

For the past few columns I've been writing about the school district accountability. I'll continue with that topic again soon, but right now I'm on vacation and the last thing I want to think about is test score gaps.



I've been in Hatteras, NC, for the past week. It's been interesting to compare the way they do things up here with the way we do things down in Beaufort.

First of all, the ferries. They have them and they work great. People drive their cars on board, they get where they're going, and then they drive off and go about their business.

The shortest ride I took, from Ocracoke to Hatteras, was about 40 minutes. A lot of people stayed in their cars for that one, but a lot of people got out and walked around. Some of them went into the little lounge area. It wasn't anything fancy. In fact it felt kind of like being in an old subway car. But I liked it because it was air conditioned, and it was a good place to be when it rained.

During the rainstorms some people could tolerate just sitting in their car with the windows rolled up. Not me. Gets way too stuffy. And besides, why keep sitting in the car when I've been sitting in the car for hours, and I'm going to end up sitting in it for many more hours to come?

Sometimes you just have to give your butt a break.

My longest ferry ride was between Ocracoke and the Morehead City area. It was more than two and a half hours long. For that one, we made reservations to make sure we would have a spot at a guaranteed time. This wasn't necessary for the shorter ferry rides, because they are much more frequent. If one is too full, you just wait a little while for the next one.

The long-haul ferries were smaller than the short-haul ferries, and so they carried a lot more cars. Also, their passenger lounges were bigger. In addition to the bus-style seats, there were booths where you could sit with friends and play cards or eat or work on your computer or whatever.

There was a vending machine for coffee and hot drinks, a soft drink machine and a snack machine with the usual assortment of gum, chips, candy bars and, of course, nabs. The prices weren't bad, either. They could have charged \$3 for a bottle of water and people would have paid it.

I know this because people kept coming in wanting to buy water from the soft drink machine. It was all out of water, though. Nothing left but the carbonated stuff. And even though there was a nice water fountain right next to the soft drink machine, people said that water was nasty. I didn't see anyone but the crew drink it.

There were six crewmembers on each of the big ferries. Two captain-types, two engine-room types, and two customer-service types. They work seven days on, seven days off, from what I heard. It takes hundreds of them to keep the state's ferry system going, so it is a pretty big employer along the coast.

Each ferry landing had space for three ferries. The captains could maneuver in relatively easily because a little artificial harbor had been created around the landing to keep the waters calm. Otherwise they would be fighting some strong currents coming in and out of the big sounds. At each landing there were three concrete loading docks with mechanized metal ramps attached. When a ferry got moored, one of the workers would press a button on a remote-control looking thing and the ramp would ease down onto the ferry.

I kept expecting the machine to grind to a halt and get stuck halfway, but it didn't. And that got me wondering how much maintenance staff they need to keep all of that equipment functioning smoothly.

Which gets us to the question of, how does the state of North Carolina pay for all of this stuff? We can't even get the SC Department of Transportation to fix potholes and build roads, let alone invest in alternative forms of transportation. We can get into all kinds of criticisms about SCDOT and its operations, but I don't want to go there right now.

Besides whatever institutional dysfunction SCDOT has endured, it has also suffered from a perpetual funding shortfall.

Part of it has to do with fuel taxes. Here are a few tidbits of information from a County Council resolution on fuel taxes drafted by the Honorable Jerry Stewart: I've taken the liberty of removing the whereases and other assorted whatevers. Also, the cumbersome phrase "motor fuel user fee" has been replaced by the far less accurate but far more comprehensible words "gas tax."

South Carolina's gasoline tax has not been adjusted since 1987

Since then the gas tax has remained flat, the construction cost index has grown 63%, the Consumer Price Index has grown 78% and traffic has grown 63%

Because DOT has accepted so many rinky-dink little streets into the state highway system (the state highway on which I live, Fuller Parkway, has all of ten houses, and isn't even a full two lanes wide), they must maintain three times more road miles than other state

SC's state highway funding per mile is the lowest in the nation;

Stewart calculates that a one cent increase in the gas tax will generate an additional \$32.8 million per year. He and other council members want South Carolina lawmakers to update the tax rate, and they also want to make sure it that, in years to come, it keeps up with economic indicators like the consumer price index and the construction cost index.

Lawmakers in past years have been unwilling to change the status quo. But there's always hope.

Because of the state funding situation, Beaufort might never have a ferry service on par with the one in North Carolina. But we can certainly work to find a small-scale, locally-funded solution to help us make better use of our waterways.