a North Carolina Clean Transportation Plan for decarbonizing the transportation sector through reductions in vehicle miles traveled, an increase in zero-emission cars, trucks, and buses, and other strategies.

"These climate goals will deliver real environmental, economic and public health benefits for North Carolinians and this executive order includes additional steps to make sure those benefits reach every community in our state," said Department of Environmental Quality Secretary Elizabeth S. Biser.

"This Executive Order ensures our state is preparing for and supporting emerging technologies," said Transportation Secretary J. Eric Boyette. "We are committed to working with our state and local partners to develop a clean transportation plan – one that will benefit all North Carolinians."

The Order underscores the importance of emphasizing environmental justice and equity in the state's transition to a clean economy. It directs cabinet agencies to consider environmental justice when taking actions related to climate change, resilience, and clean energy and to identify an environmental justice lead to serve as the point person for agency environmental justice efforts. In addition, each cabinet agency will develop a public participation plan to improve communication and transparency with the public in government decision-making, particularly with underserved communities. The Order also directs Cabinet agencies to prioritize environmental justice, clean energy and climate priorities in budget decisions and to engage advocates and stakeholders to identify additional executive actions to advance an equitable clean economy.

"The environmental justice provisions that are included in the Executive Order go a long way toward ensuring that the state can achieve the exemplary public health equity goals. I am pleased that it will increase the likelihood that all North Carolinians are able to live in vibrant communities and pursue employment in workplaces free of environmental risks," said Dr. James H. Johnson, Jr., DEQ Secretary's Environmental Justice and Equity Board Chair. "This Executive Order is the next step in North Carolina's continued commitment to a clean and more equitable energy future. Our state must continue to lead in the fight against climate change and environmental injustice while building an economy that works for everyone and the steps outlined in this order are critical to achieving those goals," said Dionne Delli-Gatti, North Carolina Clean Energy Director.

To help strengthen North Carolina's workforce and create good jobs in the clean energy economy, the North Carolina Climate Change Interagency Council will identify strategies to increase diversity in industries and occupations that are critical to addressing climate change in North Carolina. The administration will work with the North Carolina Business Committee for Education and other stakeholders to expand clean energy youth apprenticeship programs that prepare graduates for good-paying careers in the clean energy economy, with an emphasis on educational institutions that serve underrepresented communities.

The Executive Order builds on the Governor's previous actions supporting clean energy, climate change, and environmental justice. In 2021, the Governor signed House Bill 951, a bipartisan law requiring the North Carolina Utilities Commission to take the necessary steps for state utility providers to reduce carbon emissions by 70% from 2005 levels by the year 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality by 2050.

The Governor also signed Executive Order No. 80, affirming North Carolina's commitment to addressing climate change, Executive Order No. 143, establishing the Andrea Harris Social, Economic, Environmental and Health Equity Task Force to address long-term disparities and Executive Order No. 218, highlighting North Carolina's commitment to offshore wind. These actions are making North Carolina less dependent on fossil fuels, bringing new high paying jobs to the state and helping remedy disproportionate environmental, economic, and health impacts on people of color, low-income communities, and indigenous communities.

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### You Decide: Is It Cheaper to Live In North Carolina?

With the inflation rate at forty-year highs, coping with a higher cost-of-living is on our minds. Both households and businesses are considering strategies for dealing with higher prices. Cutting back on non-essentials, limiting travel, searching for bargains and working extra hours to earn more are some of the common ways of off-setting bigger expenses.

But anyone who travels – even within a single state like North Carolina – observes that prices are not the same everywhere. This is particularly the case for big-ticket items like the prices of homes and apartment rents. Does this mean people living in different regions pay different prices for the same products and services? And if the answer is yes, are we lucky or unlucky to be living in North Carolina in terms of the prices we pay?

Answering the first question requires a tremendous amount of work. Hundreds of prices must be compared, making sure the comparisons are for the same products and services, and the comparisons must be made repeatedly over time. Fortunately, the federal government's Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) has taken on this task for over a decade. BEA's latest numbers are for 2019. The most expensive state to live in is Hawaii, with California and New York a close second and third. The cheapest state to live in is Mississippi, with Arkansas and Alabama the second and third cheapest.

North Carolina is the 19th lowest-cost state in the country, meaning there are 32 states (including the District of Columbia) more expensive than North Carolina. Among nearby states, Virginia, Florida and Georgia are more expensive, while South Carolina and Tennessee are less expensive (although only slightly).

The BEA numbers also reveal an urban-rural divide in North Carolina regarding prices, with rural areas winning for affordability. Average prices are nine percent higher in urban areas than in rural locations. But in one area – rent for shelter – rural areas really come up big. For the same sized dwelling with the same amenities, rents average 37 percent more in urban North Carolina than in rural North Carolina.

Today's business recruitment often focuses on metropolitan areas. This is because those locations usually have talent from local universities, amenities to attract households and transportation networks from interstates and airports. This means that in vying for big companies, it's often the Triad, Charlotte or the Triangle against Nashville, Austin or Washington, DC, rather than North Carolina versus Tennessee, Texas or Virginia.

Yet here again, North Carolina's big metros look good on cost. Compared to the national average in prices, Raleigh is four percent under, Durham is five percent less, Charlotte is six percent cheaper, Greensboro is 10 percent under and Winston-Salem is 11 percent less. Among the three competitive metros mentioned, only Nashville is in the same range at six percent under the national average. Austin is only one percent under the national average, and Washington is 17 percent above the national average.

The big take-away is that in today's heightened awareness of what things cost, don't assume your dollars will buy the same amount in different locations. The purchasing power of dollars varies by where you are. In general, items are cheaper in rural areas than in urban regions, and your dollar goes farther in North Carolina, the rest of the South, as well as in the Plains and Mountain states than in the Northeast, Midwest and Pacific Coast states. This is a big reason why we've seen people and businesses migrating to North Carolina and other southern states in recent decades. Interestingly, despite the popularity of our state as a place to live and do business, North Carolina's cost advantage has actually widened a bit in the last decade.

There's one other important point to add about these regional price differences. If it's costlier for a worker to live in an expensive city to do the same job as a worker living in a rural location, won't the company pay the city worker more to compensate for their higher costs? Logic would say yes, yet reality shows the logic here is not completely correct. Studies show that for two people doing the same job, the one living in the more expensive location is paid more, but not enough to make up for all of their higher costs. The reason is that some of those higher costs are related to benefits of the costlier location, like access to a wider range of amenities and personal services.

So, the next time you're considering moving to a new region, use the data from the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis to compare the cost of the new location versus your current location. Businesses do this all the time. And what they have found is, North Carolina looks pretty good. Is this a big reason why our state is one of the fastest growing in the nation? You decide.

By Dr. Mike Walden. Walden is a William Neal Reynolds Distinguished Professor Emeritus at North Carolina State University.