

Scott Mooneyham: Hand dealt to Perdue an unlucky one of historic proportions

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One day, some historian may conclude that Beverly Perdue is one of the unluckiest of North Carolina's governors.

Obviously, it's a bit too early to come to such a conclusion.

After all, one of her political heroes, O. Max Gardner, our greatest Governor, pushed and prodded state government through the Great Depression. Zebulon Vance, who like many mountain residents first opposed secession, muddled through the deprivations of the Civil War. William Holden, the Republican governor of the Reconstruction Era, was eventually impeached and kicked out of office by Democratic legislators.

Perdue, though, faces the unenviable task of trying to move the state through this so-called Great Recession at a time of some of the most serious public corruption probes in North Carolina history.

Those corruption investigations have helped contribute already widespread distrust of government.

Perdue probably recognized early on that she had drawn the short straw when it comes to the ethics swirl surrounding state government. Realizing the enormity of the financial problems facing the state may have only come more recently.

Listening to her words last year or earlier this year, it would be easy to believe that Perdue had already come to see the state's financial woes as some unprecedented crisis. But politicians always play up the problems that they inherit so that they can look good once they are solved.

As a state legislator and lieutenant governor, Perdue had seen economic downturns and the corresponding drop in tax collections before. Until recently, she could convince herself that these tough times too will pass.

And they will.

But not during her first term in office. If Perdue should win a second term, state government's financial hole will persist for a while even as the economy improves. The governor and her top advisers now seem to be recognizing the long climb out of this financial hole that awaits them.

“The low-hanging fruit is already gone,” Perdue spokeswoman Chrissy Pearson recently told the Associated Press. “This is going to require some creativity.”

Governors and legislative budget writers have used that low-hanging fruit cliché before. Maybe they were right. Maybe the easy budget grabs had disappeared as well in 2001 or 1990.

The problem facing this governor is not just that she plucked those apples and oranges last year. It’s that the apple and orange trees, unlike in the past, aren’t going to be bearing any more fruit for another four or five years.

Tax collections won’t improve substantially until the state’s employment picture improves. Even then, there will be a lag of a year or two.

In her first 14 months in office, some state officials have privately grumbled that the Perdue administration has resembled a think tank, floating around ideas without being willing to put the tough ones into action.

Whether fair criticism or not, no amount of creativity will avoid some hard decisions.

Perdue may be unlucky. Just like Vance or Gardner, it’s the hand she’s been dealt.

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