

The Carolina Times

THE TRUTH UNBRIDED

VOLUME 98 - NUMBER 9

DURHAM, NORTH CAROLINA - SATURDAY, MARCH 9, 2019

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PRICE 50 CENTS

North Carolina Democrats see opportunity in do-over election

By Gary D. Robertson and Sarah Blake Morgan

ELIZABETHTOWN (AP) - A ballot-fraud scandal that brought down a Republican candidate and led North Carolina to order a do-over congressional election could give the Democrats a strong shot at taking back a seat that has been held by the GOP since John F. Kennedy was in the White House.

Democrat Dan McCready has a head start in fundraising and name recognition, and the allegations of ballot tampering have cast a shadow over the Republican Party that could help him win in the deeply conservative and mostly rural 9th Congressional District.

But there are also fears that the scandal could cut both ways, with fatigue and disillusionment over the electoral system keeping some voters home.

"It could be a lot of folks is not going to vote. Period," said Glendell Robinson, a Democrat who plans to vote. He said he has never seen anything like the scandal, having lived all of his 78 years in Bladen County, and hopes others will be able to overcome fears that their votes won't count.

The new contest was ordered by the state elections board last month after it concluded that GOP candidate Mark Harris' lead of 905 votes out of about 280,000 cast in November was tainted by evidence of ballot fraud by political operative Leslie McCrae Dowless and others working on Harris' behalf. Dowless was arrested Feb. 27 on conspiracy and other charges involving the 2016 general election and 2018 primary.

According to testimony at a board hearing, Dowless and others illegally collected other people's mail-in absentee ballots and in some cases forged signatures and filled in votes for local candidates. It is against the law in North Carolina for anyone but the voter or a close relative to handle a ballot.

The new election could take place as soon as July.

Harris, who has denied any wrongdoing, said he won't run again. And with two other big names, former Gov. Pat McCrory and ex-9th District Rep. Robert Pittenger, deciding not to seek the House seat either, McCready sits in a good position, even in a district that has been in GOP hands since 1963 and was won by Donald Trump by 12 percentage points in 2016.

"For right now he would definitely have to be looked at as the front-runner," Catawba College political science professor Michael Bitzer said.

Activists from both parties expect heightened national attention and lots of campaign money flowing into the off-year race. The district includes part of Charlotte and stretches through several rural counties along the South Carolina line. It also reaches close to the Army's sprawling Fort Bragg, where McCready's Iraq War military service makes him an attractive candidate.

The chairman of the Bladen County commissioners, Charles Ray Peterson, said the scandal has disillusioned voters, but he thinks they will take part in the election if they believe the state has rooted out the fraud.

"We've kind of been knocked down, but we want to get back up," he said. "And that's the reason the state needs to come in here and investigate and make sure that we get to the bottom of all this voting fraud."

He also said the scrutiny has been unfairly one-sided, citing allegations of ballot irregularities that may have benefited Democrats.

Elsewhere in the district, Union County resident Kevin Stewart expressed a similar sentiment, laying out a potential strategy for Republicans to appeal to voters.

Dowless "played both sides of the street," Stewart said, alluding to the way the political operative worked previously for at least one Democrat. "I think the hatchet is going to fall, quite frankly, on both sides of political aisle, and that's a good thing."

Stony Rushing, a Union County commissioner who is among at least three Republicans running for the seat and is Harris' choice, sounded geared up to portray Harris as a victim of the 9th District probe. Rushing called the board hearing "disgusting" and unfair to Harris.

Others suggested that a clean break from Harris and any tinge of wrongdoing is necessary.

Republican former state Sen. Tommy Tucker, who is "95 percent" certain he will run, said a "fresh start for the district would be in order."

Larry Shaheen, a Charlotte GOP consultant, said Republicans should focus squarely on McCready and try to link him to liberal Democrats in Congress.

Veteran Democratic consultant Brad Crone likewise warned against making the race all about the fraud probe, saying voters are "going to be worried about prescription drug prices; they're going to be worried about jobs and the economy."

For his part, Dennis Rollins, a Republican in Union County, emphasized voters' dilemma by vowing not to cast his ballot for McCready - McCready is in House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's "pocket," he said - while also expressing disgust about Republicans' role in the scandal.

"They've let the people of the 9th District down. And I don't know how they'll redeem themselves," he said. "I think everybody is just sick of politics."



'Racist,' 'con man': Cohen assails Trump before Congress

By Mary Clare Jalonick, Eric Tucker and Michael R. Sisak
 WASHINGTON (AP) - In a damning depiction of Donald Trump, the president's former lawyer on Feb. 27 cast him as a racist and a con man who used his inner circle to cover up politically damaging allegations about sex, and who lied throughout the 2016 election campaign about his business interests in Russia.

Michael Cohen, who previously pleaded guilty to lying to Congress, told lawmakers that Trump had advance knowledge and embraced the news that emails damaging to Hillary Clinton would be released during the campaign. But he also said he had no "direct evidence" that Trump or his aides colluded with Russia to get him elected, the primary question of special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation.

Cohen, shaking off incessant criticism from Republicans anxious to paint him as a felon and liar, became the first Trump insider to pull back the curtain on a version of the inner workings of Trump's political and business operations. He likened the president to a "mobster" who demanded blind loyalty from underlings and expected them to lie on his behalf to conceal information and protect him - even if it meant breaking the law.

"I am not protecting Mr. Trump anymore," Cohen declared.

"My loyalty to Mr. Trump has cost me everything: my family's happiness, friendships, my law license, my company, my livelihood; my honor, my reputation, and soon my freedom," Cohen said. "I will not sit back say nothing and allow him to do the same to the country."

Cohen's matter-of-fact testimony about secret payments and lies unfolded as Trump met with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. At a Vietnam hotel and unable to ignore the drama thousands of miles away, Trump lashed out on Twitter, saying Cohen "did bad things unrelated to Trump" and "is lying in order to reduce his prison time."

In testimony that cut to the heart of federal investigations encircling the White House, Cohen said he arranged a hush money payment to a porn actress at the president's behest and agreed to lie about it to the public and the first lady. He said he had lied by claiming that Trump was "not knowledgeable" about the transaction even though the president had directly arranged for his reimbursement. And he said he was left with the unmistakable impression Trump wanted him to lie to Congress about a Moscow real estate project, though the president never directly told him so.

In one revelation, Cohen said prosecutors in New York were investigating conversations Trump or his advisers had with him after his office and hotel room were raided by the FBI last April. Cohen said he could not discuss that conversation, the last contact he said he has had with the president or anyone acting on his behalf, because it remains under investigation.

The appearance marked the latest step in Cohen's evolution from legal fixer for the president - he once boasted he'd "take a bullet" for Trump - to a foe who has implicated him in federal campaign finance violations. The hearing proceeded along parallel tracks, with Democrats focusing on allegations against Trump while Republicans sought to undermine Cohen's credibility and the proceeding itself.

As Republicans blasted him as a convicted liar, a mostly unruffled Cohen sought to blunt the attacks by repeatedly acknowledging his own failings. He called himself a "fool," warned lawmakers of the perils of blind loyalty to a leader undeserving of it and pronounced himself ashamed of what he'd done to protect Trump.

Cohen is due to begin a three-year prison sentence in May, and described himself as cooperative with multiple investigations in hopes of reducing his time behind bars. He is seen as a vital witness for federal prosecutors because of his proximity to the president during key episodes under investigation and their decade-long professional relationship.

The first of six Trump aides charged in the Trump-Russia investigation to testify publicly about crimes committed during the 2016 campaign and in the months that followed, Cohen also delivered biting personal commentary on a president he said never expected to win in the first place.

"He never expected to win the primary. He never expected to win the general election," Cohen said. "The campaign - for him - was always a marketing opportunity."

He recounted how Trump made him threaten schools he attended to not release his grades and SAT scores and denigrated blacks as "too stupid" to vote for him. He said Trump once confided to him that, despite his public explanation of a medical deferment from the Vietnam War because of bone spurs, he never had any intention of fighting there.

"I find it ironic, President Trump, that you are in Vietnam right now," Cohen said.

Cohen gave lawmakers his first-person account of how he arranged to buy the silence of a porn actress and a Playboy model who said they had sex with Trump. He described a February 2017 conversation with Trump in the Oval Office in which the president reassured him that reimbursement checks sent through Federal Express were coming but would take some time to get through the White House system.

He said the president spoke to him a year later to discuss the public messaging around the transaction, and had even once put his wife, Melania, on the phone so that Cohen could lie to her.

"Lying to the first lady is one of my biggest regrets," Cohen said. "She is a kind, good person. I respect her greatly, and she did not deserve that."

In an allegation relating to Mueller's probe, Cohen said he overheard Trump confidant Roger Stone telling the candidate in the summer of 2016 that WikiLeaks would dump damaging information about Clinton.

Trump put Stone on speakerphone as Stone relayed that he had communicated with WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and that "within a couple of days, there would be a massive dump of emails that would damage Hillary Clinton's campaign," Cohen said. Damaging emails U.S. officials say were hacked by Russia were later released by WikiLeaks.

Trump responded by saying "wouldn't that be great," Cohen said. Stone disputed that account Feb. 27, and Barry Pollack, a lawyer for Assange, said Stone and Assange did not have the telephone call that Cohen described.



Kareem Abdul Jabbar's Lakers NBA Championship Ring/Courtesy KareemAbdulJabbar.com

NBA Legend Abdul-Jabbar Talks Auction to Help Kids in STEM

By Stacy M. Brown, NNPA Newswire Correspondent
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When Kareem Abdul-Jabbar left the NBA in 1989 at age 42, no NBA player had ever scored more points, blocked more shots, won more Most Valuable Player Awards, played in more All-Star Games or logged more seasons.

NBA.com reported that Jabbar's list of personal and team accomplishments is perhaps the most awesome in league history: Rookie of the Year, member of six NBA championship teams, six-time NBA MVP, two-time NBA Finals MVP, 19-time All-Star, two-time scoring champion, and a member of the NBA 35th and 50th Anniversary All-Time Teams.

He also owned eight playoff records and seven All-Star records. No player achieved as much individual and team success as did Abdul-Jabbar.

On Saturday, March 2, Jabbar auctioned off his championship rings, MVP and All-Star trophies and other rare items to benefit Jabbar's Skyhook Foundation, whose mission per Jabbar, is to "give kids a shot that can't be blocked."

"We do this by sending children from economically challenged schools to five days in the Angeles National Forest to experience the wonders of nature and learn the basics about science, technology and engineering," Jabbar told NNPA Newswire in an exclusive interview.

He said the children participate in an "immersive hands-on experience that takes kids out of school for five days and four nights."

They go from auditory learning to utilizing all of their senses in the great outdoors.

"Our hope is not just to get them out of the city to commune with the outdoors, but to stimulate an interest in the sciences that might lead them to fulfilling careers," Jabbar said.

He said he decided to sell the items because his foundation has struggled for a number of years and can use the funds.

"I need to keep it working and I have these wonderful mementos of my career and they take up space, need to be insured and you have to take care of them," Jabbar said.

"I'd rather use these to make sure the foundation gets the fund-