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## Republican lawmakers dilute Democratic governor's powers

By Emery P. Dalesio

RALEIGH (AP) - After being rebuffed once by judges who determined lawmakers went too far, Republican legislators on Tuesday (April 11) tried a second time to dilute the power of North Carolina's new Democratic governor to run elections.

In separate votes, the state House and Senate voted along party lines to trim the power governors have had for more than a century to oversee elections by appointing the state and county elections boards that settle disputes and enforce ballot laws. The state elections board has had five members appointed by the governor, with the majority being members of the governor's party, since 1901, according to state records.

Gov. Roy Cooper has promised to veto the new legislation, which lets the governor appoint all eight members of an expanded elections board - but from lists provided by the two major political parties. A Republican would chair the board during years that presidential and gubernatorial elections are held. Democrats would lead the elections board for midterm elections. County elections boards, which previously featured two Republicans and one Democrat, will be increased to four members, also evenly split between the parties.

The previous effort to trim Cooper's elections authority was passed in a surprise special legislative session in December, prompting raucous protests and arrests, two weeks after former Republican Gov. Pat McCrory conceded his loss by barely 10,000 votes.

Some Republicans bristled as Democrats accused them of again acting primarily to weaken Cooper.

"Just because someone voted for governor, they did not vote for someone to oversee every

other issue and everything - have a complete and total power of the whole state," said Sen. Andrew Brock, a Republican from Davie County. "We're trying to make a system that's fair."

A three-judge panel ruled last month that the General Assembly's initial effort to take some control over elections was unconstitutional. The court ruled that the law prevented Cooper from executing his duties by blocking him from appointing and administering elections board majorities.

Democrats said the new, even-numbered elections boards divided equally between the two major parties was a recipe for the same gridlock that for years has gripped the evenly split Federal Elections Commission. Critics say that has meant the commission can't punish violations and has failed to stop the flow of anonymous campaign money into elections.

With North Carolina increasingly a battleground in national elections, Democrats complained that Republicans were trying to grab another political advantage and protect their initiatives to constrict ballot access.

"We're setting up an election system that will have the potential to perpetuate voter suppression," said Sen. Angela Bryant, a Democrat from Nash County. "In many instances when there may be a deadlock, which will be in essence a no-decision, people's fundamental rights to vote are at stake."

Republicans hold legislative majorities large enough to override any Cooper veto. But GOP lawmakers said they hoped the revised legislation, which also gives the elections board oversight of government ethics rules and lobbying regulations, would end one of several ongoing legal disputes with Cooper.



Ms. Joan Higginbotham

## Retired NASA Astronaut to Deliver Commencement Address

Retired astronaut, Lowe's Companies Inc. executive and North Carolina Central University (NCCU) Trustee Joan Higginbotham will deliver the keynote address at NCCU's 129th Commencement Exercise on Saturday, May 13, 2017. The Commencement Exercise will take place at 8 a.m. in O'Kelly-Riddick Stadium on the university's campus.

Higginbotham will speak to approximately 762 students receiving their bachelor's degrees from the university. According to estimates from the NCCU Registrar's Office, the class of 2017 will be one of the largest graduating classes in the university's history. In May 2016, NCCU awarded 718 bachelor's degrees.

Higginbotham began her career with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) as a payload electrical engineer in the Kennedy Space Center's Electrical and Telecommunications Systems Division and later became an astronaut at NASA's Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center.

Higginbotham is one of three African-American women to travel into outer space. In 2006, she completed NASA's space shuttle discovery mission STS-116 serving as mission specialist during the 12-day excursion. During her time with NASA, she completed three additional missions.

After her successful stint with NASA, Higginbotham served in an executive role with Marathon Oil Company. Currently, she serves on the NCCU Board of Trustees as secretary, an appointment she has held since 2013.

She is active in a number of civic and service organizations, including: the Association of Space Explorers, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Inc., The Links Incorporated, the Charlotte Douglas International Airport Commission and Johnson C. Smith University Board of Visitors and Science Center Advisory Board.

A separate ceremony for graduate and professional students will take place Friday, May 12, in McDougald-McLendon Arena

## Bank of America settles racial discrimination case from 1993

By Emery P. Dalesio

RALEIGH (AP) - Bank of America settled a decades-old case that accused its predecessor company of systematically discriminating against black applicants for entry-level jobs in Charlotte, the U.S. Labor Department said April 17.

The largest U.S. consumer bank settled the 1993 case against its Charlotte-based predecessor NationsBank by agreeing that 1,027 people who applied for clerical, teller and administrative positions a generation ago would share \$1 million in back wages and interest, the department said.

Bank of America's penalty roughly corresponds to what a Labor Department review board last year determined it should pay, according to court documents. The bank challenged the decision in federal court before reaching the settlement. A district court judge delayed that case until Bank of America fully complies with the settlement.

"Although much time and effort has gone into this case by all parties, the department is pleased that the matter has been resolved," Thomas Dowd, the agency's acting director for federal contract compliance programs, said in a statement.

NationsBank merged with San Francisco-based Bank of America in 1998. Bank of America did not respond to emailed questions about why it fought the case for so long or why it settled now. The bank said in a statement: "We remain committed to fair hiring practices. While we continue to disagree with the Department of Labor's analyses, we are pleased to have resolved this nearly-25-year-old matter."

The dispute began during the first year of former President Bill Clinton's administration, when the department decided to check whether NationsBank was living up to its legal requirement for doing business with the federal government to not discriminate in employment because of race, color, religion or other conditions.

## Arkansas death penalty foes hope for suspensions of deaths

By Jill Bleed

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (AP) - While outrage on social media is growing over Arkansas' unprecedented plan to put seven inmates to death before the end of the month, the protests have been more muted within the conservative Southern state where capital punishment is still favored by a strong majority of residents.

A few dozen people regularly have kept vigil outside Republican Gov. Asa Hutchinson's mansion for weeks, holding signs that say "Thou Shalt Not Kill" and "End the Death Penalty." And the Arkansas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty hopes to draw hundreds of participants to a Good Friday rally at the state Capitol to protest the executions that start Monday (April 17) - three nights of double executions, followed by a single one. A judge last week halted a planned eighth execution.

"Arkansas is known across the world for the Little Rock Nine and all of that atrocity," said the coalition's execution director, Furonda Brasfield, referring to the 1957 desegregation battle in Little Rock involving nine black students. "And now it's the Little Rock eight in 10, and it paints our state in such a horrible light."

The group is using the hashtag (hash)8in10 to highlight the executions, although one man has received a stay and the seven lethal injections are scheduled to take place over 11 days, the first on April 17 and the last on April 27. Hutchinson set the unprecedented schedule because a key lethal injection drug expires April 30.

On Thursday April 13, two pharmaceutical companies, Fresenius Kabi USA and West-Ward Pharmaceuticals Corp., asked a federal judge to prevent Arkansas from using their drugs to execute inmates, saying they object to their products being used for capital punishment.

In Arkansas, a vocal critic of the plan is Damien Echols, who spent nearly 18 years on Arkansas' death row before he and two others were freed in 2011 as part of a plea deal in which they maintained their innocence. Echols, who now lives in New York, planned to attend a rally along with Jason Baldwin, who also was convicted then freed in the 1993 killings of three boys in West Memphis.

"It's not even the dignity of a person being executed on their own, which is horrifying in itself," Echols said in an interview last month with Arkansas Public Media. "You know, they've stripped away even that dignity now and you're being in essence shoved into a cattle chute and killed in mass numbers. It's absolutely horrifying."

Sister Helen Prejean, a death penalty opponent who was the subject of the movie "Dead Man Walking," has taken to Twitter to fight the execution schedule, at times tweeting the phone numbers of Hutchinson and Attorney General Leslie Rutledge. On Sunday, the governor tweeted a Bible verse praising God to which Prejean replied with a verse of her own: "Blessed are the merciful."

Author John Grisham, an Arkansas native, wrote in USA Today that the schedule would result in a "spectacular legal train wreck."

"It undermines the gravity of our legal process and the death penalty itself by denying the eight due process, full access to their lawyers and established clemency proceedings," Grisham wrote. "It risks the specter of botched executions, which would haunt everyone involved and take an incredible emotional toll on the innocent staff. The plan simply risks too much."

Still, the protests in Little Rock so far have been fervent yet small, with vigils outside the Governor's Mansion typically involving fewer than 30 people. The University of Arkansas' annual Arkansas Poll last asked about the death penalty in 2015, when a strong majority of residents said they supported capital punishment.

"The families of the victims have not only had to live with the loss of their loved ones through brutal murders, but they've also had to live with the unending review of these cases year after year after year," Hutchinson said in a statement this week. "Now to suggest, after all of the court reviews have been completed, that they ought to be delayed once again shows an incredible amount of insensitivity to the victims and their families who continue to suffer because of these heinous crimes."



Alfred J. Whitesides Jr.

## NCCU Alumnus Alfred J. Whitesides Jr. Honored

Asheville City Schools Foundation will honor NCCU alumnus Alfred J. Whitesides Jr. for his work in the community during its annual Celebration of Champions event.

Whitesides will be presented with the Lifetime Achievement Award at the organization's annual event on May 6. The civil rights activist and retired banker was among 12 community leaders, parents and organizations recognized for making a positive impact on Asheville City Schools students and teachers.

In 2016, Whitesides became the first African-American to be elected as a member of the Buncombe County Commission.

After a successful career in finance at Wachovia and Mountain 1st Bank and Trust, where he served as vice president, Whitesides became board president of The Arc of Buncombe County, an organization that serves children and adults in the Asheville area who have intellectual and developmental disabilities.

His career in banking spanned more than 35 years, during which time he was active with a number of organizations, including the Asheville City Schools Board of Education, the United Way of Asheville Board, and the Boys and Girls Club of Asheville, among other organizations. Previously, he served as chair of the University of North Carolina at Asheville's Board of Trustees and also as president of the university's Bulldog Athletic Association.

Whitesides received his bachelor's degree from NCCU, where he also served as student government president.