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The Carolina Times

THE TRUTH UNBRIDLED

VOLUME 95 - NUMBER 51

DURHAM, NORTH CAROLINA - SATURDAY, DECEMBER 24, 2016

TELEPHONE (919) 682-2913 PRICE: 50 CENTS

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year

Protesters rip GOP for taking away next governor's 'power'

By Gary D. Robertson
RALEIGH (AP) - Protesters say the North Carolina legislature's actions limiting the next governor's influence before he even takes office were unconstitutional power grabs by GOP legislators unhappy their candidate didn't win re-election.

"We voted for a new governor and they're choosing to come and ... take away the power," said Caren Parker of Carrboro, among the crowd who demonstrated this week against the Republican-controlled General Assembly, leading to more than 50 arrests.

So what's next for Gov.-elect Roy Cooper and other fellow Democrats now that a special session is over that passed laws designed to weaken them?

Lawsuits and more demonstrations are likely, although it's unclear how effective those will be.

"Once more, the courts will have to clean up the mess the legislature made, but it won't stop us from moving North Carolina forward," Cooper said in a statement after the legislature adjourned an extraordinary three-day special session Dec. 16.

McCrory, who lost to Cooper by about 10,000 votes in November, quickly signed into law a bill that merges the State Board of Elections and State Ethics Commission into one board composed equally of Democrats and Republicans. The previous state elections board law would have allowed Cooper to put a majority of Democrats on the panel.

The law would also make elections for appellate court judgeships officially partisan again, which could favor Republicans. A Democrat's win last month in an officially non-partisan Supreme Court race will give the party its first majority on the court in almost 20 years.

Another bill that received final legislative approval would subject Cooper's Cabinet choices to Senate confirmation and would allow Cooper to designate only up to 425 state employees as his political appointees, compared with a cap of 1,500 for McCrory.

The Cabinet bill apparently remains on McCrory's desk. Emails and a phone call to McCrory's office seeking comment weren't returned. With 30 days to decide whether to sign or veto

a bill, McCrory could kick the bill to his successor Cooper, although that's unlikely. Republicans will continue holding veto-proof majorities in 2017.

Republicans call their approval of legislation reasonable actions to rebalance state government before a new administration takes office. The North Carolina governor's powers have expanded since the state became the last in the country to give the veto to its executive in 1997.

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U.S. Attorney General Loretta Lynch



Getting in the Christmas Spirit was the theme of the Durham Christmas Parade. See photos on page 7)

AG Lynch pushes Baltimore to reach police consent decree

By Eric Tucker

WASHINGTON (AP) - Attorney General Loretta Lynch on Dec. 15 stepped up the pressure on Baltimore officials to reach a deal with the federal government to overhaul the city's police practices, saying "the ball is in the city's court" to conclude negotiations soon.

Lynch, who took office in April 2015 as riots roiled Baltimore after the death of a black man in police custody, said she intends to return to Baltimore in January to give an update on efforts to reach a court-enforceable consent decree.

Her statements seemed intended to publicly push Baltimore toward a resolution and appeared to reflect disappointment in the pace of negotiations.

Though consent decrees can take months to negotiate, the federal government and Baltimore already had reached an agreement in principle by August, when the Justice Department issued a report that identified discriminatory policing practices and pervasive civil rights violations.

The Justice Department is looking to conclude the process by Jan. 20, when the Obama administration ends and Lynch and other leaders will move on - a timeline for completion that remains possible. The city has been provided with each of the sections of the proposed consent decree and has had some of the sections for months, according to a person familiar with the negotiations who was not authorized to discuss the ongoing talks and spoke on condition of anonymity.

"At this point, the ball is in the city's court, but we are looking forward to getting a positive response from them on finalizing this consent decree," Lynch said.

Anthony McCarthy, a spokesman for the new mayor, Catherine Pugh, said the city was committed to working with the Justice Department. He said the city had already undertaken some of the changes that Washington sought and wanted to see those improvements acknowledged in the report.

"She also wants us to ensure that the consent decree is in the best interest of the people of Baltimore. It's a huge financial commitment attached to this consent decree," McCarthy said.

A consent decree, filed in federal court and overseen by a monitor, often is a road map for changes in fundamental police department practices, such as in how officers use deadly force and carry out traffic stops.

The Justice Department has the ability to sue cities that refuse to reach such an agreement. The government sued Ferguson, Missouri, under similar circumstances earlier this year after the City Council there balked at the overhaul plan, though the two sides ultimately reached a resolution.

"It's good for both parties because it sets forth the framework of what the city has to do. It sets forth the benchmarks the city has to meet," Lynch said at a discussion hosted by Politico.

The Justice Department opened an investigation into Baltimore's police department last year, weeks after the death of 25-year-old Freddie Gray, who was injured in a police transport van.

A harshly critical report in August found that Baltimore police officers routinely discriminate against blacks, repeatedly use excessive force and are not adequately held accountable for misconduct.

Jonathan Smith, the former chief of the Justice Department's special litigation section, which conducts investigations like the one into Baltimore, cautioned against reading too much into Lynch's comments. He said it makes sense for the department to look to conclude a major project before the end of the administration, and that a deal was likely very near.

Associated Press writer Juliet Linderman in Baltimore contributed to this report.



President Barack Obama gives a personal Presidential coin to Nick Wetzel, 15-year-old Make-A-Wish recipient from Peoria, Ariz., during a visit in the Oval Office, Dec. 9, 2016. Nick was accompanied by his brother Stephan, shown, mother Nancy Wetzel and his brother Gregory. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)



President Barack Obama greets Kevin Costner after greeting Octavia Spencer, center, and Taraji P. Henson while dropping by for a surprise visit as the First Lady met with the cast of the film "Hidden Figures" prior to a screening of the film in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building South Court Auditorium, Dec. 15, 2016. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)