

Co-speaker's retreat elicits mixed feelings

BY MARK PUENTE
STAFF WRITER

Republican leader Richard Morgan is calling his two-day get-away an issues retreat to look for ways to solve North Carolina's woes — but some GOP members continue to say Morgan has other motives behind the retreat.

Morgan, the embattled co-speaker of the N.C. House from Moore County, organized a retreat Monday and Tuesday at the exclusive Pine Needles Resort in Southern Pines.

He invited local policy experts to talk about economic and health care conditions facing the state.

Michael Walden, a professor of economics at N.C. State University, and William Roper, CEO of the UNC Health Care System, were two of the local speakers.

"These people are world-class speakers that will impact the legislators by detailing the scope of the state's problems," said Sabra Faires, Morgan's chief of staff.

Faires added that about 30 legislators and candidates were invited to the retreat. "They were selected based on their interest in certain issues and the likelihood that they will be in a position to solve the state's problems," Faires said.

But Morgan did not invite all of

the state's Republican legislators.

"I invited legislators who have helped solve tough issues in the past," he said in a press release Sept. 28. "Our focus is on policy, so we wanted to bring in the legislative leaders who can help us shape the policies that will make North Carolina a better state."

The state's GOP has a different take on the matter and did not endorse the retreat.

"The North Carolina Republican Party is not sponsoring a retreat or any other event with Rep. Richard Morgan," NCGOP Chairman Ferrell Blount said in a Sept. 24 press release.

"In fact, as widely reported, Rep. Morgan was expelled from the North Carolina Republican Party Executive Committee on May 23, 2004."

The N.C. House was evenly divided after the 2002 elections.

After a week of squabbling to elect a speaker, Morgan alienated party officials when he agreed to share the position with Rep. Jim Black, D-Mecklenburg.

Now, the political battles that have been brewing within the party since Morgan was expelled from its executive committee are creeping into the political landscape.

Bill Peaslee, NCGOP chief of staff, said the electorate will see a division

in the party because of the retreat. He accused Morgan of having other motives for the retreat. "I think he is fighting for his own survival for speaker of the House," he said.

Also, some of Morgan's House colleagues disapprove of the retreat because it happened only a month before Election Day.

Rep. Leo Daughtry, R-Johnston, said it is a case of a speaker not uniting the caucus, but dividing it. "He snubbed the party before the election," Daughtry said. "It is a shame."

But Rep. J. Russell Capps, R-Wake, said voters should not believe a divide exists within the state's GOP. "There is a problem with Morgan

and his group of supporters. Richard Morgan has a big ego," he said.

But one pundit said fighting is part of the process because politics is a struggle for power.

"A political leader ought to lead," said Ferrell Guillory, director of UNC's Program on Southern Politics, Media and Public Life. "What would people say if he didn't call his legislators together?"

"I don't think Morgan having a retreat is a cause for alarm or that it adds to the divisiveness of the Republican Party."

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