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Judge refuses to halt voter ID requirement in March election

By Gary D. Robertson
RALEIGH (AP) - A federal judge refused Friday to block North Carolina's photo identification requirement to vote in person from taking effect with the March 15 primary elections.

U.S. District Court Judge Thomas Schroeder's ruling denying the preliminary injunction motion of the state NAACP and allied voters likely ensures that voter ID will be implemented for the first time on schedule. A trial on whether the ID law is legal will be held Jan. 25 and last several days.

The Republican-led General Assembly passed an elections overhaul law in 2013 containing the mandate but deferred its start until the first election in 2016 to give people time to learn about the requirement and to obtain one of several forms of qualifying ID.

The law has been in the courts ever since, including three federal lawsuits that have been consolidated into one case. Last June, the legislature altered the photo ID mandate to allow more people who had trouble obtaining an ID card to successfully vote by filling out paperwork and presenting alternate identifying information. GOP Gov. Pat McCrory signed both laws.

Schroeder wrote Friday that NAACP lawyers have failed to show their clients surely will win at trial on allegations the photo ID requirement is unconstitutionally burdensome on minority groups and intentionally discriminatory. These allegations, he said, are weighed against a broad effort by elections officials to tell voters about the amended ID requirement through letters, radio and television ads, and election worker training.

The NAACP plaintiffs, Schroeder wrote, have failed to clearly demonstrate how the state's education efforts "have failed to prepare North Carolina voters for the photo ID law. Quite the opposite. Changing course in midstream will likely serve to confuse voters as to the state of the law."

Schroeder also declined another request from the state NAACP to delay a Jan. 25 trial in Winston-Salem on the legality of the mandate until after the primary. "The claims need to be resolved," Schroeder wrote in a separate ruling Thursday.

Rep. David Lewis, R-Harnett, and Sen. Bob Rucho, R-Mecklenburg, who helped shepherd the voter ID legislation, said in a release that Schroeder's ruling against the injunction "validates the state's comprehensive two-year effort to educate all North Carolinians about the new law." They called the preliminary injunction request a "desperate, partisan" attempt to block the requirement before early voting begins March 3.

NAACP state president the Rev. William Barber and group attorneys pointed out they would still get a chance to present their full arguments and evidence to have the law overturned at the trial's close.

"While the legislature attempted to mask their discriminatory intentions behind inadequate modifications to the law, the impact of the law remains the same: voters of color will lose their right to vote at disproportionate rates," Barber said in a news release.

The U.S. Justice Department and the League of Women Voters of North Carolina also sued over the 2013 law but didn't seek the preliminary injunction or trial delay. They will participate in the upcoming trial.



An Interfaith Prayer Vigil and Speak Out was held at CCB Plaza in Durham on Jan 20. Representatives from various denominations came out to support Medicaid Expansion in the state. Rev. Michelle Cotton-Laws represented the N.C. NAACP. The NC NAACP is petitioning Gov. McCrory to change his policy and accept expanded Medicaid for thousands of North Carolinians without health care and those who do not qualify for health care under the Affordable Health care Act. From left to right are: Rev. Warren Hernson, Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance of Durham, Rev. Rachel Greene, Sanctuary of Christ Holy Church; seated, Ms. Mary Grace; and Rev. Michelle Cotton-Laws.

As primary race tightens, Democrats brace for a messy winter

By Lisa Lerer and Ken Thomas

WASHINGTON (AP) - There was a time when Democrats fretted about Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign becoming a coronation and leaving her without the tests of a primary season to prepare for a general election matchup against the Republican nominee.

No one is worried about that anymore.

In the past two weeks, the Democratic race has gone from a relatively civil disagreement over policy to a contentious winter competition between former Secretary of State Clinton and Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders.

Clinton's institutional strength and her support among the minority voters who make up a large portion of the party's base still put her in a formidable position, even as polls show Sanders surging in Iowa and maintaining an edge in New Hampshire.

But should Sanders prevail in those first two states on the 2016 campaign calendar, Clinton's bid to succeed President Barack Obama may mean a much longer and messier path than her supporters once envisioned. It would plunge Democrats into the kind of primary fight they have gleefully watched Republicans struggle to contain in the past year.

"You have to look at these numbers and say there's a real race going on," said Democratic pollster Mark Mellman. "It's a race where Hillary Clinton has significant advantages in the long run. But it's a real race."

The contest intensified with the Democratic candidates gathering in Charleston, South Carolina, on Saturday night for a party dinner and the annual fish fry hosted by Rep. James Clyburn, D-S.C. Then there's the Sunday night debate, the final one before the Iowa caucuses on Feb. 1. The New Hampshire primary is Feb. 9.

"I think it is a new phase of the campaign," said Joel Benenson, Clinton's chief campaign strategist. "We talked about how close this was going to be in (Iowa and New Hampshire). They always are historically and we're ready to have this debate engaged."

In the past week, Clinton has shifted course in apparent response to Sanders' strong poll results. She has stepped up her criticism of her rival, a self-described democratic socialist, after carefully avoiding that during the campaign.

The new approach carries risks. Sanders is popular with liberals who are part of the coalition that Clinton will need to win the White House. Clinton and her supporters still remember her disappointing third-place finish in Iowa in 2008 against Obama. Clinton's team has retooled her schedule to add stops in Iowa in the week ahead. The candidate has made near-daily television appearances where she has challenged Sanders' stances on health care and gun control.

Clinton and Sanders were each booked on four Sunday morning news shows.

Her campaign is sending out top party representatives, starting with former President Bill Clinton, to make her case in early voting states. Daughter Chelsea Clinton has offered critical words about Sanders, leading to a back-and-forth over his health care plan.

"They're very afraid of a repeat in 2008 and they're getting very aggressive," said Sanders campaign manager Jeff Weaver. "I expect at any moment now they'll go hard negative on us and we're prepared for that. But we won't be negative on them."

Clinton has tried to dismiss Sanders' proposals as unrealistic and disingenuous. She points to his 2005 vote for legislation giving gun manufacturers immunity from lawsuits as a sign that the senator wouldn't fight forcefully enough against powerful interest groups.

Sunday's debate is in the city where a 21-year-old white man shot and killed nine people attending a prayer service at an African-American church last summer. The setting may give Clinton a chance to confront Sanders on his past votes related to gun control.

But in a campaign that has seen billionaire Donald Trump rise to the top of the Republican presidential field by capitalizing on an electorate angry with the political establishment, Clinton may once again be embracing the mantle of experience at a time when outsider status is in vogue.

"What she's trying to do is cast Bernie as, I don't want to say a protest candidate, but as a message candidate against someone who is grounded in the reality of governance," said former Obama campaign strategist David Axelrod. "The danger is that you also make yourself an exponent of governance the way people see it today."

"In an anti-establishment time," Axelrod said, "you're essentially branding yourself as the establishment candidate."

The campaign could take a much tougher turn in the weeks ahead.

Clinton's campaign complained this past week when Sanders aired an ad that suggested Clinton wouldn't be tough enough on Wall Street. That could clear the way for Clinton's team to retaliate with its own critical advertising.

After Iowa and New Hampshire, the calendar seemingly swings in Clinton's favor. She has an edge in Nevada, the first caucus state with a significant segment of Latino voters, and in South Carolina, where black voters make up more than half of the electorate.

From there, the campaign will play out in a series of Southern states holding contests on the March 1 "Super Tuesday" primaries, where African-American voters are pivotal.

The question for Sanders is whether he can expand his support beyond the white voters who dominate the first two contests in Iowa and New Hampshire.

"If - and it's a very big if - Bernie Sanders wins both Iowa and New Hampshire, there will be a lot of heartburn. There will be a lot of handwringing," Mellman said. "But for him to win the nomination over the long term, he's got to get beyond that base."

Fayetteville considers changing city seal with slave market

FAYETTEVILLE (AP) - Fayetteville held public hearings on Tuesday and will again later this month as the city decides whether a building where slaves were once sold should stay on its official seal.

The Market House was placed on the city seal more than 20 years ago. The building has a long history. Along with a slave market, North Carolina's capitol once stood on the site, and it is where the state ratified the U.S. Constitution in 1789.

But the site's role in slavery has the four black members of the nine-person Fayetteville City Council calling to change the seal.

"A city's symbol should be inclusive of all its citizens and should not be offensive to a significant number of the citizenry," lawyer Allen Rogers told The Fayetteville Observer (<http://bit.ly/1UZuc8W>).

Rogers, who is black, wrote a letter to City Council last summer that raised the issue. About 41 percent of Fayetteville's 208,000 people are black.

Councilman Ted Mohn has already thought of some alternative seals that include the dogwood flower, the Lafayette statue in Cross Creek Park and the statue of the Fayetteville State University bronco.

Fayetteville has used the seal with the Market House for more than 20 years, although the police and fire department don't use it because of its divisiveness.

Asheville bans criminal record questions on job applications

By Joel Burgess

ASHEVILLE (AP) - Asheville, one of the region's biggest employers, is eliminating any question about criminal convictions from most job applications, a change planned for some time in January.

When the change is made, applicants will still go through a criminal background check, just later in the hiring process. The change will help cut unemployment and recidivism among a growing population with criminal records, a number for which no local count exists but that totals 1.6 million in North Carolina. That is according to employment law experts and "ban the box" advocates, a slogan referring to the box job applicants are asked to check for criminal convictions.

Advocates say striking the question will serve as a counterbalance to an overzealous criminal justice system that disproportionately convicted African-American men, often for nonviolent drug offenses. For many that first conviction was followed by economic troubles and more serious crimes, said Keith Young, the only African-American on City Council.

"It becomes a hindrance," said Young, a proponent of reinforcing the city's planned new employment policy with a resolution and possibly a city ordinance.

Twenty-three years ago Robert Robbs, of Asheville, got convicted of selling cocaine. Social scientists would say he fit the demographic of those most likely to go into the drug trade.

Robbs, a then-17-year-old African-American, watched his mother struggle to raise four boys.

"It was fast. Fast money," he said of selling drugs.

Six years and several misdemeanor convictions later, Robbs was facing a second-degree murder charge in the 1999 shooting of 23-year-old Bryant Dobbs. He was the one convicted, he said, because he didn't agree to become a police witness like others.

That meant well over a decade in prison. It was time enough to Robbs to think and realize he needed to make serious changes if he ever wanted a chance when he got out. Though his poverty had made selling drugs tempting, he didn't let himself off the hook, saying some people he grew up with become lawyers and doctors.

"I was a victim of my choices," he said.

While incarcerated, he went to school, racking up degrees and diplomas in computer repair, business management, religious education, culinary arts, masonry, and heating and air conditioning repair.

But when he got out in 2014, no one would hire him. Not even temp agencies.

In the end, he did find work, but had to go 60 miles away to Forest City. In July, he was hired by a maker of industrial air conditioners whose clients include universities, the U.S. Open tennis tournament and NASA. In the fall, he was promoted to a team leader on the assembly floor.

If employers had not immediately disqualified him with a criminal history check, he said "it would have given me a chance to talk to them and for them to get to know me and the person I am now," the now 40-year-old Robbs said. "Yeah, I made a mistake, but look at what I am doing to correct my mistake."