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Leaders React to High Court's Congressional District Ruling

By Cash Michaels
CashWorks Media

Now that the US Supreme Court has ruled that North Carolina's 2011 congressional redistricting maps for the First and Twelfth districts were unconstitutional because more black voters from surrounding districts were added unnecessarily, does this hint that an upcoming High Court ruling on the state's 2011 legislative maps are most likely to be seen the same way?

And when will the 2011 congressional maps be redrawn by the Republican-led NC General Assembly? Democrats and civil rights activists are certainly hopeful.

The Supreme Court's May 15th decision to not to overturn a lower court's July 2016 decision striking down North Carolina's controversial 2013 voter ID law, certainly put smiles on the faces of the NCNAACP and others who challenged the measure because it targeted the African-American vote "with surgical precision."

With last Monday's congressional redistricting victory still echoing in their circles, supporters are eagerly anticipating a favorable legislative redistricting decision next week. But for now, this week's High Court congressional redistricting triumph was both satisfying, and inspiring.

"This should serve as a wakeup call to the Republican-led General Assembly, whose voter suppression tactics have been struck down twice in federal court, in as many weeks," said black Democrat Rep. Alma Adams, whose 12th Congressional District was ruled unconstitutional because GOP state lawmakers "stacked-and-packed" it to be minority-majority for electoral advantage.

"As elected officials, we should be working together to make access to the ballot box easier and more fair. In Congress we must take swift action to restore the Voting Rights Act."

"In North Carolina, it is time to appoint an independent redistricting commission to return our democracy to the will of the people," Rep. Adams concluded.

Congressman G. K. Butterfield, the other North Carolina lack Democrat whose First Congressional District (which encompasses Durham) the US Supreme Court also ruled was racially gerrymandered, also applauded the decision, saying that the GOP redistricting "...was an extreme case of racial gerrymandering."

The NCNAACP has been leading the charge against Republican voter suppression.

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North Carolina Central University Professional and Graduate School students celebrate before ceremonies May 12. See undergraduate and graduate ceremonies photos on pages 8 and 9. (NCCU Photo.)

Rev. T. A. Spearman Announces Bid For NC NAACP President

By Cash Michaels
CashWorks Media

The Rev. Dr. T. Anthony Spearman, third vice president of the North Carolina Conference of NAACP Branches, has formally announced that he is a candidate to become the civil rights organization's next permanent state president now that Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II is stepping away from the post he's held for 12 years.

Meanwhile Melvin "Skip" Alston, who previously served as NC NAACP president from 1996 - 2005, has dismissed rumors that he is interested in running for his old job again, but did say that he will support NC NAACP First Vice President Carolyn Coleman if she decides to run for president. Ms. Coleman says she has not decided yet.

The news comes as Rev. Barber prepares to join the national "Poor People's Campaign" to draw attention to issues of poverty as the country prepares to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s original Poor People's Campaign next year.

In a May 20th letter emailed to "members of the NC NAACP," Rev. Spearman, who also serves as president of the NC Council of Churches, announced that he has "...filed as a candidate for [NCNAACP president] in our next election."

"Every vote is important, and I am asking for your support to become the next NCNAACP president," Rev. Spearman continued. "Continue the fight with me. Nothing is too hard for God. I invite you to contact me with you questions, concerns, and ideas. Hear the cry on the battle field - "Forward together and not one step back."

Earlier in his missive, Rev. Spearman recounted how, under Rev. Barber's leadership, the NC NAACP "founded a movement," shifting from "Banquets to Battle." He denoted "...the explosive growth of the Historic Thousands on Jones Street People's Assembly Coalition (HK on J)... over the years," further growing from sixteen coalition partners to "...over 200 diverse social justice organizations" today.

Spearman also recounted the NCNAACP's 2012 "Truth and Poverty Tour" through some of the state's most impoverished communities.

"God's Word compels us to fight this battle defending the poor, disenfranchised and needy people. We are obligated to create effective strategies to ensure the political, educational, social and economic equality of rights of all people. We must defeat the forces of race-based discrimination and religion-based bigotry.

Pursuing on these battlefields should be the order of each day," Spearman concluded.

He has been third vice president of the NC NAACP for six years, in addition to being chair of the Religious Affairs Committee, and president of the Hickory NAACP Branch for two years.

Rev. Dr. Spearman is presently the senior pastor of St. Phillip AME Zion Church in Greensboro.

Though no one else at press time has made it known that they've also officially file for the NCNAACP presidency, Rev. Spearman has already attracted the support of attorney Alan McSurely, one of Rev. Barber's closest lieutenants.

In an open letter to the NCNAACP membership issued May 21st, McSurely writes that Rev Spearman "...is prepared to carry on Dr. Barber's vision and spirit and intellectual brilliance as Barber moves to another lane to pick up Dr. King's torch of justice..."

"The call came only after the Lord situated and educated Dr. Spearman for this challenge," McSurely continued. "See if you agree (Continued On Page 14)

Senate GOP says 3 a.m. changes weren't to punish Democrats, Durham Could Be Hurt

By Gary D. Robertson

RALEIGH (AP) - Top Republicans in the North Carolina Senate said May 16 that their state budget amendment in the wee hours to expand opioid abuse treatment programs wasn't drawn up to punish Democrats for offering several changes of their own after midnight.

The amendment emerged as senators gathered early May 12 for the final vote on a two-year spending proposal before going home for a long weekend.

The opioid amendment was paid for by taking \$1 million from other spending programs. A couple of reductions occurred with public school initiatives with designated funds for eastern North Carolina counties represented by Democrats. Some of those counties were removed from a tuition assistance program helping teacher assistants obtain teaching degrees. The amendment also blocked \$300,000 for a special math and science program for needy students.

The reduction caused Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper's office and other Democrats to criticize the late-night maneuvering. But Senate leader Phil Berger, a Rockingham County Republican, said in an interview that Republicans had no intent to penalize Democrats for their late-night amendments.

Berger said they were addressing the concerns of colleagues, based in part on a Democrat's amendment, to target more funds to fight the opioid epidemic.

"We'd heard a lot of conversation on it during the night on how bad it was, and I know from personal experience how bad it is," said Sen. Brent Jackson, a Sampson County Republican and budget committee co-chairman. Communities that received the pilot program money are represented by Republicans.

Other reductions to expand the pilot came from a program to help downtown revitalization and for a North Carolina Museum of Art expansion. A position in Cooper's office also would be eliminated.

The two parties already had robust debate the previous day comparing the Republican proposal with Cooper's alternative plan before an initial vote last May 11. The Senate reconvened at 12:05 a.m. May 12 for a final vote.

Republicans became upset with Democrats when they ran amendments to mirror Cooper's budget that had little chance of passing because they also attempted to dismantle GOP tax cuts.

Senate Republicans recessed for two hours and returned to propose their opioid treatment, which passed just after 3 a.m. before the entire budget got final approval.

Berger said that Senate Republicans had been "told by the minority party that they had no amendments" to propose for the post-midnight session.

Senate Minority Leader Dan Blue didn't return a phone call at

his office late May 9. Sen. Mike Woodard, a Durham County Democrat who led the opposition debating the Republican budget, said it was the Democrats' intent to offer amendments.

Asked about Berger's defense of the amendment, Woodard replied: "I didn't see funds taken away from districts represented by Republican senators."

The budget debate now heads to the House, which will pass its own spending plan.

NAACP president to leave office as group undertakes changes

By Jesse J. Holland

WASHINGTON (AP) - NAACP President Cornell William Brooks will not be returning as the leader of the nation's oldest civil rights organization after his contract expires this summer, officials said May 19.

Brooks has been the NAACP's leader since 2014 but will not be kept on past June 30, the end of his current term. NAACP Board Chairman Leon W. Russell and Vice Chair Derrick Johnson will lead the organization until a new president is selected.

Russell and Johnson announced what they described as a "transformational, system-wide refresh and strategic re-envisioning" for the NAACP in a Friday (May 19) evening conference call with reporters.

"We understand and appreciate the historic model of protest, but at this point in time we believe as an organization we need to retool to become better advocates, better at educating the public, better at involving them in our operation" and better at legislation and litigation, Russell said.

Russell, who was made the Baltimore-based organization's board chairman in February, praised Brooks' leadership and said the NAACP remained at the forefront of civil rights activism in the United States.

"However, modern-day civil rights issues facing the NAACP, like education reform, voting rights and access to affordable health care, still persist and demand our continued action," he said.

A national search for a new leader was expected to begin this summer.

In addition, the NAACP planned to embark on a "listening tour" this summer to solicit input on how the organization should reinvent itself.

Brooks, the NAACP's 18th national president, replaced interim leader Lorraine Miller. Miller had served in that position since Benjamin Jealous ended his five-year tenure in 2013.

Brooks, a minister, is originally from Georgetown, South Carolina. It was not immediately known what his future plans were.

The NAACP found itself battling for attention from black youth with groups like Black Lives Matter, which rose to prominence behind street-level protests after the killings of African-American men and women by police, including 18-year-old Michael Brown at the hands of a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri.

Catherine Flowers, founder of the Alabama Center for Rural Enterprise, an organization that advocates for poor and black people living in rural areas, said she wasn't surprised at the coming change.

"I would like to see more of a grassroots effort" by the NAACP, she said. "Clearly, on a national level we're at a crisis and it calls for a new kind of leadership."

Brooks also has his fans. Ernest L. Johnson Sr., president of the NAACP Louisiana State Conference, invited Brooks to visit Baton Rouge less than a week after a white police officer shot and killed a black man during a struggle outside a convenience store last year. Videos of Alton Sterling's July 5 shooting quickly spread on social media, setting off nightly protests in Louisiana's capital.

Johnson said Brooks met with Sterling's relatives. During a rally outside Baton Rouge's City Hall, he said he was tired of victims of police shootings being treated as "hashtag tragedies" instead of human beings mourned by their families.