Holden Thorp Remarks re: Airport Authority
January 9, 2009

I have decided to ask the UNC Board of Governors not to create an airport authority to identify a replacement site for Horace Williams Airport.

This has not been an easy decision … most of all because I made a pledge to our AHEC doctors. I had said that, short term, I was convinced that a MedAir move to RDU would be workable. But I also said that for the long-term, we owed it to our doctors to explore another alternative. At the time, I thought that an airport authority was the best approach. The county would have the zoning authority, and the siting and development of the airport would be in the hands of a public body that would operate transparently.

But increasingly, I have felt that the authority would be unable to accomplish what we had hoped. There is a great deal of distrust, not necessarily of the authority, but of the process by which it came to be. That distrust would likely extend to the authority when its members were appointed.

So, with all that in mind, I started calling some of the AHEC doctors. Those I spoke with told me they understood our eventual need to move airport operations to RDU and that it's in the best interest of the University and our community not to form the authority.

I consulted with Speaker of the House Joe Hackney, and he agreed that this is the right approach. And I talked with the chair of the county commissioners, the mayor, President Bowles and our trustees, and they all concur.

We will continue to move forward on Carolina North. It is critical to the future of the University and the state of North Carolina. While we will keep Horace Williams Airport open as long as we can, to realize the full potential of Carolina North, we must close the airport.

When that happens, we will still need an airport. It's essential for our AHEC program. But we have an acceptable option – RDU.

Whether Orange County wants and needs an airport should be widely and openly discussed. And the decision should be made by the county and its citizens.