

# State eyes election reforms

BY HALLEY KUEFFER  
STAFF WRITER

The aftermath of last year's contested elections has left North Carolina questioning its ability to hold fair, problem-free races.

In response, members of the N.C. Senate introduced a number of bills Monday to reform the voting process in the state.

The bills come after two races for Council of State dragged on well past November. One, the contest for state superintendent, is still undecided, with a court hearing scheduled for today in Wake County.

One of the many reform bills introduced Monday would require voting systems to record all votes on paper. It also includes a measure to provide checks on electronic voting equipment and calls for standardizing purchases of equipment throughout the state.

Another bill would allow voters to recast lost ballots during a two-week period after the election.

The measure was proposed in response to an incident in Carteret

County in which 4,500 votes were lost — leaving the race for commissioner of agriculture undecided for weeks after the election.

Under the proposal, a local board of elections would contact the voters whose ballots are lost and invite them to vote again, said Sen. Austin Allran, R-Catawba, a sponsor of all of the bills.

A pilot program to continue the use of one-stop voting through Election Day is another proposed solution. In many areas, one-stop voting allows citizens to vote outside their precincts.

This is the most controversial of the proposed changes, Allran said, because many legislators think the state would see an increase in voter fraud if individuals vote outside their precincts.

Taking earlier steps to count absentee ballots also is part of the package of legislation.

"This was requested to allow them to count ballots as they come in so that they are not deluged at the last minute, and they have more time to

*"When voters go to the polls and vote in good faith, then their votes should be protected and counted."*

GEORGE RABINOWITZ, UNC PROFESSOR OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

count the ballots," Allran said.

A final bill focuses on giving public employees leave to work at voter precincts.

Both parties have called for voter reform in recent weeks.

"The Democrats do control the House and Senate, and in terms of the party's involvement, (the proposed legislation) is more about protecting voting rights than party politics," said Schorr Johnson, communications director for the N.C. Democratic Party.

Allran said there is a high probability that these measures will be enacted because voter reform is such a pressing issue.

"(Legislators) are reacting to some things that have been really difficult," said Thad Beyle, UNC

professor of political science. "Each one of them is a problem."

Beyle said he thinks reforms are necessary to help the state organize its election process.

George Rabinowitz, UNC professor of political science, advocated random checks of voting machines in order to ensure their accuracy. He said that would be an effective way to eliminate voter fraud.

"I think that North Carolina is better than most states, but I do think that the reform is needed nationwide as well," he said.

"When voters go to the polls and vote in good faith, then their votes should be protected and counted."

Contact the State & National Editor at [stntdesk@unc.edu](mailto:stntdesk@unc.edu).

# Meek wants to rebuild from the grassroots up

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

RALEIGH — New state Democratic Party Chairman Jerry Meek believes his party can only regain political pre-eminence by returning a voice to local activists laboring in their communities to tip the political balance in their favor.

County and precinct leaders believe donor lists and training will help as they try to push their favorites into offices that often breed candidates for higher office, Meek said. And he plans to provide both.

"We won't continue to win statewide elections if we continue to lose county commissioner races, and register of deeds races, and sheriff's races," he told Democrats when they elected him two weeks ago. "We won't rebuild our party unless we build our party county by county."

Meek upset longtime party operative Ed Turlington — the favorite of Gov. Mike Easley and former Gov. Jim Hunt — to win the chairman's election. He has

pledged not to tinker with the party's well-oiled state House and Senate legislative fund-raising machines as he attempts to reinvigorate the party.

"The House and Senate caucuses have done an excellent job of targeting races," Meek said in an interview this week. "The state party will continue to be very supportive of that."

Meek's efforts to empower disaffected county and precinct leaders contrasts with the top-heavy approach legislative leaders use in Raleigh.

House Speaker Jim Black, D-Mecklenburg, and Senate leader Marc Basnight, D-Dare, raised \$2 million to assist candidates in swing districts during the 2004 election.

The candidates raise money and give it to the party, which then doles out much of it to key legislative candidates targeted by caucus leaders.

The money helped Democrats take back control of the House after winning several key districts and extend their hold on the Senate.

# Easley cuts worry local schools

May affect city, county capital projects

BY ADAM W. RHEW  
STAFF WRITER

With major capital projects on the horizon, local school officials say state and county funding cuts could cause serious problems.

Steve Scroggs, assistant superintendent for support services for Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools, said Gov. Mike Easley's recommended budget would cut more than \$87 million in funding that public school districts use for discretionary purposes and building improvements.

If approved by state legislators, the cuts mean the district would lose almost \$600,000 in funds from its operating budget.

City schools Superintendent Neil Pedersen said he was disappointed in Easley's proposal to cut discretionary funding.

He said cuts to the district's operating budget are not a new phenomenon — last fiscal year, the district also lost money because of state reductions.

Pedersen said the operating budget cuts, if continued in the future, would affect in some way the opening of the district's third high school.

"In 2007 ... we will need one-and-a-half million dollars in new money to open the doors," he said of the planned opening date.

That money would be used for initial start-up costs like hiring janitors and buying athletic equipment.

And Easley's recommended cuts are not the only ones the district faces. In October, the Orange County Board of Commissioners began discussions about changing the way the county allocates funds for capital projects.

Since 1988, the commissioners have allocated about 74 percent of their annual capital spending budget to schools, leaving the remainder for county capital projects.

But now, commissioners want to change the share split by city schools and Orange County Schools to 60 percent of the capital budget.

"That's something we're not quite up to speed on," Scroggs said. "It all happened so fast."

The cuts come as both city and county school districts engage in major capital projects.

County schools officials in November broke ground on the district's third middle school, which will be located in Efland.

The county funding cuts would specifically affect capital projects such as the building of the city schools' third high school.

Although concerned, Scroggs said the cuts would not delay the school. "We're gonna get this high school built come hell or high water."

County schools officials were not available for a full interview, but Joseph Tullios, director of budget for the district, said state officials often change budget predictions during the school year.

Tullios also emphasized that the process is still in its early stages.

And while Pedersen expressed similar sentiments, he said the long-term effects from the combination of budget cuts could be serious.

"I am very concerned that in the next five years, it's going to be difficult for us to maintain the quality of education we've been offering our students."

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