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Settlement could help black candidates for county commission

By GARY D. ROBERTSON
RALEIGH (AP) - A rural North Carolina county could elect black candidates to serve on its governing board for the first time in more than 20 years, because of a court settlement reached this week in a voting rights lawsuit.

A national civil rights organization sued in February on behalf of black voters who alleged racial discrimination in how commissioners are elected in Jones County, 100 miles (161 kilometers) southeast of Raleigh. Rather than continue costly litigation, the two sides reached an agreement in which at-large elections for the five commissioner posts will be replaced with a system in which seven commissioners are elected in specific districts. The change, approved by a federal judge, will take place for the 2018 elections.

"The parties share the goal that all future elections for the Jones County Board of Commissioners be conducted under a method of election that allows Jones County's African American voters an equal opportunity to elect their candidates of choice," the agreement signed Aug. 23 by U.S. District Judge Louise Flanagan reads.



Historic Stokesdale Neighborhood came out for National Night Out. See page 14 for story and pictures.

Nearly one-third of the county's 10,000 residents are African American, but a black candidate hasn't been elected to the commission since 1994 and the countywide election system is to blame, according to the initial lawsuit. Under the redistricting plan, two of the seven districts are calculated with black voting-age populations slightly above 50 percent.

"We expect that there will be, as a regular matter, African American candidates elected to represent" some districts, said Jonathan Blackman, a New York attorney working alongside the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, which initiated the lawsuit. As part of the decree, the county will pay \$10,000 in attorneys' fees.

A lawyer for the county didn't immediately return a phone call seeking comment. County officials initially asked that the lawsuit be dismissed, but mediation toward a settlement began in the spring.

In the current at-large system, each voter chooses up to five candidates, and the top five vote-getters win. The Jones County Board of Commissioners is currently all-white, with four Democrats and one Republican. Democrats comprise the largest party by registration in the county, at nearly 50 percent.

In the past, black candidates have been supported by African American residents, but they've ended up losing as a result of racially polarized voting, according to the lawsuit, which alleged Voting Rights Act violations. Black voters petitioned the commission in 2014 to request a shift to voting by district.

"We pay taxes and most importantly, we love Jones County just like our white neighbors," Elaine Robinson-Strayhorn, a lawsuit plaintiff and unsuccessful 2014 commissioner candidate, told reporters Aug. 24. "So we deserved to have our voice heard too."

The settlement comes as North Carolina legislators this week redraw General Assembly maps after nearly 30 districts were struck down by federal judges as illegal racial gerrymanders. Critics of those 2011 House and Senate maps argued Republican legislators created excessive numbers of majority-black districts that in turn made surrounding districts more white, favoring GOP candidates.

A federal appeals court last year separately struck down a North Carolina state law requiring photo identification to vote, reducing the number of early voting days and eliminating same-day registration during early voting. Those who sued said they disproportionately harmed black voters.

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Young people protesting Confederate Monuments came out in force recently. See photos and Durham Committee Statement on page 6. Artije Photography

Definitive link found between Stonewall Street, Confederate

CHARLOTTE (AP) - Historians have found a definitive connection between Stonewall Street in North Carolina's largest city and a Confederate general which eluded leaders a decade ago.

But revived efforts to rename the Charlotte street are encountering several hurdles, including a transit station and multimillion developments all sharing the name of the road. Charlotte considered renaming Stonewall Street for civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. about 10 years ago, but the effort faded away when supporters couldn't find evidence the street was named for Confederate General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson.

Since then, The Charlotte Observer reports, historians have found handwritten notes of a June 1869 meeting when Charlotte aldermen approved renaming four streets for Confederate generals. Stonewall Street is the only significant one to survive to today. Nearby Hill Street was likely named for another Confederate general, Daniel Harvey Hill, who was born near York, South Carolina, was superintendent of the North Carolina Military Institute in Charlotte when the Civil War started, and died in Charlotte in 1889. Much of Hill Street was severed when the Bank of America Stadium was built more than 20 years ago.

While the city isn't formally considering renaming Stonewall Street now, the issue has come up in the Charlotte mayor's race. Current Democratic Mayor Jennifer Roberts said she "absolutely" supports renaming Stonewall Street. Her Democratic challengers said they would consider it. But a Republican challenger, City Council member Kenny Smith, said Charlotte has more important issues to deal with like crime than the name of a street that few know the origin.

Renaming Stonewall Street in 2017 may be harder than 10 years ago. Since then, the city has built a light rail station named for the road, and developer Crescent Communities is building an upscale shopping center named "Stonewall Station" and a residential and retail project called "550 Stonewall."

But the company said in a statement it will follow the city's lead. "If the name of either the street or transit station were to change, Crescent would likely revisit the name of the development to ensure it continues to accurately promote the community's distinct location," the company said.

A historian who has researched the issue for years said even being able to definitely tell people Stonewall Street is named for a Confederate general likely won't change the minds of most people. "I don't think that's in their consciousness," Dan Morrill said. "That's just Stonewall Street to them."

He believes the street naming may have honored the general's wife, Mary Anna Jackson, who was born near Charlotte and returned when Stonewall Jackson died in 1863. Her father, Rev. Robert Hall Morrison, helped found and was the first president of Davidson College north of Charlotte. She died in Charlotte in 1915 at age 83. General Hill, her brother-in-law, is buried in the cemetery of Davidson College, where he taught in the 1850s.

The other two streets mentioned in that 1869 meeting were Vance and Lee streets. Vance was likely named for Zebulon Baird Vance, a Confederate colonel, North Carolina governor, and U.S. senator. But Vance Street was bulldozed to build Interstate 277. Lee Street was named for Robert E. Lee but it's unclear where it was or if a street name was ever changed to it.