

N.C. legislative map trial begins in Raleigh

BY GARY D. ROBERTSON
ASSOCIATED PRESS

RALEIGH, N.C. — A federal court ruled two months ago Republican legislators weren't legally justified in turning two North Carolina congressional boundaries into majority-black districts and ordered new lines.

Another panel of three federal judges has convened a weeklong trial

deciding whether close to 30 of the 170 state House and Senate districts approved almost five years ago by the General Assembly also are illegal racial gerrymanders and must be redrawn.

The trial started on Monday, April 11.

Voters in the challenged districts who sued make largely the same arguments that won out in February's separate congressional litigation.

They say legislators created too many minority-majority districts when evidence shows black voters have been able to elect their preferred candidates in districts when their voting-age population was well below 50 percent.

The congressional district ruling forced lawmakers to quickly redraw the map and delay the March congressional primary until June. It's unclear whether,

if the legislative plaintiffs are successful, new boundaries would be ordered for this year.

The three-judge panel in Monday's trial - U.S. District Judges Thomas Schroeder and Catherine Eagles and U.S. Circuit Judge Jim Wynn - refused last fall to stop this year's legislative elections while the case was being heard. Should the judges rule for the plaintiffs, state attorneys

wrote they should delay requiring any changes in the maps until the 2018 elections. General Assembly primary races already were held in March.

The current General Assembly boundaries used in 2012 and 2014 helped Republicans pad their seat advantages over Democrats. Redrawn districts could threaten their veto-proof majorities and

ability to unilaterally pass legislation.

Attorneys for the state and for legislative leaders defending the maps again take the view race didn't control how they drew the nine Senate and 19 House maps. Those who sued "are attempting to impose impossible legal obligations" on mapmakers, Alec Peters and Tom Farr wrote in the state's pretrial filing.



Photo by Tevin Stinson
Scores of members at the Winston Lake Family YMCA gathered during a meeting last week to get answers on the future of the branch that has served the African-American community for more than 90 years.

YMCA

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Head also mentioned that other branches in the area have seen a decline in membership as well. He did not mention what other branches would be changing, but did say other pools will be closing.

According to Head, the branch would not be considered an "Express Y" because members and guests would still have access to the gym. Express Y designations are given to branches that only house a wellness center.

For more than two hours, members voiced their frustrations about the changes and lack of communication. Al Jabbar, a longtime member of the branch, was visibly irate about the lack of transparency from the executive board. Jabbar stood up and asked how did the branch fall in such a financial hole without the members who have been com-

ing there for years knowing.

"I want to see the five-year plan for Winston Lake," he said. "This did not happen overnight. If we are \$400,000 in debt, someone had to know something."

"It shows a lack of respect that the leadership has not come and talked to the people of this community," Jabbar said.

Members raised questions on the reported pool usage as well. Many of the senior citizens in attendance said they go to the pool more than two or three times a week to participate in water therapy classes. Veronica Rousseau said the swimming pool is one of the main reasons she comes to Winston Lake.

"A lot of us are seniors and that pool is a big help for our health," said Rousseau. "Don't take our pool from us; we need our pool."

Winston Lake advisory board members are expected

to present the complaints on the changes during a board meeting this week. The advisory board is a group of ten residents selected to represent the views of each branch. Two members of the Winston Lake board are expected to be present during the meeting.

Advisory board member Marshall McDuffie said all of the complaints made by the members would be brought up during the board meeting.

"We represent the people of Winston Lake," McDuffie said.

Ujima

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Kwanzaa principal that means "collective work and responsibility," became a 501(c)(3) in 2006. A CDC, which is a non-profit that's devoted to development in a particular community, has advantages in getting things like grants for its projects. Oftentimes, a CDC is used when private developers aren't interested.

Though senior living complexes are big business in other parts of town, Ujima members said developers are hesitant to come to East Winston for that kind of project.

"Crossing 52, they just don't spend money over here," said Jones, referring to US-52, which divides the historically black part of town in East Winston from the rest of the city.

The particular property has several other complicating factors, including an incline that will require substantial grading work before construction begins. It's also in a food desert, meaning there are no grocery stores within one mile, so it doesn't qualify for tax credits from the North

Carolina Housing Finance Agency that depends on the nearby availability of commercial services. Tax credits are used by developers to significantly subsidize a project.

With no private developers biting, the CDC is acting as its own developer. This became particularly challenging with changes in the economy.

"We had to keep the faith through the housing slump and through the downturn in the economy, which people call the recession and in our community felt like a depression," said Larry Weston, the CDC's consultant.

Though Emanuel Baptist Church provided the land for Ujima to develop, the CDC is separate from the church and must raise its own money, which it's done through a variety of fundraisers. Pre-development funds from the City's block grant program allowed the CDC to pay for design and engineering costs early on.

The CDC has been through many potential contractors and lenders on the project. With no tax credit or state or federal funds, the CDC needed

help from the city to secure a private lender.

"The first thing the private lender asks: 'Is the City in on this?'" said Jones.

Their current potential lender's \$3 million is contingent on the City's commitment of \$2.5 million, just as the City's \$2.5 million investment was contingent on the promise of private financing. The City's proposed financing is comprised of a \$500,000 grant, a \$1 million no-interest forgivable loan and a \$1 million loan at 2 percent interest. The City Council will vote on it in its Monday, April 18 meeting.

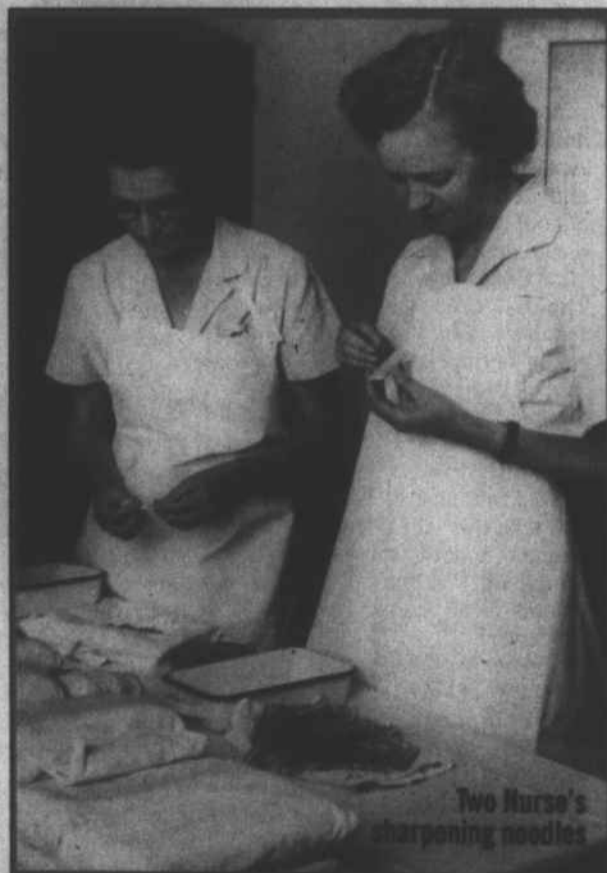
The City had numerous questions and concerns about Ujima as a first time developer, which the CDC has answered. During Tuesday's committee meeting, the CDC addressed everything from having enough capital to cover unexpected construction costs to the market viability of the project. Weston told City Council members that interest from potential tenants was "rabid." Ujima has received 29 letters from interested tenants and its members who attend Emanuel Baptist are regularly asked about the project by congregants.

The retirement community will be for those aged 62 and over. A one-bedroom, one-bathroom unit including utilities, is \$899, and a two-bedroom, two-bathroom unit, including utilities and a garage, is \$950. Weston said that the CDC felt these were fair prices for what tenants will be getting, especially considering the market rate will have increased by 2018 when Emmanuel Retirement Village is scheduled to open. Ujima also has an agreement with the City that there will be some subsidized units.

Members of the CDC bring a variety of skills in finance, non-profits and real estate to the table and have learned a lot through the long process. Ujima President Sandy Sadler said he was confident the CDC is up to the challenge of finally seeing its dream to fruition.

"We feel from all the work we've done, we're a competent and dedicated development team," said Sadler.

Ujima's office is in The Enterprise Center, which is owned by S.G. Atkins CDC, whose guidance has been invaluable to Ujima, said Sadler.



Two Nurses sharpening needles

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