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The Carolina Times

THE TRUTH UNBRIDED

VOLUME 96 - NUMBER 38

DURHAM, NORTH CAROLINA - SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 23, 2017

TELEPHONE (919) 682-2913 PRICE: 50 CENTS

Lawyers: 12 North Carolina legislative districts remain illegal

By Gary D. Robertson

RALEIGH AP) - Illegal and unconstitutional boundaries remain within North Carolina's new state legislative districts, lawyers who sued successfully over the old maps told federal judges Friday while asking for another redraw.

In a court filing, the lawyers for voters found fault with 12 General Assembly House and Senate districts in the maps approved by legislative Republicans two weeks ago. The judges should redraw the boundaries in the areas where the districts are located using alternatives the plaintiffs offered to legislators last month, or send the job to a third-party expert, the filing says.

"What we filed today is no different from what we told the General Assembly before they passed these new districts," Anita Earls, one of the voters' attorneys from the Southern Coalition for Social Justice, said in a news release. "It is now the court's responsibility to fix the problem."

GOP legislators argue they cured the problems the judges previously found with the 2011 maps which, like the new maps, favor Republicans. The 2011 maps helped the GOP expand its majorities, leading to passage of a conservative agenda in state government.

The judges also could sign off on all of the district boundaries for use in the 2018 elections. Attorneys for state legislative leaders have another week to rebut Friday's objections. It's unclear when the judges will rule.

The same judges last year threw out 19 House and nine Senate districts as illegal gerrymanders because GOP leaders failed to justify using race as the predominant factor in drawing them. Following a U.S. Supreme Court ruling in June affirming their decision, the lower-court judges ordered new maps be approved by Sept. 1.

The number of districts in which blacks represent more than 50 percent of voters fell markedly compared to the original maps. But in Friday's objections, Earls and colleague Eddie Speas contended the boundaries still contain four districts that illegally separate black and white voters, while boundaries for eight other districts also violate the state Constitution.

Of the four where racial bias is still being alleged, only two have majority-black populations, a House district and Senate district in Guilford County. The other two - a Senate district in Hoke and Cumberland counties and House district in Sampson and Wayne counties - remain irregularly shaped and continue to be packed with black voters, Friday's filing says.

Republican redistricting leaders specifically approved rules that left out the use of the racial data of the electorate when fashioning the new boundaries. But in Friday's (Sept. 15) objections, the voters' lawyers said the GOP's outside mapmaker was the same person who drew the 2011 maps and would know that drawing certain boundaries the same way as before would produce the same result.

"Claiming to be colorblind by not looking at race data is no proof that race did not predominate in the drawing of a legislative district," Speas and Earls wrote.

The lawyers also objected to five House districts - four in and around Raleigh and one in south Charlotte - they said weren't required to be redrawn because they failed to touch any of the 28 districts originally struck down. That violates the state Constitution's prohibition on mid-decade redistricting, they wrote.

Friday's (Sept. 15) filing also says three other districts - a Senate district in Mecklenburg County, a House district in Cabarrus and Rowan counties, and a House district in Johnston, Wayne and Greene counties - violated a state constitutional directive designed to minimize district boundaries crossing county lines.

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NCCU Art Museum Hosts Exhibit by Cuban Artist Erik Rubio - Description: Erik Olivera Rubio, a graduate of San Alejandro Academy of Fine Arts, Havana and a former member of the Association of Humorists of Cuba, has exhibited internationally in places such as Italy, France, Florida and through out Havana, Cuba. This exhibition will be Rubio's first museum showing in America. The exhibition includes many deeply personal works from Rubio's own collection. They demonstrate his liberated, self-assured painting style, as well as his technical abilities. His mastery of drawing and painting also demonstrates his powerful imagery, absolute command of portraiture and dazzling technical virtuosity that transports viewers and imbues all of his works with a staggering force. The artist will display innovation in composition, treatment and technique through the concert of water colors and acrylic.

When: Sunday, October 8, 2017 - Friday, November 17 - Where: NCCU Art Museum

White House, black college heads to meet amid strained ties

By Jesse J. Holland

AP - President Donald Trump on Monday named a lawyer and former NFL player as executive director of the White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities, as the administration faces criticism from those institutions of promises unkept.

Jonathan Holifield, who also writes and consults on the topics of innovation and inclusiveness, told leaders and students that HBCUs must contribute more to the American economy.

"There is no path to sustain new job creation, shared prosperity and enduring national competition without the current and increased contributions of historical black colleges and universities," Holifield told students at the Old Executive Office Building next to the White House.

His appointment answers one complaint from the leaders HBCUs, who are making their second visit to the White House this year amid strains with the Trump administration over unfulfilled promises. Trump has said he would move the office of historically black colleges and universities from the Education Department to the White House. He promised support for the schools during his presidential campaign and Black History Month meetings, when college presidents posed for pictures with Trump in the White House.

But the annual gathering in the nation's capital for those schools has been reduced to a two-day summit, further aggravating college officials. And Trump was not in Washington to receive the visitors Monday. Instead, he was in New York for the U.N. General Assembly.

"Everyone's uptight in this day and age with our current president and with what's going on," said Ty Couey, president of the National HBCU Alumni Associations. "Things are out of control."

Advocates for the schools say there has been little to no action from the Trump administration. The institutions have not seen increases in their funding in Trump's proposed budget, and they had to beat back a White House push to call construction money for historically black colleges and universities unconstitutional. All that followed the backlash after school presidents posed with Trump for a photo in the Oval Office.

That led to calls from the colleges' major advocates to postpone the annual National Historically Black Colleges and Universities Week Conference.

"It has become painstakingly clear that these promises are not being kept," said Rep. Alma Adams, D-N.C., who leads the Congressional HBCU Caucus.

"In this current environment, and with zero progress made on any of their priorities, it would be highly unproductive to ask HBCU presidents to come back to Washington," she said.

The week is normally planned by the White House HBCU Initiative's executive director along with a presidential HBCU advisory board, said Johnny C. Taylor, president and CEO of the Thurgood Marshall College Fund, a nonprofit organization that has supported public historically black colleges and universities since 1987.

Responding to "feedback from key stakeholders," the Education Department sent an email Sept. 5 saying it was "postponing this year's National HBCU Week Conference" and replacing it with "more intimate conversations."

Omarosa Manigault Newman, a HBCU graduate and assistant to the president and director of communications for the White House Office of Public Liaison, told The Associated Press in a telephone interview last week that the conference was simply scaled back. She said the White House intended to announce an executive director for the initiative on Monday.

Also announced Monday was a lineup of 62 HBCU "All-Stars" - students who serve as the initiative's ambassadors to black colleges.

The leaders were expected to discuss capital financing, improving student outcomes, alliances with the tech sector and post-secondary degrees. Students are getting a tour of the White House, mentoring and a special tour of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

"President Trump's commitment to the HBCU Community remains strong and unwavering," Newman said in a statement. "Registration remains at capacity and we are looking forward to welcoming HBCU presidents, students and guests."

Episcopalians struggle with history of Confederate symbols

By MEG KINNARD

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) - Recent eruptions of violence over Confederate symbols like the rebel flag have prompted impassioned national debates - and not just in the public arena. Churches, too, are wrestling with the question of what to do with emblems dotting their parishes that memorialize the former slaveholding states and their battle heroes.

It's in part the continuation of a conversation that was sparked when self-avowed white supremacist Dylann Roof killed nine African-American parishioners during a Bible study at a church in Charleston, South Carolina, in 2015. Roof was seen brandishing a Confederate flag in photographs that surfaced after his arrest. He is currently on federal death row.

The shock and turmoil of the shooting at Emanuel A.M.E., the South's oldest black church, prompted the removal of a Confederate battle flag from the Statehouse grounds in Columbia. And then came Charlottesville, Virginia. When violence erupted there in August at a rally of white nationalists opposed to the removal of a statue of Gen. Robert E. Lee, calls for taking down Confederate monuments accelerated.

Many churches date back to Civil War times and beyond and found themselves on the side of the pro-slavery South when their sons marched off to war. The war ended, as did slavery - but the racism did not.

"You do have an identifiable connection to the Confederacy," said Doug Thompson, history professor at Mercer University in Macon, Georgia. He said Episcopal churches prayed for the president of the Confederacy, not the Union, during the war. "Episcopalians have built into their very structure an attachment to this national identity."

Just steps away from the Statehouse, the Trinity Episcopal Cathedral is wrestling with Confederate ghosts. The South's Gen. Wade Hampton and its poet laureate, Henry Timrod, are buried on the parish's grounds. A plaque in its sanctuary honors members who died in the Civil War. However, the church doesn't allow the display of Confederate flags, and the Very Rev. Dean Timothy Jones said Confederate flags recently placed on soldiers' graves were removed.

"I care deeply about how historical symbols can create hurt and communicate a message of discrimination," Jones said. "We believe in redressing the terrible wrongs of slavery and affirming the dignity of every human being."

Several weeks after the church shootings, delegates to the national Episcopal church's convention passed a resolution calling for the removal of Confederate battle flags from display. The call included not only taking down actual flags but also the removal of the images from iconography, like plaques and stained glass windows. Afterward, Washington National Cathedral, which is Episcopal, announced its plan to remove Confederate battle flags from two windows honoring Confederate generals Lee and Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson, saying later it would remove the windows entirely and store them pending a future decision about their fate.

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