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The Carolina Times

THE TRUTH UNBRIDED

VOLUME 96 - NUMBER 31 DURHAM, NORTH CAROLINA - SATURDAY, AUGUST 5, 2017 TELEPHONE (919) 682-2913 PRICE: 50 CENTS

Political remap could shift N. C. battle's outcome

By GARY D. ROBERTSON
Associated Press

RALEIGH AP) - North Carolina's Republican-dominated legislature has been repeatedly walloping Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper since before he took office, and the bitter conflict shows no sign of abating. But an upcoming adjustment to some political boundaries could sway its outcome.

A court-mandated redistricting threatens the Republicans' power to override Cooper's vetoes and make unfettered changes to state government. This possibility has GOP leaders planning to return to Raleigh multiple times this year to consider even more conservative-leaning legislation and Democrats quickly raising money in case judges order snap elections under the new boundaries.

"There's a sense that there is a deadline," said Chris Cooper, a political science professor at Western Carolina University and not related to the governor. "There's a sense of a looming change coming with redistricting."

So far, the GOP has steamrolled the new governor. It began a week after Cooper's narrow election victory last December. Republicans convened a surprise special session and proceeded to strip him of power over elections, limit the number of policy positions he could fill and subject his Cabinet to state Senate confirmation.

After Cooper went to court to try to block some of the laws, with mixed results, GOP lawmakers passed a state budget that essentially blocked Cooper's use of taxpayer dollars to hire private lawyers to sue.

"We don't think it's appropriate to sue the state and use state dollars to do so," Senate leader Phil Berger said last month. "If he wants to sue the state, he can use private dollars."

The clash quieted only slightly in March when Cooper and the Republicans cobbled together a partial repeal of House Bill 2, the "bathroom bill" limiting LGBT rights that had brought unwanted national attention to the state.

Then GOP legislators quickly resumed ignoring Cooper's wishes and eroding his powers until this year's main work session adjourned June 30. They overrode the new governor's vetoes, took away his ability to fill upcoming appeals court vacancies and slashed spending in his office.

"They certainly do have the votes," Cooper said when faced with a GOP override of his state budget veto, adding he'd "work to fight another battle on another day."

That day is coming real soon. Republicans already have scheduled two or three special legislative sessions this year, with the first Aug. 3. They plan to use them in part to keep checks upon Cooper, who won by 10,000 votes over Republican Gov. Pat McCrory on a platform of eliminating the law known as HB2 and straightening out the state's recent rightward bent. He says taxpayer-funded "vouchers" and tax cuts benefiting corporations and the wealthy need to stop.

GOP legislators also are expecting by this fall to redraw General Assembly districts struck down by federal courts as illegal racial gerrymanders. New boundaries will likely put many GOP-leaning districts in play. Democrats only have to win three more House seats or six Senate seats to end the GOP's veto-proof majority.

"I think you can see from this session what a difference that would have made," said Gary Pearce, a longtime North Carolina Democratic consultant.

Cooper and his allies want the courts to order a special election this fall under new maps. Republicans say there's not enough time and elections should wait until November 2018.

Cooper said this week he's already raised more than \$1 million for an initiative with the state Democratic Party to win more legislative seats, with the goal of winning back by 2020 the majorities in the House and Senate. Republicans hadn't controlled the legislature in 140 years until 2011.

GOP legislators may otherwise avoid controversial issues during the special sessions to keep attention to broader accomplishments this year like raising teacher pay, cutting income tax rates across the board and expanding pre-kindergarten for at-risk children. They say the economy is humming thanks to GOP policies.

In recent years, they've passed abortion restrictions, prohibited "sanctuary cities" and passed HB2.

"I do not believe that social issues will be front and center in those sessions," GOP consultant Chris Sinclair said. "I think they will be pragmatic as well."

Republican Rep. David Lewis, chairman of the House Rules Committee, said lawmakers "will meet and do those duties needed to create jobs and provide tax relief to the middle class. The governor can work with us or continue to play to and listen to the far-left wing of his party."

Groups allied with Democrats have sounded the alarm that more GOP muscling could be ahead. The state NAACP is so concerned it asked federal judges to block the legislature from even meeting until new maps are drawn by an outside party and elections are held.

As for Cooper, he told reporters recently the legislature should simply consider vetoes, complete redistricting and "go home."



2017 Comic-Con - "Masters of the Sun" - Will.i.am, from left, Taboo, and apl.de.ap, of the Black Eyed Peas, speak at the "Masters of the Sun" panel on day three of Comic-Con International on Sat., July 22, in San Diego. (Photo by Al Powers/Invision/AP)

Chancellor writes in support of UNC Center for Civil Rights

By MARTHA WAGGONER
Associated Press

RALEIGH (AP) - A ban on courtroom work for a University of North Carolina center that represents the poor and disenfranchised puts the school's "hard-earned reputation at risk" if it leads the closure of the center, the chancellor of UNC's flagship campus says.

The UNC Center for Civil Rights provides valuable litigation training to law school students, UNC-Chapel Hill Chancellor Carol Folt wrote in a letter. "I am concerned that eliminating or even weakening the law school's ability to train the next generation of civil rights lawyers will reflect poorly on our university and the school, as well as the university system and the state," she wrote.

Folt sent her letter to Anna Nelson, chair of the committee that meets Tuesday to consider a litigation ban for the center, which receives no state funding. If the committee approves the ban, it would then go to the UNC Board of Governors, the policymaking board for the 16-university system, for consideration.

The center was founded in 2001 by noted civil rights attorney Julius Chambers, an African-American whose home, office and car were bombed as he pursued school desegregation cases in the 1960s and 1970s. It has taken on cases involving school segregation, equal education rights and a landfill in a poor community.

Center proponents blame ideology for the proposed ban. Conservative supporters of the ban say the center's courtroom work strays from the education mission of the country's oldest public university.

Folt writes that she has received as many as 375 letters in one day in support of the center. Earlier in July, a letter signed by 600 law school deans, faculty and administrators "made clear that preventing the Center for Civil Rights from representing clients in litigation would needlessly tarnish the reputation of UNC in the national legal education community."

In addition, the litigation ban could deter donors who fund the center's operations, Folt wrote.

A committee appointed by Folt at the behest of the Board of Governors to study alternative paths for the center found no options that would allow the center to continue the full breadth of its work while also satisfying those who oppose it.

Board member Steve Long, who has led the effort to ban the center's litigation work, has said that the center must refocus on its education mission.

Long has challenged the center's history, saying that the former law school dean Gene Nichol is the actual founder, not Chambers.

And Nichol and Long have their own history: In 2015, a board committee that included Long abolished the Center on Poverty, Work and Opportunity that Nichol led.

In her letter, Folt enters that same fray. "The community here and elsewhere does not disassociate the mar (Chambers) and what he stood for from the center and the important work it has done on behalf of thousands of North Carolinians, among them African-Americans and other low-income minorities who otherwise would have had limited or no access to adequate legal counsel," she wrote.

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The center operates under American Bar Association guidelines and UNC system policies, Folt wrote. The law school dean approves all proposed litigation, which "has been just one last-resort strategy our center offered to citizens and communities who seek to address issues that could be resolved out of court through education and dialogue," Folt wrote.

UNC President Margaret Spellings hasn't taken a public position on the ban, and a spokesman didn't respond Monday to an email. Lou Bisette, chair of the Board of Governors, has said that he's undecided.

Black seniors stroll down memory lane aiming to stay sharp

By LAURAN NEERGAARD
AP Medical Writer

It's more than a stroll down memory lane. Seniors are walking through neighborhoods once a center of Portland, Oregon's black community, combining exercise with "do you remember" conversations about their youth. The small but unique study is testing whether jogging memories where they were made can help older African-Americans stay mentally sharp and slow early memory loss.

The study is called SHARP - it stands for Sharing History through Active Reminiscence and Photo-Imagery - and uses old photos to prompt memories the seniors may have forgotten.

It's part of a new and growing effort to unravel troubling racial disparities in Alzheimer's and other dementias. Black seniors appear to have twice the risk of whites, and researchers are looking for ways to stop cognitive decline as they get older.