

State gun control supporters pushing bill that may reduce gun trafficking

Bill calls for creation of special task force and details of buyers' mental history

BY T. KEVIN WAKER
THE CHRONICLE

After striking out several times in the General Assembly, gun control advocates are hoping for a home run with newly introduced legislation that aims to cut the rate of gun trafficking in the state.

Sen. Howard Lee (D-Orange County) and Reps. Jennifer Weiss (D-Wake County) and David Miner (R-Wake County) sponsored and introduced legislation last week that would create a gun trafficking task force comprised of state, local and federal enforcement agencies. The task force would be charged with identifying and coordinating ways to do away with gun trafficking. The legislation also calls for increased sentences for those convicted of deliberately defacing serial numbers on guns and for felons in possession of guns. The state's background check system would also be revised to include mental health



Lee

records, if the legislation is approved.

"(The legislation) has Democrat and Republican sponsors, which is really unusual for a gun bill," said Jonathan Wilson, outreach coordinator for North Carolinians Against Gun Violence.

The Raleigh-based gun control organization is joining forces with Americans for Gun Safety to promote the legislation. A study sponsored by AGS spurred the push for the legislation. The study shows that North Carolina is the seventh largest supplier of guns used in out-of-state crimes, putting it ahead of states such

as New York and Michigan.

Supporters say the prongs of the legislation will make it easier for law enforcement to track the history of guns, giving officials clues to help end gun trafficking.

"The Gun Trafficking Interdiction Act will be the most aggressive attempt in the nation to infiltrate and destroy the illegal gun trafficking market," said Sen. Lee. "Through law enforcement, we are going to piece together the puzzle on every gun crime to find out how that criminal got that gun. Once we have this information, it is only a matter of time before we successfully investigate, arrest, prosecute and incarcerate the gutless perpetrators who are fueling the violent crimes on our streets."

Gov. Easley and several law enforcement groups have also thrown their support behind the legislation.

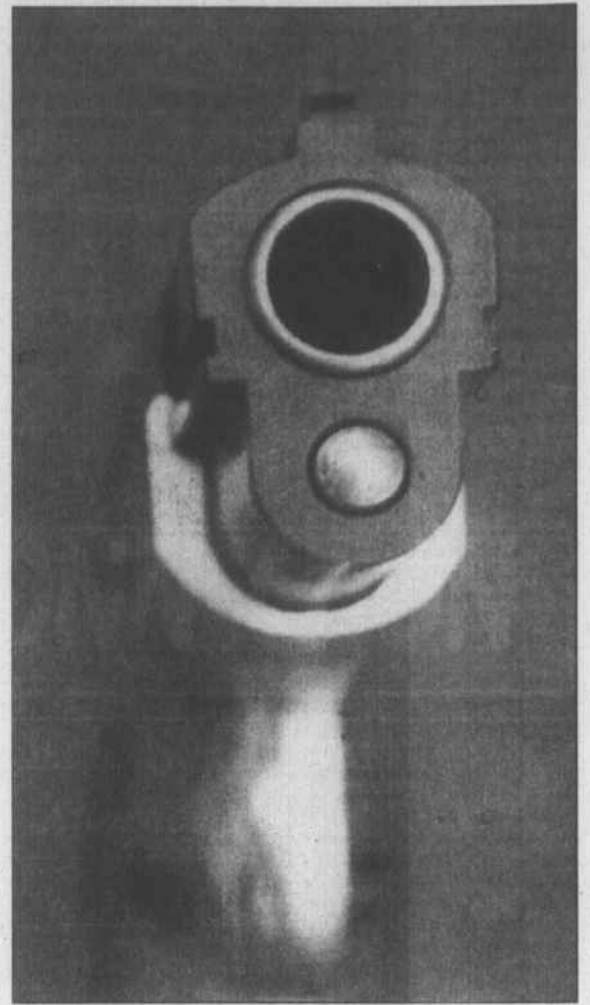
"We are supporting this legislation because we believe that the Gun Trafficking Interdiction Act will make North Carolina safer and make our officers safer," Tom Younce, legislative director of the N.C. Association of Chiefs of Police, said in a written statement. "There is a major gun trafficking problem in our state. Whether it is guns

bought in North Carolina that are trafficked up the coast, or guns that are bought here and trafficked to neighboring cities and towns."

Supporters want the legislation passed during the General Assembly's current session. But bills pushed by gun control lobbies rarely are put on the fast track in the General Assembly. Recently, gun control groups pushed for stronger gun safety laws and the closing of gun show loopholes, both measures have languished in committees.

Wilson calls the legislation a "no-brainer" because gun control supporters insist that nothing contained in the bill would make it more difficult for law-abiding citizens to purchase guns. Supporters also say that passage of the bill would not cost the state anything because federal funds could be used to fund the creation and functions of the task force.

With financial backing from AGS, North Carolinians Against Gun Violence is trying to mount a massive public relations effort around the legislation, aimed at getting state residents so excited about the bill that residents will personally contact their representatives to lobby for the bill's passage.



Guns bought in North Carolina are often used to carry out crimes in others state, according to a report.



Members of the Black Leadership Roundtable call for a death penalty moratorium outside of the Forsyth County Hall of Justice in 2001.



Black Leadership Roundtable conveners Larry Womble and Khalid Griggs present a check to the mayor of Princeville in 2000. The group raised thousands for the town.

BLR

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15 or 20 years because of all the things we have been involved in," said State Rep. Larry Womble, a co-convenor of the roundtable. "Taking important stands on issues has helped to enhance the roundtable and has given us a reputation in this city as a group that will stand up for what is right."

The city's original Black Leadership Roundtable started in the 1980s, but quickly died out because of myriad reasons. The rejuvenated organization has kept busy. Over the past few years, the roundtable has also raised thousands of dollars to help

the flood-ravaged town of Princeville, and taken strong stances on a death penalty moratorium (the group supports temporarily halting the punishment) and the recent school bond referendum (the roundtable came out strongly in favor of the bonds which passed overwhelming last year).

The theme at last week's celebration was "African-Americans and Africa: Keeping the Connection." Several Liberians are members of the roundtable. Natives of that West African nation drove home the theme by preparing a variety of Liberian dishes for the occasion. The children of Seth O. Lartey, pastor of Goler and a native of Liberia, and his wife, Jacqueline, an

African American, served as so-called "connectors." The children presented facts about the vast continent of Africa as part of the anniversary celebration.

Four prominent city residents were honored at the celebration for contributing to the roundtable, financially and in other ways. The honorees were Nigel Alston, an executive at GMAC Insurance; Dr. Charlie Kennedy, a popular local pediatrician; Ernie Pitt, the publisher of The Chronicle; and Michael Suggs, a public affairs executive at R.J. Reynolds.

Mayor Allen Joines was among the special guests at the celebration. Joines applauded and congratulated roundtable members for their

work.

"You have been the voice of our community in many respects," he told roundtable members. "Sometimes you gently nudged us into the right direction and sometimes you not so gently nudged us in the right direction."

Roundtable Co-convenor Khalid Griggs can't pick just one highlight from the organization's relatively short past.

"Each one of the activities that we were involved in were special in their own way," Griggs said.

Griggs said the roundtable's greatest achievement has been its ability to be a voice for the voiceless.

Womble and Griggs, the two heads of the organization, insist that it is not them but

members and supporters of the group that keep it afloat. People like, Linda Sutton, the group's longtime secretary. Sutton received a special award at the celebration for her dedication to the group. Sutton said the roundtable has been a perfect outlet for her need to be involved and active.

"I have always considered myself a person who is very interested in issues that arise in the community," she said.

Sutton predicts a long future for the current reincarnation of the roundtable. She said the membership, which boasts people from various walks of life, has kept its responsibility to the public in the foreground and have been strengthened by differences

instead of weakened by them. "There have been some trying times and some ups and downs, but in the long run, we have always managed to work things out," Sutton said.

When Irene Phillips, a Winston-Salem State University professor, moved to Winston-Salem from New York nearly four years ago, she immediately sought out a grassroots, active organization. She ended her search when she found out about the roundtable.

"I was looking to get involved," said Phillips, who coordinated last week's anniversary bash. "I was always involved back in New York and (the roundtable) allows me to continue to be involved."

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