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CONGRATULATIONS! 24 NCCU Student-Athletes Graduate on Saturday - Twenty-four student-athletes were among the graduating class of 2018 during North Carolina Central University's 132nd commencement exercises on Saturday, Dec. 8 inside McDougald-McLendon Arena.

The 24 graduating student-athletes earned degrees in nine different majors. Three student-athletes - quarterback Naiil Ramadan, outfielder Miriam Duen and running back Torrance Cotton - graduated in just 3.5 years. (NCCU Athletics Photo)

Panel to take closely watched vote on pipeline

By Alan Suderman

RICHMOND, Va. (AP) - A massive winter storm delayed a closely watched vote in Virginia on a natural gas pipeline compressor station that's been the frequent target of protests.

A citizen panel that votes on air pollution permits was set to decide Dec. 10 whether Virginia's most powerful corporation can build a natural gas compressor station in a historical African-American community. But the state on Dec. 9 announced the meeting was being pushed back to Dec. 19 because of a winter storm that has made roads dangerous.

Dominion Energy needs the State Air Pollution Control Board to sign off on a permit to build a station in Buckingham County to pump gas through the planned Atlantic Coast Pipeline.

The upcoming vote has become a flashpoint in the yearslong fight over the pipeline and a political imbroglio for Gov. Ralph Northam, who has come under intense criticism for his recent removal of two board members ahead of the vote.

The proposed site is about an hour west of Richmond in Union Hill, a community founded by freed slaves.

Dominion, the lead developer of the pipeline and dominant force in Virginia politics, said it chose the location because it had sufficient acreage for sale and intersects with an existing pipeline. The proposed 600-mile (966-kilometer) Atlantic Coast Pipeline would carry fracked natural gas from West Virginia into Virginia and North Carolina.

Both Dominion and the Northam administration have said they've worked carefully to ensure the station will be as environmentally friendly as possible and won't harm nearby residents.

"It is the strictest permit for a compressor station in the country," said Secretary of Natural Resources Matt Strickler.

But opposition has been fierce, both from groups that don't want the pipeline built at all and by others who worry

exhaust from the compressor station will hurt the low-income and elderly residents who live nearby.

Some opponents have accused Dominion of trying to take advantage of Union Hill's black residents. Richard Walker, who says his great-grandfather bought a 25-acre homestead in Union Hill for \$15 in 1885 as a freed slave, said Dominion is engaged in "environmental racism."

He said Dominion recently duped the state NAACP into sending a letter to public officials saying it was satisfied with the progress Dominion was making with Union Hill residents. The NAACP quickly reversed course and reaffirmed its opposition to the compressor station after the letter was made public. NAACP president Kevin Chandler did not return a request for comment.

"The same exploitation that took place 100 years ago is still taking place," said Walker, who currently lives in Richmond but has several elderly cousins who live in Union Hill.

Dominion has strongly denied the charge and has said it has deep respect for the community and wants to be a constructive partner. The company has recently offered to give more than \$5 million to help improve Union Hill.

The air pollution board was supposed to decide the issue early last month, but delayed a vote amid concerns that state's Department of Environmental Quality hadn't properly considered environmental justice issues when endorsing the permit.

Shortly afterward, Northam removed two members of the board whose terms had expired this summer and named two replacements he later said won't be voting on the compressor station permit. That leaves four members who can vote later this month, as one of the remaining five members has recused himself over a conflict of interest.

One of the board members Northam removed is Sam Bleicher. He previously abstained

n voting for a permit for one of Dominion's natural gas power stations in 2016, saying he thought new natural gas plants and pipelines were a serious mistake for the environment. But Bleicher said those views would not have affected his vote on the compressor station and should not have been cause for his removal.

"It's a completely different situation," he said. "It's not about the pipeline, it's about the location of the compressor station."

Northam said he'd planned on naming replacements after the November vote and decided to move ahead anyway after the vote was delayed. He said he's agnostic on how the board votes, and was not influenced by Bleicher's past statements or by Dominion.

"As far as the pipeline ... there's not a lot of middle road on that issue," Northam said in a recent radio interview. "I've tried to be as fair as I can."

But the move shocked some of the governor's closest allies in the environmental community and enraged some supporters, who have said he owes the public a better explanation.

"It's hurt and tarnished the governor's reputation," said Del. Mark Keam.

Dominion spokesman Aaron Ruby said the company doesn't comment on board positions.

"The governor makes his own decisions about his appointments," Ruby said.

African-American North Carolina voting rights activist dies

LOUISBURG (AP) - Mrs. Rosanell Eaton, an African-American voting rights activist who successfully helped challenge voting restrictions supported by North Carolina Republicans, has died. She was 97.

Eaton's daughter, Ms. Armenta Eaton, says her mother died Dec. 8 at home in Louisburg, North Carolina.

Mrs. Rosanell Eaton was a poll worker or precinct judge for decades who had registered to vote as a young woman in rural Franklin County despite Jim Crow restrictions.

When white men told her she had to recite the preamble to the U.S. Constitution before she could register to vote, she did it from memory, her daughter said.

Eaton grew up on a farm and went to segregated schools. Her advocacy for voting rights came in the face of racist attacks, as her house was shot at and crosses were lit on fire in her yard, her daughter said.

Ms. Armenta Eaton said her mother taught her four children to stand for what they believed in, even if it meant standing alone.

"She was a lady of principle," Armenta Eaton said. In her 90s, Mrs. Rosanell Eaton was a lead plaintiff in a lawsuit that caused voting restrictions supported by North Carolina Republicans to be struck down. In 2016, a federal court determined tougher ballot access rules adopted in 2013 were written with "almost surgical precision" to discourage black voters who tended to support Democrats. An evenly divided U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 2016 that it would not restore the GOP-backed law.

Mrs. Rosanell Eaton's lifetime of civil rights advocacy caught the notice of President Barack Obama, who invited her to the White House in 2016.

Ms. Armenta Eaton said her mother only agreed to go to meet the president when she found it out the timing wouldn't conflict with an upcoming primary election.

"She didn't want to go until the primary was over," Ms. Armenta Eaton said.

2 more North Carolina sheriffs end agreements with ICE

RALEIGH (AP) - Two more newly elected sheriffs in North Carolina have announced an end to their counties' agreements with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

News outlets report that Wake County Sheriff Gerald Baker and Durham County Sheriff Clarence F. Birkhead announced their respective policy changes Dec. 7.

Wake County joins Mecklenburg County in pulling out of the federal 287(g) program, in which local law enforcement agencies check the immigration status of people they've arrested. The 287(g) program has sent thousands of people into deportation proceedings since 2006. Mecklenburg and Wake counties are North Carolina's largest.

Durham County hasn't participated in 287(g), and it will no longer honor ICE detainees, which are used to hold suspects up to an additional 48 hours.

Wake County will only honor existing detainees.

5 Georgia officers could face trial next year in shootings

ATLANTA (AP) - As many as five white police officers in Georgia face murder trials next year in the deaths of unarmed black men.

The Atlanta Journal Constitution reported that all five officers were indicted under new state grand jury rules that went into effect in 2015. The new rules no longer allow officers to look at the prosecution's case and then testify without being cross-examined.

Former DeKalb County District Attorney Robert James said for a long time, it was unusual for any police officer to be indicted on murder charges.

The first case is expected to be that of DeKalb County Police Officer Robert Olsen, in late February. Olsen claimed self-defense after shooting Afghanistan war veteran Anthony Hill, who was naked and unarmed outside a housing complex.

City to settle lawsuit alleging 'invasive' police body probe

WASHINGTON (AP) - The city of Washington, D.C., is settling a lawsuit with a black man who accused a Metro police officer of repeatedly probing his anal cavity during a weapons search.

News outlets report the American Civil Liberties Union D.C. announced last week that Washington admits no wrongdoing and will pay an undisclosed amount to M.B. Cottingham. The ACLU and the 40-year-old Cottingham sued police in July over the September 2017 search by Officer Sean Lojaco, who denies inappropriately touching Cottingham.

Video shows Lojaco's repeatedly searching Cottingham's groin area. No weapons were found, and Cottingham wasn't arrested or charged.

The lawsuit accused Lojaco of violating Cottingham's Fourth Amendment protection against unreasonable searches. Police have said Lojaco will be fired. He is fighting the planned termination and remains on administrative leave.

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