Seven things in the legislature’s budget you might have missed

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Danny Peed of Greenville buys grapes at Mark’s Food Market in Greenville in April 2014. House budget writers fell short last year in their efforts to put fresh produce in convenience stores located in “food deserts” without easy access to groceries. This year, the Senate agreed to spend $250,000 on the program, which would provide $6,000 grants to install refrigerators in convenience stores. Ethan Hyman News & Observer File Photo

The legislature’s final $22.34 billion budget bill sailed to a final Senate vote Wednesday, picking up support from two Democrats who’d previously voted no.

After Wednesday’s 36-14 vote, the House is scheduled to take up the budget on Thursday before it goes to Gov. Pat McCrory. Democratic Sens. Jane Smith of Lumberton and Ben Clark of Raeford joined GOP senators in voting yes.
Expect the budget’s main headlines – raises for teachers and state employees, an income tax cut and lower college tuition – to help McCrory and legislative Republicans as they campaign for re-election this year.

But there’s plenty in the 235-page bill that hasn’t attracted much attention. Here are a few highlights:

**More funds for university fundraising:** The budget repeals a $1 million cap on state money used for fundraising efforts at UNC system schools – a cap approved by the legislature last year in an effort to push universities to use private funds to solicit more private funds. UNC system president Margaret Spellings has lobbied against the cap. “We also want to lift the private fundraising cap to give individual institutions greater autonomy to maximize their partnerships with the private and philanthropic sectors,” she said in March.

**Produce in convenience stores:** House budget writers fell short last year in their efforts to put fresh produce in convenience stores located in “food deserts” without easy access to groceries.

This year, the Senate agreed to spend $250,000 on the program, which would provide $6,000 grants to install refrigerators in convenience stores. The funding comes despite criticism from several Republicans who said the program is “shades of Michael Bloomberg.”

**Big bonuses for third-grade teachers:** While all teachers are in for a pay increase in the budget, some third-grade teachers would be the biggest winners in their profession.

A $10 million allocation will offer $6,800 bonuses to third-grade reading teachers whose students see the biggest improvements in test scores. “That makes me want to be a third-grade teacher,” Senate budget writer Harry Brown said earlier this week.

**SBI to get a new plane:** The budget includes $8 million to help the State Bureau of Investigation replace a deteriorating plane.

The SBI’s 40-year-old Beechcraft King Air plane has been used to catch criminals, extradite fugitives from other states, perform search and rescue missions and conduct drug investigations. It’s no longer in condition to fly. The plane’s brakes and landing gear failed during flights, and a fire filled the cockpit with smoke.

The agency’s new Pilatus PC-12 NG Spectre is expected to cost $8.7 million, and the SBI will need to find the remaining $700,000.

**Mental health money from Dix sale:** After Raleigh paid the state $52 million to turn the former Dorothea Dix psychiatric hospital campus into a park, the budget will use $18 million of the proceeds to fund new and expanded inpatient mental health facilities in rural and underserved areas.
**New lab schools:** The state’s eight public universities that offer teacher training programs would be required to set up a K-8 “lab school” in a district where a quarter of schools are classified as low performing. Lab schools would be staffed in part by students in the university programs and would test new educational techniques. The budget includes $1 million for UNC system administration to set up the program.

**Wright School gets saved:** The Senate has dropped another attempt to close the Wright School in Durham, which serves students with disabilities. Closing the Wright School appears frequently in Senate budget proposals, but the House wants to keep it open.

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