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Some of the 400 professional graduates at ceremonies at North Carolina Central University.

NC General Assembly returns to work Wednesday, Moral Monday Protest Return

By Gary D. Robertson
RALEIGH (AP) - When the North Carolina General Assembly returns to work May 14 for its annual session, Republicans in charge say they're committed to raising salaries for teachers and state employees.

They also plan to tackle the cleanup of coal ash ponds after the Dan River spill, whether Common Core education standards should be replaced and how tax credits for film production companies should work if they're allowed to continue. There's also state government budget adjustments - the primary responsibility of the legislative session in even-numbered years. Election-year politics will shape the Legislature's work, since lawmakers are up for reelection in November and House Speaker Thom Tillis is running for U.S. Senate.

GOP leaders say they'll continue policies they argue have resulted in more money in people's pockets and dramatic reductions in unemployment. The minority Democrats say Republicans aren't willing to fix tax cuts for the wealthy or to restore education spending.

Here are some key questions entering the session:

WILL ALL TEACHERS AND STATE EMPLOYEES GET RAISES NEXT YEAR? Legislative leaders and GOP Gov. Pat McCrory say they will. While Tillis, R-Mecklenburg, and Senate leader Phil Berger, R-Rockingham, didn't give their full endorsement to McCrory's ambitious proposal last week to retool teacher pay, they expressed confidence about getting across-the-board raises approved. "I think that much of what the governor has outlined is well within reach," Tillis said.

McCrory proposed \$1,000 more for state employees and raises for veteran teachers from roughly 2 to 4 percent. That's in addition to raising the minimum salary for early-career teachers from \$30,800 to \$33,000. Democrats say the short-term proposals don't reach their goal of moving teacher salaries to the national average. "Anything that gets us beyond where we are now is going to be an improvement," said Sen. Floyd McKisick, D-Durham, a deputy minority leader, "but it doesn't go far enough."

WILL THERE BE A SOLUTION TO CLEANING UP COAL ASH? Probably, although it's unclear what the final product will look like. And it's unlikely the Legislature will wade into who ultimately pays for disposing or moving ash in more than 30 pits near Duke Energy's



North Carolina Central University announced that Robert Lawson, 74, retired university photographer, died Sunday, May 11. See story on page 7. (NCCU Photo)

coal-fired power plants. Many Democrats want the company and its shareholders pay for any statewide cleanup, not their customers with higher power rates.

But Tillis and Berger believe the issue should be left to the Utilities Commission. Expect the Senate to take the lead on the cleanup. Berger lives in Eden, where the spill occurred and Rules Chairman Sen. Tom Apodaca, R-Henderson, isn't satisfied with McCrory's proposal released last month and wants to go further.

HOW SIGNIFICANT IS THE \$445 MILLION REVENUE SHORTFALL? The amount is just 2 percent below original revenue expectations, with \$600 million-plus in unspent funds that can fill any holes before the fiscal year ends June 30. But it still means \$445 million less available for other needs. The revenue downgrade also means economists expect \$151 million less for the next fiscal year. McCrory insists he's got the \$256 million for employee raises but won't explain how until later this week. Expect spending reductions.

WILL MEDICAID REFORM PASS? Despite months of work on the issue and support for the plan from doctors and hospitals, enthusiasm for the McCrory administration proposal to create "accountable care organizations" remains tepid, particularly in the Senate. The fact that predicted Medicaid shortfall levels are lower compared to past years may provide an excuse to delay extensive debate until 2015.

WHAT ABOUT THE MORAL MONDAY PROTESTS? The Rev. William Barber, president of the state NAACP conference, said weekly demonstrations would resume May 19. He said they would include participants entering the Legislative Building, where police arrested more than 900 people for trespassing and failing to disperse over a three-month period in 2013.

While the protests brought national attention to the conservative agenda in North Carolina, the speeches and civil disobedience didn't derail pending legislation. Barber said voter registration drives this summer will help make the voices of protest be heard at the ballot box.

WILL THE LEGISLATURE AND MCCRORY GET ALONG? Many issues in 2013, including tax reform and the fate of Dorothea Dix Hospital land, pitted McCrory and the House against the Senate. The legislature also united to override two McCrory vetoes.

Sean Combs delivers commencement speech at Howard

WASHINGTON (AP) - Rapper and music mogul Sean Combs has received an honorary degree at one of the nation's most prestigious historically black universities.

Combs delivered the commencement address Saturday at Howard University in Washington.

He was among five people receiving honorary degrees as trailblazers in their fields. The university also honored CNN anchor Wolf Blitzer, transplant surgeon Clive Callender, jazz legend Benny Golson and PepsiCo CEO Indra Nooyi.

Combs attended Howard in the late 1980s, although he did not graduate. University President Wayne Frederick says Combs' entrepreneurial spirit was sparked at Howard, where he studied business.

Activists Say Blacks Can't Afford to Become Complacent

By Freddie Allen
NNPA Washington
Correspondent

WASHINGTON (NNPA) "Despite the success of the Civil Rights Movement that ultimately led to the election of the nation's first black president, civil rights groups must continue to capture the hearts and minds of people that think that blacks have enough rights, according to Judith Browne Dianis, co-director of the Advancement Project said that "The average person of color is not feeling the success of a President Obama," said Browne Dianis.

She was part of a panel discussion on racial justice last week sponsored by the Advancement Project, a multi-racial civil rights organization focused on bringing about high impact policy change.

Philip Agnew, executive director of the Dream Defenders, a human rights group focused on ending the criminalization of young minorities, agreed with Browne Dianis.

"The new racism is that racism doesn't exist, said Agnew. "People believe that we fixed everything, that everything is fine."

The idea that racism is a thing of the past, because we have a black president is what led to the United States Supreme Court's decision in Shelby v. Holder, said Agnew.

Last summer, the Shelby v. Holder ruling eviscerated the Voting Rights Act of 1965 by nullifying section 5 of the VRA, a provision that forced states and jurisdictions with histories of discriminating against voters to "pre-clear" any changes in voting laws with the Justice Department.



Rev. William Barber urges formation of broad coalitions not easily explained on bumper stickers (NNPA Photo by Freddie Allen).

The ruling made it much tougher for groups to challenge new, restrictive voting laws that often hurt the poor and minorities, advocates say.

Earlier this year, Washington lawmakers proposed the Voting Rights Amendment Act of 2014, which garnered a lukewarm response from voters' rights advocates across the nation. Most said that it was an important first step, but didn't go far enough to

ensure equal access to the ballot box.

Rev. William Barber, president of the NAACP North Carolina State Conference and the "Moral Mondays" movement said that civil rights leaders today have to do three things simultaneously.

"We're trying to protect civil rights, we're trying to defend the victories we've already won, (Continued On Page 2)



President Barack Obama and Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany tour the Kitchen Garden with Executive Chef Cris Comerford on the South Grounds of the White House, May 2. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)