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THE CAROLINA JOURNAL

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They picked on ‘the wrong chick’

Rep. Tricia Cotham details harassment by Democrat colleagues, activists in announcing her switch to Republican Party affiliation.

BY ALEX BALTZEGAR

On Wednesday morning, Republican leaders announced that Rep. Tricia Cotham, a longtime Democrat from Mecklenburg County, is joining the North Carolina Republican Party.

Cotham, who was elected as a Democrat in 2022, said she was switching because the Democratic Party is not the party it once was.

Cotham has voted in Democratic primaries since at least 2005. She was married to the Chairman of the North Carolina Democratic Party. Her mom is a Mecklenburg Democratic county commissioner and a delegate to the Democratic National Convention. Her dad was the chairman of the Mecklenburg Democrats.

“As long as I have been a Democrat, the Democrats have tried to be a big tent, but where the [modern-day Democratic Party is now] has become unrecognizable to me and to so many others in this state and country,” Cotham said.

Cotham said the Democratic Party “wants to villainize anyone who has free thought, free judgment, who has solutions, who wants to get to work to better our state.”

“If you don’t do exactly what Democrats want you to do, they will try to bully you. They will try to cast you aside. I saw that when I first ran for office and was told, ‘Why didn’t you ask for permission?’ I didn’t think I needed to do that, and quite frankly, I was offended,” Cotham said, saying as a female, this approach especially disturbed her.

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Cotham answers questions from the press for the first time as a Republican.

Republicans more often than she did previously, then her move to officially switch parties could pave the way for Republicans to pass more of their agenda.

Cotham challenges Cooper's control

Cotham indicated that behind closed doors, Democrats operate in a very top-heavy manner.

“It became very clear to me early on, in January, that you better vote in line with everything Governor Cooper tells you to do, from signing onto bills, to [letting Cooper] pick your seat on the House floor, to your committee requests—all of this sense of control,” said Cotham. “I will not be controlled by anyone.”

"MEAN TWEETS"

Hiiii @triciacotham! Thanks for the permission to unleash hell on you in 2024. We won't hold back! 🤔

 **Nida Allam**
twitter.com

There were already several factors prohibiting Democrats from being able to stop Republicans on major legislation this year. Before Cotham’s switch, the House had a working supermajority; the Senate had an official supermajority; and Governor

Cooper signed a bill to expand Medicaid—conditional on the passage of a state budget—which will include a number of policy provisions.

These factors combined make it nearly impossible for Cooper to have any say in legislative outcomes for the rest of his tenure as governor.

Democrats behind the scenes

“I have always tried to work across the aisle from day one, and I am proud of that work because that means we are working together as statesmen and stateswomen,” said Cotham. “Unfortunately, that is taught in the Democratic Party.”

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CON repeal is critical care for patient access

DONNA KING
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



With the ink dry on Medicaid expansion in North Carolina, the impact of expanding the government entitlement program to hundreds of thousands of people is coming into focus. Lawmakers drafted the expansion bill to be contingent on Gov. Roy Cooper signing the state budget. It would take a dramatic turn of events for Cooper to reject the legislature’s budget with Medicaid expansion on the line, but I’ve learned to never say never.

The expansion bill reforms four of the state’s 27 certificate-of-need, or CON, laws that regulate the healthcare industry. CON requires providers to demonstrate community need for a medical service before requesting permission from the state to offer it. Two of those four reforms in the bill would apply only to fewer than 15 of the state’s most populated counties, and three years from now.

It sounds “wonky,” but CON regulations impact how many healthcare providers are in your town, and what services they are allowed to provide. Add more than half a million people to Medicaid, and that four-week wait

for an appointment could double or triple. Reforming CON laws means the difference in health outcomes, just by being able to see a provider.

CON goes back to the 1970s. A federal mandate required states to adopt the regs, arguing that they keep medical practices from failing by stopping them from financially overextending themselves with expensive equipment and facilities. The mandate was repealed in the 1980s. Some states have abandoned the regulations. Among the 35 that still have CON, North Carolina is the second-most regulated in the nation.

Calls to lift CON regulations have surrounded the Medicaid expansion debate for years, with critics arguing that a free-market approach opens up access to care and brings down prices. However, powerful interest groups have resisted. Among other arguments, there is concern that repeal could launch a new crop of private medical businesses, drawing too many privately insured patients away from hospitals and collapsing the financially fragile rural hospitals that depend on private insurance income.

On a positive note, as twin mental health and drug epidemics rage, the Medicaid expansion bill does eliminate burdensome certificate-of-need requirements

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Let’s Make a Deal

Here is what North Carolina lawmakers want in return for Medicaid expansion, but is the juice worth the squeeze? NC may end up with a lemon.

KEY BUDGETARY PROVISIONS

▲ 7.5% STATE EMPLOYEES will receive pay raises of at least 7.5% over two years.	▲ 10% TEACHERS will receive pay raises just north of 10% over the next two years.	▲ 11% STATE TROOPERS will receive an 11% pay raise over two years.
▲ 10% LAW ENFORCEMENT and corrections officers will receive raises over 10%.	SCHOOL OF CIVIC LIFE AND LEADERSHIP AT UNC-CH To focus on developing democratic competencies based on American history and political tradition.	 Funding to move UNC-Chapel Hill’s LAW SCHOOL to a new location.

BY ALEX BALTZEGAR

North Carolina House leaders unveiled their proposed state budget in March. Gov. Roy Cooper will face pressure to sign the final version because Medicaid expansion is tied to passing a budget.

The House’s budget would cost \$27.9 billion, a 10.5% increase from the previous budget and a number agreed upon in advance between the House and Senate.

Following the House budget

release, the Senate is expected to release its version before the two chambers meet to “conference,” meaning leaders from both chambers will negotiate a budget to send to Cooper.

There has been speculation as to whether the budget would include additional policy provisions, such as major abortion legislation, the SAVE Act, or the Parent’s Bill of Rights. None of these components are included in the House’s budget.

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The progressive left’s tale of two states

AMY O. COOKE
PUBLISHER



Don’t like progressive-left policies? Then don’t go to North Carolina. “We’re going to flip it,” was the warning from one of the architects of Colorado’s “Blueprint” shortly before I left the Rocky Mountains for the warmer, friendlier confines of North Carolina in January 2020.

When Colorado’s professional left speaks, my experience is that we should listen. I’m still recovering from PTSD from being on Colorado’s political frontlines as the state went from solid red to blue to progressive green in a decade.

If you haven’t read the book “The Blueprint: How Democrats Won Colorado (and Why Republicans Everywhere Should Care),” you should, regardless of political affiliation. It’s a fascinating clinical read about the dramatic transformation of Colorado’s political landscape through the left’s strategic investments in data and infrastructure. The left’s campaign changed the political trajectory of that state for a generation.

Once considered a destination state, “Colorado lost 3.2% more people than it gained in 2022,” reports KDVR. It’s no wonder; progressive-left policies have spurred a surging crime rate, massive homeless encampments, burdensome regulations, horrific traffic, and climbing property taxes.

Since 2016, Colorado has dropped five places on Cato’s freedom index. I expect that decline to continue. Only the Taxpayer’s Bill of Rights keeps the state from going over an econom-

ic cliff. As Colorado’s business climate deteriorates, CNBC names North Carolina as the top state in the nation for business.

My Colorado experience provides some context for an interesting Politico article about how the same professional left that flipped Colorado is faring in the Tar Heel State.

The headline is revealing: “How Democrats got sidetracked in their swing state of the future. North Carolina has never evolved into the true tossup state Barack Obama’s 2008 win once appeared to foreshadow.”

“[T]he party has never been able to push North Carolina into true tossup-state status like it has with Arizona or Georgia.”

“That’s left North Carolina Democrats having to fight for the resources now flowing freely into places like Arizona and Georgia, now two of the most tightly divided battlegrounds in America (which did not turn blue in 2008).”

Democrats haven’t won North Carolina’s presidential electors nor a U.S. Senate seat since 2008. Currently, the GOP has a veto-proof majority in the state Senate and fall one seat shy of a veto-proof majority in the state House. Republicans rule the judiciary and Council of State. The only lever of power they don’t control is the executive branch.

The left’s lack of success hasn’t been from lack of trying or resources. North Carolina was supposed to be the left’s gateway to the South. By our estimates, leftist millionaires, billionaires, foundations, corporations, and others have pumped well over \$450 million into the state over the last decade. That doesn’t include political-party or PAC dollars.

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Medicaid Expansion Would Deepen Worker Shortage

DeSantis tops Biden 44% to 41% in poll of NC voters

BY DAVID BASS

Republican Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis beats President Joe Biden in a hypothetical head-to-head match-up for president 44% to 41%, according to a new Civitas Poll of likely general election voters in North Carolina.

Asked the same question but with former president Donald Trump as the GOP nominee, voters picked Biden over Trump 45% to 43%. The differences in both results are within the poll's margin of error.

The results are an early test of the political winds as the 2024 presidential nomination race heats up. Only two candidates on the Republican side have officially announced — Trump and former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley, whose name was not included in the Civitas Poll.

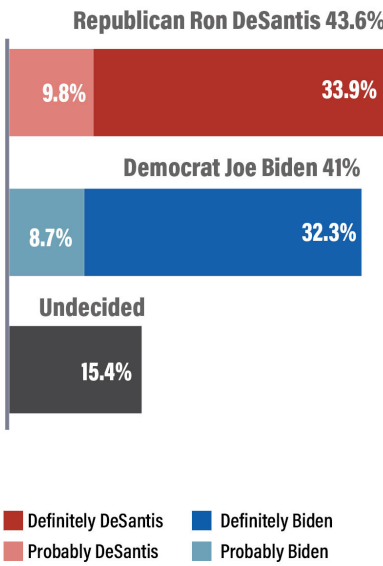
Former Vice President Mike Pence polled at 39% to Biden's 41%. Pence is weighing a bid for the nomination but hasn't announced yet.

"Yet again, the race to the White House will flow through North Carolina," said John Locke Foundation President Donald Bryson. "These results indicate that the presidential race in North Carolina could be close. While Ron DeSantis was the only Republican candidate, in this poll, to come out over President Biden, all three results were within the margin of error."

The Civitas Poll also surveyed

Biden v DeSantis

If the 2024 general election for President was held today, and you had to make a choice based on these options, who would you vote for?



Cygnal Polling, on behalf of John Locke Foundation, surveyed 605 likely general election voters from March 26-27, 2023 with a margin of error of ±3.98%.



voters' political preferences at the state level in North Carolina. On that front, Republicans continue to enjoy an advantage on the generic ballot.

Asked if they would support a GOP candidate or Democrat candidate for the General Assembly, 46% picked Republicans and 42% Democrats. The split nar-

rowed slightly for governor, with 45% picking a Republican and 43% a Democrat. For Congress, 45% picked the GOP and 42% a Democrat.

Gov. Roy Cooper's approval rating holds steady at 48% approving and 37% disapproving.

On election integrity issues, 59% said they believe the 2024 election in North Carolina will be "free and fair," while 28% said it would not be. Support for voter ID was strong at 68%.

Nationally, 69% said the country is headed on the wrong track, compared to 22% who said right track. President Biden's approval rating stands at 37%, compared to 56% who disapprove.

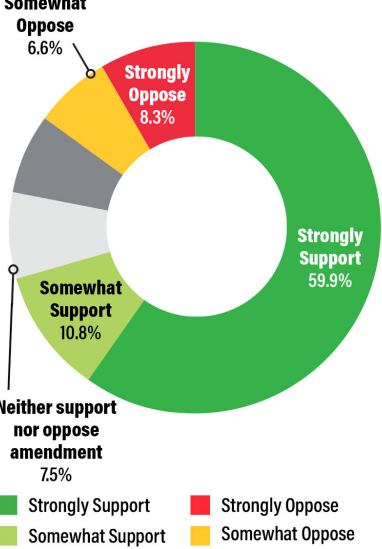
On environmental issues, 54% said they believe the environment in the U.S. is less clean today than in 2005.

The poll queried voter attitudes on five state constitutional amendments:

- "Would you support or oppose a state constitutional amendment to provide that the right to live includes the right to work, and therefore the right of persons to work shall not be denied or abridged on account of membership or non-membership, or payment or non-payment, in any labor organization?" 54% support, 14% oppose, and 13% are undecided.

Citizen Voting Amendment

Would you support or oppose a state constitutional amendment to modify the North Carolina Constitution to clarify that only United States citizens may vote in North Carolina?



Cygnal Polling, on behalf of John Locke Foundation, surveyed 605 likely general election voters from March 26-27, 2023 with a margin of error of ±3.98%.



- "Would you support or oppose a state constitutional amendment adding the Taxpayer Protection Act to the North Carolina Constitution that would limit the growth of State spending to inflation plus population growth, require yearly deposits in a Savings Reserve or Unfunded Liability

- Reserve, return excess revenue to taxpayers, and submit tax increases to a vote of the people?" 57% support, 11% oppose, and 9% are unsure.
- "Would you support or oppose a state constitutional amendment to remove the literacy test requirement for voting from the North Carolina Constitution? The federal Voting Rights Act of 1965 prohibits the implementation of this requirement." 42% support, 28% oppose, and 12% are unsure.
- "Would you support or oppose a state constitutional amendment to modify the North Carolina Constitution to clarify that only United States citizens may vote in North Carolina?" 71% support, 15% oppose, and 8% are unsure.
- "Would you support or oppose a state constitutional amendment to prohibit condemnation of private property except for a public use and to provide for the payment of just compensation with right of trial by jury in all condemnation cases?" 43% support, 9% oppose, and 13% are unsure.

The poll was conducted March 26-27 and surveyed 605 likely general election voters.

SBI director testifies on intimidation tactics from governor's senior staff

BY DONNA KING

In revealing, sometimes emotional, testimony March 28 before the N.C. House Oversight and Reform Committee, State Bureau of Investigation Director Bob Schurmeier described a culture of political strong-arming from Gov. Roy Cooper's senior staff.

Schurmeier accused Cooper staffers of interfering with his ability to manage direct reports, intimidating him with threats, and calling for his resignation.

Schurmeier pinpointed Cooper's Chief of Staff Kristi Jones and General Counsel Eric Fletcher as being the couriers of the pressure campaign, threatening him with a "big investigation" and accusing him of racial discrimination if he did not resign. He refused to do so.

"I told them, 'you all are lawyers, so you know when I say that I deserve some due process,'" he testified. After two meetings with Jones and Fletcher, in which Schurmeier says he was threat-



SBI Director Bob Schurmeier testifies before the House Oversight and Reform Committee on March 28, 2023.

ened with an investigation at SBI expense, no such investigation materialized.

DIVIDED LOYALTIES

Schurmeier came forward about the political drama to law-

makers. He said the future of the state's top criminal investigative agency depended on distancing it from the Department of Public Safety and allowing it to operate more independently, but with accountability.

He described an environment in which senior members of his staff were hired and directed by the governor's office and had divided loyalties, particularly his lead attorney, listed on the SBI website as Angel Gray, who was al-

legedly "reminded that she works for the governor" by one of Cooper's senior advisers.

Schurmeier said both SBI lawyers happened to be "out" when Schurmeier was confronted on two occasions by Jones and Fletcher. When he consulted with Gray as the agency's general counsel, he said she was not responsive. They went long periods without talking at all. He says he requested to Jones that Gray be reassigned, to no avail.

"I tried to part ways, but find a kind way to do it," he testified. Jones allegedly said Gray's pay grade prevented her transfer.

Among the jurisdictions under the State Bureau of Investigation are drug trafficking, arson, embezzlement, and election law violations.

"I think you stepped on some toes," said Rep. Jeffrey McNeelly, R-Iredell, in committee, "The good ol' boys didn't like getting their toes stepped on, so they tried

OFFICE OF HOUSE RULES CHAIRMAN DESTIN HALL

Rep. Tricia Cotham

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ocratic Party that that's a good thing, but there is little action." Cotham said her Democratic colleagues called her a traitor and a spy. They told her not to come to Democratic caucus meetings because they were concerned Cotham would share information with Republicans.

Democratic-aligned groups not only went after Cotham on social media, but she says there were multiple instances where her 12-year-old son received text messages.

"Interest and lobbyist groups that are aligned with the Democratic Party have directly sent messages to my 12-year-old son, and that needs to stop," said Cotham. "And it's not just been one time."

Cotham said female Democratic colleagues confronted her for having too long of hair and wearing the wrong color outfit on certain days. She said she was attacked for matters as trivial as which emojis she had in her social media bio.

"One of the absolute worst moments, which was really a turning point for me, was when I was criticized for using the 🇺🇸 and the 🙏 on all my social media platforms, and even [having an American flag] on the back of different vehicles that I have."

"I could not believe that was the conversation that was happening at the time, and I was deeply offended," said Cotham. "I am proud to be an American. I am proud of our country. I'm proud of the men and women in my family who have served."

Cotham said when Speaker Moore made her Education Committee Chair that, instead of this being seen as good, she was shunned and called a traitor. Democratic leadership even assigned her what she referred to as a "shadow chair," who kept tabs on her for the Democrats.

What Republican leaders said

Republican U.S. Rep. Dan Bishop, NC-08, who stumbled into the press conference on crutches because of a torn Achilles he suffered on Sunday, was the first to speak about Cotham at the press conference where Republicans introduced Cotham as their own.

"I've been friends with Tricia Cotham, even though we've been political opponents, for many years," said Bishop. "I've been good friends with her mother," Bishop said, in reference to Patricia Cotham, who is a Democratic National Committee member, a delegate member of the Executive Council of the N.C. Democratic Party, and is serving her third term on the Mecklenburg Board of County Commissioners.

"I'm glad to be here with a friend today," Bishop said. "She is a strong woman, a strong leader... My entire life has been in Mecklenburg County, and I can tell you this. Tricia Cotham is going to get all the support she needs in Mecklenburg County."

"We'll probably still have disagreements from time to time, but this latest development in which a major party cannot



Rep. Tricia Cotham shakes hands with House Speaker Tim Moore on April 5, 2023.

"MEAN TWEETS"

Jenna Wadsworth @jennawads... · 11m

Researchers are studying how #LongCovid affects mental cognition in patients, with a majority of findings showing increased cognitive impairment, brain fog, & decreased executive function in these #COVID survivors.

Perhaps we're witnessing that reality today in NC. #NCpol #NCGA

1

2

224

Irene Godínez @irene_godinez · 10m

Perhaps it's a good time to remind folx that white women play a key role in upholding white supremacy. @triciacotham will carry the water, in the tradition of many other yt women, to ensure the GOP agenda becomes law. Their agenda is inherently anti-progress & anti-dignity. #ncpol

abide dissenters on particular issues within its ranks is something that is bad for America," said Bishop. "I've never seen that in the Republican Party."

Senate leader Phil Berger, R-Rockingham, whose Senate Republican caucus already had a supermajority, said there were a lot of people like Cotham who feel left behind by the Democratic Party.

"It is unfortunate that [Cotham] is now the latest in a long line of folks to come before the public and say, 'I didn't really leave the Democratic Party; it left me,'" Berger said. "There are a lot of folks in North Carolina who feel exactly the same way. It's one of the reasons that the Democratic Party in North Carolina continues to lose members in historic ways."

Sen. Vickie Sawyer, R-Iredell, called Cotham a top legislator in the General Assembly and the most powerful Democratic lawmaker from the Charlotte region. And yet, "she was rewarded with being shunned by her party, vilified by her caucus, and bullied by other women," Sawyer said.

"In [the Republican caucus] freedom, liberty, and independent thinking are valued," Republican House Majority Leader John Bell, R-Wayne, said. "We like strong-minded people with opinions, various backgrounds, and ways of life to come into our caucus."

"I respect your bravery. You have a backbone, there is no doubt," Bell said.

Rep. Jason Saine, R-Lincoln, another top Republican in the House, said he had noticed Cotham, who is "normally smiling, who is normally happy, start to have a little concern on her face" over the last few weeks leading up to Cotham's departure from the Democratic Party.

"Tricia Cotham has been someone who is reasonable, who is moderate, who we've been able to work with in this session," said Rep. Destin Hall, R-Caldwell. "Her principles and her views have not changed. What has changed is the Democratic Party in North Carolina. The party has left her, and it is leaving reasonable people behind."

Hall also called out some of the comments made against Cotham.

"The misogynistic and sexist accusations that have been put forward against Rep. Cotham is absolutely despicable," Hall said.

A group of people standing "Everybody just can't be the same and do the exact same thing and act the exact same way on every issue," Cotham said. "What happened to the concept of a big tent party?"

"When we hear these ideas—we're inclusive, we're tolerant, we're so welcoming to everybody—no, you're not," Cotham said. "I think the country is get-

ting sick and tired of that. I'm not going to fit into a box. I'm not here to push the button just because someone tells me to."

Cotham has previously been pro-choice, even so far as rebuking Republicans in a 2015 floor speech for proposing longer waiting periods. When asked if she would support a 13-week abortion ban, Cotham said she was going to pray on the issue.

"I'm still the same person, and I am going to do what I believe is right and follow my conscience," Cotham said. "I'm going to listen to others; I'm going to ask their opinion; but most importantly, I'm going to look inside, and I'm going to pray on this issue. I know that's where I'll find the answer."

Democratic minority leader Robert Reives put out a statement many read as calling for primaries against the three Democrats who did not show up on a critical vote. After the news broke that Cotham was switching her party affiliation, Reives said she should resign.

When a reporter asked Cotham about her relationship with Reives and whether she had given him notice of her intent to switch parties, Cotham said Reives has not talked to her all year, despite her efforts to reach out to him.

Speaker Moore said he has been having conversations with other Democrats about joining the Republicans.

Moore also said there is intent on redrawing Senate, House, and Congressional maps.

Cotham's background

Cotham gained a reputation as a moderate Democrat this year. She was one of a few Democrats who had been willing to work with Republicans on certain issues, including those related to public safety and school choice.

Previously, Cotham was appointed to serve in the state House by Democratic Governor Mike Easley, replacing powerful Democratic legislator Rep. Jim Black, who is best known for illegally paying a Republican to change parties in an IHOP bathroom. When she was appointed, she was the youngest female member of the state House in North Carolina history. Cotham served until 2016 when she announced she would not run again. Instead, she ran in the Democratic primary for the newly drawn U.S. Congressional District but lost to Alma Adams.

Democratic backlash

Cotham received backlash from the Democrats when she was not present for a vote to override Governor Cooper's first veto this year. She was one of three Democrats not present. Cooper's veto would have been sustained if two out of the three absent Democrats had voted against the override.

However, Cotham and Rep. Cecil Brockman, D-Guilford, were out for medical reasons, and Rep. Michael Wray, D-Northampton, said he was out because of a family emergency.

After these three missed the critical vote, Democratic minority leader Robert Reives said that Democrats can make their voices heard in the primary and general elections, referring to Cotham, Wray, and Brockman.

Immediately after the 2022 election, there was speculation that one or more House Democrats were thinking about changing parties.

Cotham's House seat in Mecklenburg is not a Republican-leaning or even a swing seat. House District 112 is a district that President Biden won by 23%.

Oftentimes when members switch parties, it is viewed as a tactical decision due to changing dynamics of their district. Cotham's current district will likely not be voting Republican anytime soon.

Supportive Democrats

Following the news of Cotham's switch, Brockman said Democrats have themselves to blame. "I hope the [Democratic] party takes a strong look at how they react to people making the decisions that they make," Brockman said. "They put themselves in this position."

Former Democratic state senator Joel Ford talked about his experience siding with Republicans on some issues.

"Yeah and [Democrats] turned on me like a wild pack of dogs," Ford said. "The most dangerous thing a Democrat can be today is an independent thinker."

Not as supportive Democrats

Many Democrats were not as understanding of Cotham's decision. Several of her Democratic colleagues took to Twitter to voice their thoughts.

Sen. Natasha Marcus, D-Mecklenburg, called her decision dishonest and undemocratic. "If candidate Tricia Cotham had been honest before the election, she would not have won her seat," said Marcus. "The people of her district do not support the extreme rightwing policies that the NCGOP is shoving down our throats, now with her help. This is dishonest and undemocratic." Rep. Graig Meyer, D-Orange, and N.C. Senate Democrats were among hundreds of Twitter users to retweet her comment.

North Carolina is the third state in less than one month where state Republicans have gained supermajorities. The Tar Heel state joins Wisconsin, which gained a supermajority when a Republican won a special election, and the Louisiana state House, which gained a supermajority after a Democratic defection.

"I want to be a part of that change agent for the greater good of our state," Cotham said toward the end of the press conference.

New bill aims to help North Carolina workers afford housing

ALEX BALTZEGAR

The North Carolina Senate introduced a creative solution to address critical workforce housing shortages for North Carolinians. Specifically designed to create affordable housing for teachers, first responders, nurses, and first-time buyers, Senate Bill 317 would provide a new option for a developer to bypass certain local regulations if the developer agrees to sell at least one-fifth of the lots at what would likely be a loss. Despite taking a loss, developers would benefit by increasing profit margins on the other 80% of lots. Under the bill, developers could pursue this option by (1) buying at least 10 acres, (2) using 20% of the lots for single-family “workforce housing,” and (3) selling at least half of those lots at a price affordable for prospective buyers who make 80% of the “area median income,” while the rest of the “workforce housing improved lots” can be priced for those earning up to 100% of the median area income. “We have a workforce housing crisis in North Carolina,” said bill sponsor Sen. Paul Newton, R-Cabarrus. “Firefighters, teachers, and nurses across our state can’t afford to buy a home. As a result, many North Carolinians are missing out on the American Dream and the opportunity to build generational wealth.” In Raleigh, seasonally adjusted median home values have gone up 31.6% to \$423,838 since January 2021 and 109% since



Sen. Paul Newton, R-Cabarrus, chairs a committee meeting.

January 2013, when the median value was \$203,000. In Charlotte, home values increased by 26.9% over the past year. “Reasonably priced housing options are scarce in North Carolina cities due to the stranglehold local governments have on new building,” said Paige Terryberry, senior analyst for fiscal policy at the John Locke Foundation. “In North Carolina, the demand for housing units is up. Yet new home growth is stagnant or below its potential in many areas due to a handful of factors. As a result, prices are rising.” According to a 2021 study from the National Association

of Home Builders, about 24% of the price of a home stems from the cost of government regulations. About 10.5% of the final house price was attributed to regulation during the development of the lot, and the other 13.3% was due to regulation during the construction phase. S.B. 317 is primarily aimed at decreasing that 10.5% regulation cost to developers. “I think it’s a really creative solution to bring developers and local governments to the table to solve the problem of low housing supply in North Carolina,” said Jordan Roberts, director of

government affairs for the John Locke Foundation. “We hosted a policy summit recently where we had speakers from the left and the right agreeing on these very reforms to make it easier to build more, and a different variety, of housing in North Carolina,” Roberts added. “I’m glad to see these bipartisan ideas come to fruition in this piece of legislation.” Newton suggested that another benefit to homeowners under this bill would be that the 80% portion of the developments that aren’t subject to workforce housing requirements will have a natural incentive to

help keep up the other 20%. “This bill is a targeted free-market response to our housing crisis, and it is intended to ensure houses get built,” Newton said. “This bill minimizes regulatory burden to create a market incentive for builders to develop affordable housing units by constructing market-rate homes without heavy regulatory costs.” Mike Carpenter, executive vice president of the North Carolina Home Builders Association, said this bill would help clear unnecessary regulations for developers. “We’re calling on the market to solve a problem that, in many ways, is being created by over-regulation,” Carpenter said. “We can help fix this housing crisis by removing some of the regulation—what we would contend is unnecessary regulation—to allow the market to respond.” Newton does not think S.B. 317 will stand in the way of local government oversight in critical areas. “Local government units will still have authority to oversee building codes, environmental permits, and the implementation of income requirements for the workforce housing units,” Newton said. “North Carolina has done an incredible job of attracting large numbers of job creators to our state,” said Newton. “Implicit in our promises to job creators is that their employees will have somewhere to live. This bill makes good on that promise and seeks to allow all North Carolinians to access the American Dream of homeownership.”

INTERVIEW: Checking in on ‘In the Pines’

The John Locke Foundation, a Raleigh-based think tank, has recently completed its first film production, a short titled “In the Pines.” We sat down again with Locke’s creative director, Greg de Deugd, who wrote and produced the film.

CJ: Thanks for chatting with us. Last time we checked in, you had just finished shooting the film.

GD: That’s right. Now it’s all done. We have started submitting it to film festivals and will host a red carpet screening on April 28 at The Cary Theater.

CJ: And how can we get tickets for that?

GD: Right now, it is invitation-only, but we are giving away a handful of invites if you register at www.inthepinesfilm.com.

CJ: Tell us a little about the film.

GD: It’s a short vignette set in 1898 North Carolina. The Demo-

cratic Party had lost power in the state for the first time since the end of Reconstruction. They were determined to regain it by dividing this new union of Republicans, black North Carolinians, and populist farmers. They called this plan their “Campaign of White Supremacy.” It was essentially a campaign of propaganda and violence meant to divide their opponents and, mainly, to stop blacks from voting.

CJ: So, the story revolves around three young people who got caught up in those events?

GD: Yes. We decided to tell the story from the point of view of young people who grew up in a unique, rather idyllic environment for the time. Wilmington was a notable example of black and white citizens working alongside each other successfully in both business and government. Wilmington was a prosperous town on the rise. It was a brief glimpse of what could have been. We felt that if we told the story from the perspective of these kids who grew up in harmony, suddenly having their world ripped

out from under them ... partisan politics, propaganda, and race hate destroying their lives ... it would really resonate.

CJ: How long is the film?

GD: It’s a little under 20 minutes long, but we plan to use it as a proof of concept for a feature or mini-series. The characters we created have so much more to tell, and the world of the film is ripe for exploration.

CJ: Not to mention it has universal themes. It’s not just a North Carolina story but a very American story.

GD: Most people love this country because we put ourselves on a path toward perfection. We are constantly striving to be the best nation in the world, and the story of Wilmington shows those aspirations but also the forces at work against us. There is evil in the world, and the best stories are just good people fighting back against the darkness.

MORE INFO:
www.inthepinesfilm.com



Actress Amara Ayler in a scene from the film 'In the Pines,' directed by Dugan Bridges.

DUSTIN VON RADEWACHER (DXYT IMAGES)

6 EXECUTIVE BRANCH

NC House completes first veto override since 2018

BY ALEX BALTZEGAR & THERESA OPEKA

For the first time since 2018, the N.C. General Assembly successfully voted to override a veto from Gov. Roy Cooper. Senate Bill 41 now becomes law.

The House override vote was 71-46, with three Democrats notably absent: Reps. Michael Wray, D-Northampton, Tricia Cotham, D-Mecklenburg, and Cecil Brockman, D-Guilford.

A veto override requires a three-fifths vote in the House, and 71 out of 117 votes is greater than the three-fifths required.

Rep. Destin Hall, the House Rules chairman, stood up to present the vote to override, saying that the House had debated and discussed this bill in committee for weeks, and the bill had already received two votes on the House floor.

The House then voted to hold a vote to override without continuing debate.

Rep. Robert Reives, the Democratic minority leader who hails from Chatham County, stood up immediately afterward and called for debate anyway.

He was out of order, meaning he was breaking the rules by speaking outside of the parameters of House rules.

Reives was in discussions with Hall and Republican leaders earlier this year when the rules were being finalized. He is also an attorney and has been a member of the House for 11 years.

Reives was not allowed to speak under House rules. The



NCGA House Chamber

vote to override was held.

Following the vote, Reives rose for a "point of personal privilege," which is a speaking privilege that members typically use to recognize a fellow member's birthday, to say happy anniversary to their spouse, or to invite their colleagues to a meeting.

Instead, Reives addressed the elementary school students and teachers who were watching from the balcony.

"I would just like to say to all the people that are here, the teachers and students, thank you for being here," Reives said. "I want to apologize on behalf of this body for you seeing what you just saw. Your teachers will explain it to you. We are a deliberative body. We recognize all viewpoints, but that was not shown to you today, and that breaks my

heart."

Many Democrats applauded Reives' comment.

Rep. John Torbett, R-Gaston, responded to Reives. He said that teachers could also tell the students that the House process abided by their rules. Torbett also said his grandson was one of the students in attendance.

Cooper vetoed S.B. 41, Guarantee Second Amend[ment] Freedom and Protections, on March 24.

"Eliminating strong background checks will allow more domestic abusers and other dangerous people to own handguns and reduces law enforcement's ability to stop them from committing violent crimes," Cooper, a Democrat, said in a press release. "Second Amendment supporting, responsible gun owners know this

will put families and communities at risk."

The move was expected by Cooper, as he vetoed similar legislation two years ago.

It also comes after Cooper's executive action that created the Office of Violence Prevention in the Department of Public Safety on March 14.

In most North Carolina churches and places of religious worship, the congregations can decide whether firearms are allowed on their private property and what security measures they will have in place to protect their congregations.

However, if a church or other place of religious worship is also the site of a private school, then that option is not available to the congregation.

S.B. 41 closes that loophole so a person who is legally registered to

carry a concealed handgun could do so on the property of a church or other place of religious worship provided that:

• It is located on private property.

• It is not during school hours.

• No students are present for curricular or extracurricular activities at the time.

• The person in control of the property has not posted a "no guns allowed" sign.

The second part of the bill repeals North Carolina's Jim Crow-era pistol purchase permit law.

After the Civil War, North Carolina's Democratic-controlled legislature enacted a permit system to prevent black residents from owning guns, according to The North Carolina Law Review, which reports that "the permit system's intention was to keep minorities from possessing handguns."

Now, a century later, the report finds that "Black applicants [are] experiencing a rejection rate of approximately three times the rate of White applicants" for pistol permits at the Wake County Sheriff's Office.

North Carolina is the only state in the South that has kept this law. Federal law already requires background checks for pistols purchased through licensed dealers.

S.B. 41 also included a provision to launch a statewide firearm safe storage awareness initiative.

Cooper issues order to create NC Office of Violence Prevention

BY THERESA OPEKA

Democrat Gov. Roy Cooper signed an executive order at a press conference March 14 creating the Office of Violence Prevention in the Department of Public Safety, the first of its kind in the South.

Cooper was joined by Democrat Attorney General Josh Stein, Department of Public Safety Secretary Eddie Buffaloe, Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Kody Kinsley, and other guests for the signing.

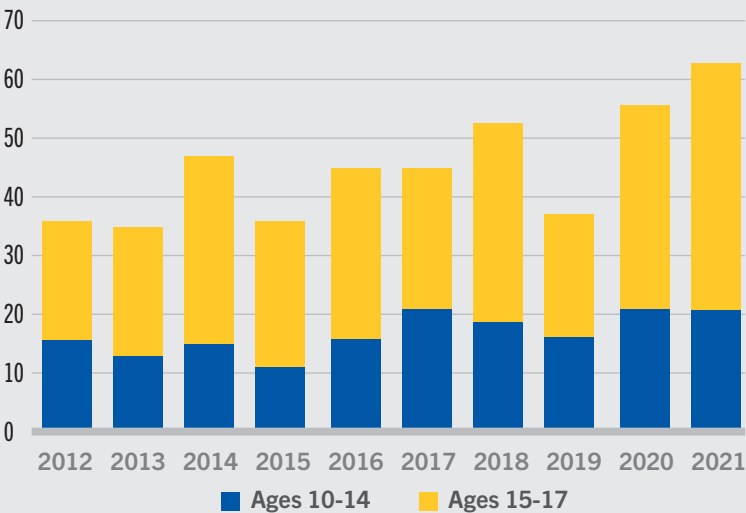
A clearinghouse, Cooper said, is needed to grow the infrastructure to tackle violence in a comprehensive and coordinated way, citing the recently released N.C. Child Fatality Task Force report that said homicide surpassed car accidents for the first time in 2021 as the No. 1 cause of injury deaths among teens ages 15 to 17.

"Too many families and communities are enduring the tragic injuries and deaths from homicide, from carelessness, from suicide. And whether a gun is used or not, violence is a tragedy that has to be stopped," he said.

"It requires an all-hands-on-deck approach, and that's what this is about today."

The office will coordinate efforts on violence prevention by providing training and technical assistance, issue best-practice guidance and model processes, facilitate information sharing across state and local leaders working to reduce violence, conduct public awareness campaigns, share data, collaborate with research institutions, and help with applying for grants.

Suicides among N.C. children aged 10-17



SOURCE: NORTH CAROLINA CHILD FATALITY TASK FORCE

Buffaloe will begin the hiring process shortly for an executive director for the office, which will be funded by using existing state and federal funds.

Cooper said if it is successful, he would like to make the office a permanent part of state law.

The office will work closely with other state agencies, including NCDHHS.

Kinsley stressed that gun violence is a public health issue, with five North Carolinians dying from a firearm-related injury each day, and the firearm-related suicide rate for children nearly tripling in two decades.

"We know that when we follow the data, and we understand these problems, we match it with these solutions that work," he said.

"We cannot let another child die because they accidentally stumble upon a gun in the back seat of their father's truck and lose their lives," Kinsley said.

"We cannot let another person die because, in their deep moment of hopelessness, they feel like the only option they have is to end their life. We can do these things and save these lives, and we do it by working together."

Buffaloe echoed Kinsley's sentiments, offering that a statewide initiative about the importance of responsible firearm storage from the Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention Division of DPS is set to be rolled out in late spring.

In the press conference, Stein said he believes measures like universal background checks and

red flag laws do not violate people's Second Amendment rights.

Red flag laws allow a judge to temporarily remove a gun from an individual at the request of a family member, doctor, or even police officer.

He also proposed raising the minimum age to 21 to buy an AR-15 or other semi-automatic rifle.

Stein and Cooper criticized the Republican-led General Assembly.

They cited proposed firearm legislation, like the recently vetoed Senate Bill 41, which would have repealed the Jim Crow-era pistol permit law and closed a loophole that prevents concealed carry permit holders from carrying in places of worship that, on other days, house a school.

Cooper vetoed the bill in March.

"Legislation that I have seen right now goes the opposite way, and so we'll continue to fight that kind of legislation but also continue to encourage the General Assembly to take some positive steps," Stein said.

"The facts tell a different story than the governor," a spokesman for Senate leader Phil Berger, R-Rockingham, said. "Over the last five years, there have only been four convictions for obtaining a pistol without getting a permit first. The claim that repealing the pistol purchase permit will make our communities more dangerous is absurd."

Jon Guze, senior fellow for legal studies with the John Locke Foundation, said it's good that Cooper and Stein finally recognize the importance of public safety and that they are com-

Too many families and communities are enduring the tragic injuries and deaths from homicide, from carelessness, from suicide. And whether a gun is used or not, violence is a tragedy that has to be stopped.

- Gov. Roy Cooper

mitting themselves to an "evidence-based" approach.

"As it happens, public safety is a topic for which there is already a great deal of well-corroborated evidence, and that evidence clearly shows that intensive community policing is the most humane and cost-effective way to deter crime," Guze said.

"That means hiring more police officers, paying them higher salaries, providing them with state-of-the-art training and support, and deploying them to act as peacekeepers in high-crime, high-disorder neighborhoods. This initiative will only succeed if it results in more cops on the street. Approaches involving things like gun control and community development will fail."

Cooper gives praise and jabs in final State of the State address

BY THERESA OPEKA

Democrat Gov. Roy Cooper gave his final State of the State address March 6 to what appeared to be, at times, a divided room between Democrats and Republicans. Lt. Gov. Mark Robinson presided over the joint session of the legislature hosting Cooper and delivered a pre-taped Republican response afterward.

After a move by Republicans to agree to expand the Medicaid entitlement program, Cooper peppered the speech with calls to change how they pass the expansion, funding the Leandro education plan, and not “move backward,” urging the General Assembly “to keep us off the front lines of those culture wars that hurt people and cost us jobs.”

He began his speech by referencing that North Carolina chartered the first public university system in the country 234 years ago, cited the creation of the Research Triangle Park 60 years ago and the North Carolina Biotechnology Center 39 years ago.

“Time and again, overcoming adversity, our leaders had the foresight and the resolve to invest in new ideas that have revolutionized our state, impacting the generations that follow, and while we stand on their shoulders, we also stand at an altogether new crossroads,” Cooper said. “One that demands that we have the same clarity of purpose, the same innovation, the same determination that brought us here. Our moment to build enduring prosperity is now, and I know that North Carolina is ready.”

He segued into how North Carolina is becoming a leader in the global clean energy economy, bringing good-paying manufacturing jobs to parts of the state, and that electric vehicles are projected to grow into a \$400 billion global market in five years. Cooper cited battery manufacturing in Randolph County, semiconductor production and electric vehicle manufacturing in Chatham County, and charging station production in Durham County that is already taking place.

He finished his talking points on clean energy by noting that



Gov. Roy Cooper delivers his State of the State address to the N.C. General Assembly, with, from left, Lt. Gov. Mark Robinson, House Speaker Tim Moore and Senate Leader Phil Berger.

North Carolina was the second state in the Southeast to put carbon reduction requirements into law through bipartisan cooperation in the General Assembly, referring to the House Bill 951 law to enact Cooper’s executive order that the state be carbon-neutral by 2050.

Cooper touted his administration’s focus on moving the state to a net-zero carbon future with clean transportation and renewable energy like wind and solar.

Cooper did receive applause from both sides of the aisle when he mentioned that the state broke records in 2022 with tens of thousands of new jobs and that North Carolina was named the number one state in the country for business.

Education

Education was next on his agenda, including how the state was able to invest more than \$800 million into early childhood care centers from money the state received from the federal American Rescue Plan.

Cooper took a swipe at Republican legislators over a judge’s order to bypass the state legislature and direct the treasury to release millions of state dollars to fund

the 2018 Leandro comprehensive remedial education plan. The previous left-leaning N.C. Supreme Court upheld that judge’s order, but on March 3, the new court, which became right-leaning after the November elections, reinstated a lower court’s order blocking the transfer of funds.

“The court should uphold decades of bipartisan Supreme Court precedent that comes down on the side of the children because that’s what really matters,” Cooper said.

Cooper said the state has the money this year and next to fund the Leandro plan, developed by a California-based private consulting group. In North Carolina, a budget proposal presented by the governor outlines his spending priorities. The state legislature sets the budget every two years, with updates on alternate years, and sends it to the governor for signature. Cooper signed the legislature’s biennium budget in 2021 after vetoing them since taking office in 2017.

“The budget I will present to you invests in the entire education plan ordered by the court,” he said. He said his budget proposal would also give teachers and principals double-digit raises.

Cooper said that while he has already directed tens of millions

of dollars in federal funding into mental health aid in schools, he said he would propose a plan that makes historic investments in the “whole-person health” of every North Carolinian.

He wrapped up his points on education by highlighting the importance of colleges and universities, including community colleges, HBCU’s, and the creation of the Bipartisan Commission on the Future of Public Universities.

Spending

He took another jab at the Republican-led General Assembly for proposing further tax cuts, citing that the North Carolina Chamber of Commerce has said the current corporate tax rates are already competitive. Cooper signed the November 2021 budget, which gradually reduces the corporate tax rate if the state economy is strong until it is eliminated in 2030.

Cooper promised that as part of the American Rescue Plan, every home in North Carolina would have access to high-speed internet.

Continuing to tout federal money from the Biden administration through the federal infrastructure bill and American Rescue Plan, Cooper said the state plans on investing \$2.3 billion over the next two years for infrastructure needs, including nearly \$500,000 for water infrastructure upgrades.

Medicaid expansion

The room became clearly divided when Cooper brought up Medicaid expansion. Democrats loudly cheered, clapped, and stood up, while many Republicans remained stoic and seated, despite a majority of Republicans in the state legislature agreeing to expand the federal Medicaid entitlement program in North Carolina.

Cooper pushed to pass Medicaid expansion as a standalone measure rather than writing it into the state budget, as Republicans have proposed, so it would take effect sooner than the likely summer passage of the budget. He said waiting to expand could cost lives and more than \$521 mil-

lion a month in federal healthcare dollars. He also said that putting it in the budget could risk the additional \$1.8 billion in federal money that the Biden administration is using to incentivize the 11 states that have not expanded Medicaid, called Healthcare Access and Stabilization, or HASP, funds.

“Finally, we all now agree on Medicaid expansion,” Cooper said. “We all now agree on how to do it, and we all now agree on what other healthcare laws will be changed with it, for mental health, for working families, for rural hospitals, for a healthier North Carolina. It’s \$1.8 billion that we cannot afford to leave behind. Let’s expand now.”

He also talked about investing resources to recruit and retain law enforcement officers and called to fight gun violence, citing the recent release of the Child Fatality Task Force annual report that said children in North Carolina were 51% more likely to die from gun violence than the average child in the United States. The same report found that the suicide rate among N.C. teens has nearly tripled in the last 20 years.

Cooper briefly mentioned that there is still work to do for those like hurricane survivors who may “feel forgotten and left behind,” referring to problems in his N.C. Office of Recovery and Resiliency, as some victims of Hurricanes Matthew and Florence remain in hotels years later, but said he is encouraged by the progress that has been made as a state.

As he wrapped up his address, Cooper referred to the Parent’s Bill of Rights and abortion policy.

“Use the public schools to build a brighter future, not to bully and marginalize LGBTQ students,” Cooper said. “Don’t make teachers rewrite history. Keep the freedom to vote and reach for every eligible voter. Leave the decisions about reproductive health care to women and their doctors.”

Cooper said he and legislators had found plenty to disagree about over the years but have found areas of common ground that they should build upon.

“I stand before you to report that the state of our state is bright and energized with the promise of tomorrow,” he said.

SBI director

continued from PAGE 3

to pressure the head of an agency that covers our whole state.”

Lawmakers asked pointed questions about the SBI’s culture and its management relationship with the governor. Even Democrat members offered questions about the private conversations and asked how Schurmeier would envision a new agency home for the SBI.

“A lot of this seems personal,” said Rep. Amos Quick, D-Guilford. “We are talking about restructuring an entire agency because of what appears to be a personal issue.”

Schurmeier disagreed, saying it is not a personal conflict. He said because his tenure is up in June, he wants the legislature to structure the SBI so that his successors have a separate budget number and autonomy from the



What I’m attempting here is to ensure that the next director ought to have the authority to run this agency and determine senior staff members and shouldn’t have to negotiate with the governor’s office to do that

- SBI Director
Bob Schurmeier

Department of Public Safety and the governor’s office in senior staff hiring, promotions, and management.

“What I’m attempting here is to ensure that the next director ought to have the authority to run this agency and determine senior staff members and shouldn’t have to negotiate with the governor’s office to do that,” he said.

The SBI was moved out from under the Department of Justice, run by the state attorney general, in 2014 by then-Gov. Pat McCrory. At that time, Cooper was serving in his 14th year as attorney general. Schurmeier told lawmakers that under DOJ, budgetary priorities were focused on hiring attorneys, not law enforcement or investigators.

Schurmeier said the SBI did not add one agent for nearly a decade, despite growth in crime and population, but has since “come from behind” under his leadership and added 16 new agents, improved technology, established a task force to identify excessive force, and “leaned into the future,” he said.

STAFFING SHORTAGES

He warned lawmakers that staffing at all levels of law enforcement, including the SBI, remains a major problem. In a state with 10.5 million residents, just 1,700 enroll in law enforcement training annually.

“Of those, there are some that none of us want in law enforcement,” he said, describing enrollees who can’t pass physical, academic, or background check requirements.

A spike in drug trafficking, particularly fentanyl, is at crisis level in North Carolina. Schurmeier reminded lawmakers that drug deaths in the state are happening every day, and defeating the scourge of drug crime is a primary mission for SBI investigators.

“Our agency is helping, and I hope you will stand with me,” Schurmeier said to lawmakers. “We are going to take on these cartels and teach them a lesson if they come to North Carolina.”

In closing the hearing, Chairman Jake Johnson, R-Polk, thanked the director and mem-

bers, indicating that changes to the agency might appear in the budget. Johnson said further investigations are on the horizon.

“This afternoon, State Bureau of Investigation Director Bob Schurmeier made concerning allegations about involvement in personnel matters as well as attempted intimidation tactics with no basis to force his resignation, from top staff in Governor Cooper’s Office,” Johnson wrote in a statement released after the hearing. “Appointed leadership positions have inherent split loyalties between the Governor’s office and Department leadership, especially when politics do not align. Director Schurmeier made a clear case for a completely independent SBI. Committee members on both sides of the aisle made clear that we need to bring in the governor’s staff and others to better understand this matter in the interest of full transparency. We would like to thank Director Schurmeier for his bravery in cooperating with this inquiry. It is a true act of public service to the State of North Carolina.”

Canton paper mill closure like 'a death in the family'

BY ZACH ROUNCEVILLE

A paper mill, which has been operating for more than 100 years and is integral to the economy of Canton, is slated to close by June 2023. This will force around 1,300 workers currently employed at the mill to seek new jobs.

Pactiv Evergreen, which owns the mill and is headquartered in Lake Forest, Illinois, stated via communications director Beth Kelly that the closure is part of the company's restructuring and reorganization plan for management structure and its beverage merchandising segment.

According to Haywood County officials, this was a decision no one saw coming and has left the small mountain town just west of Asheville searching for answers. Carolina Journal spoke with Zeb Smathers, mayor of Canton, who said the mill closure is akin to losing a family member.

"We've had a death in the family," he said. "I had a mill worker tell me that. That's exactly what it is and exactly what it feels like. Like a death, you just experience the numbness and shock of a sudden loss, and that's what happened out of the blue. I had to call the governor's office and let them know. It's shameful that we had to find out through social media that the workers were losing their jobs. I saw workers coming in with tears in their eyes, and I am heartbroken. I hear stories of kids in the school system crying because they are going to have to move away from their friends so their parents can find jobs elsewhere. There's just sadness and hurt."

An identity lost

"It comes down to the numbness and shock of what had happened," Smathers said. "This is not just 1,300 jobs; this is our blue-collar identity. We had worked our way back economically over the last decade by embracing our blue-collar heritage."

He is also angry that the hard-working taxpayers of Haywood



Canton is reeling from the news of a pending paper mill closure.

County will have their tax dollars wasted as a result of the pending mill closure and feels that the company displayed a lack of trust and respect. In 2015, a subsidiary of Pactiv Evergreen was awarded a Job Maintenance and Capital Development Fund Grant, which was used to convert two coal-fired boilers to natural gas at the Haywood County plant. The grant was formulated and awarded after the N.C. House failed to pass a bill to award \$12 million in grant funding for the paper mill.

"Back in 2014, there was a JMAC to switch a boiler over to natural gas," said Smathers. "There have been other grants locally. If they [Pactiv Evergreen] complied, great. If they didn't, I want that money brought back. I want our taxpayer money back, especially in Haywood County. You broke your word in more ways than one, and there are repercussions for that. One of the things I've talked a lot about is respect. Yes, we're dealing with mourning and finding ways forward with these people's jobs, but in some regards, this is very

sickening to me given how it all went down."

Stock sale prompts calls for SEC investigation

It was later reported that Pactiv Evergreen executives sold off more than 50,000 shares of stock prior to the announced closure of the Canton mill, prompting a call by U.S. Rep. Chuck Edwards, a Republican who represents the area in the U.S. House, for the Securities and Exchange Commission to investigate the company's actions.

CJ also spoke with N.C. House Rep. Mark Pless, R-Haywood, who expressed dismay at the news of the stock sales.

"That's a troublesome problem," he said. "I'm not sure why that happened. I think that Congressman Edwards sending a request for an investigation is very appropriate. All of us were thinking that same thing. We need some answers as to why that happened. They should be held accountable for it."

Addressing the impact

of the mill closure

Haywood County officials and community leaders have been meeting to discuss how to move forward in the aftermath of the closure announcement. Pless shares the sentiment of all who have been affected by the mill closure.

"I think the initial shock has subsided some. It's still very traumatizing," he said. "We had a prayer meeting at Sorrells Street Park, where several hundred people joined. We were able to engage with some of the folks there. The pastors do a great job speaking. I think the first thing that really comes to mind is that people are finally acknowledging the possibility that this is going to happen in the next few months. Initially the shock was that there is no way this is real. I think now the reality has sunk in. Everyone is starting to move forward and figure out what to do next."

In terms of what local and state officials plan to do in order to help the town overcome the negative effect on the local economy, Pless



We pride ourselves on being a mill town. It's on our stores; it's on our children's jerseys at the high school. Being a mill town is not so much about having a mill and the machinery inside; it's the people inside.

- Zeb Smathers
Mayor of Canton

said that among other efforts, he is working with Haywood Community College on proposals to utilize local and state resources to assist people in finding new employment across other job sectors. The community college recently hosted an event led by its president, Shelley White.

"Dr. White has dealt with this in other areas where she has been in the college system. She brought her workforce development director and several other officials. All those folks were brought together to talk about some resources and some avenues that we're going to be able to go down in terms of job training, finding jobs," Pless said.

Pless is also examining legislative avenues, trying to receive answers from the company about how to address the impact going forward.

"There are some legislative proposals being drafted to deal with some of the things that had happened up to this point," he said. "I reached out to the liaison for the corporation, and I would love to have a conversation with them, so I know what's going on, so I can understand whether there is something the state can do and wheth-

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EPA announces national standards for PFAS levels in North Carolina

BY CJ STAFF

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Michael Regan announced a first-of-its-kind National Primary Drinking Water Regulation at a press conference in Wilmington. The regulation applies to six per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, PFAS, also known as "forever chemicals," that can be found in drinking water.

Regan, who previously served as head of the N.C. Department of Environmental Quality under Gov. Roy Cooper, told a crowd at UNC Wilmington, "EPA is proposing the first ever national standard to protect communities from PFAS in drinking water."

The proposed plan, which won't be completed until later this



U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Michael Regan announced a National Primary Drinking Water Regulation in Wilmington.

year, will have the largest impact on public water utilities.

Utilities will be required to

constantly monitor for the six PFAS, which include PFOA and PFOS as individual contaminants,

and PFHxS, PFNA, PFBS, and GenX as a mixture.

Notifications to the public of PFAS levels and a reduction of contamination if levels exceed the standards are also required.

DEQ Secretary Elizabeth Biser also spoke, noting that the DEQ Action Strategy for PFAS which was released in June of last year has the department already working on PFAS contamination with water utilities and municipalities.

"The state is taking a whole department approach for PFAS. Under our action strategy, our approach is to research, regulate, or remediate," Biser said.

"We focus on protecting communities through research and identifying where PFAS contamination exists."

North Carolina was at the center of national attention in 2017

when the Wilmington StarNews ran a story about GenX in the Lower Cape Fear River Basin.

GenX is a chemical used to make Teflon, firefighting foam, solar panels, and other products according to a report from the John Locke Foundation.

The chemical made its way into the Cape Fear River in Bladen County at the Chemours Fayetteville Works plant.

"Dr. [Detlef] Knappe, an engineering professor at North Carolina State, and his students were conducting water sampling in the Cape Fear River when they discovered the presence of a toxic chemical compound known as GenX," Regan explained during his announcement.

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Republicans push major K-12 education reforms

BY DAVID BASS

Republican leadership in the General Assembly is moving forward a number of key K-12 education reforms, buoyed by solidified majorities in both chambers that raise the likelihood of a successful veto override vote.

Anti-CRT bill

Republicans moved a bill through the House Education Committee in mid-March that would prohibit the teaching of Critical Race Theory in N.C. public school classrooms. The GOP ran an identical bill in 2021 that fell victim to a veto by Gov. Roy Cooper.

"This bill does not change what history standards can and cannot be taught. It simply prohibits schools from endorsing discriminatory concepts," said bill sponsor Rep. John Torbett, R-Gaston.

Democrats countered that the bill would have a chilling effect on the ability of teachers to share "the truth" about America's history or racism.

House Bill 187, Equality in Education, would ban the teaching of 13 discriminatory concepts in the classroom, including:

- That one race or sex is inherently superior to another race or sex.
- An individual, solely by virtue of his or her race or sex, is inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive.
- An individual should be discriminated against or receive adverse treatment solely or partly because of his or her race or sex.
- A meritocracy is inherently racist or sexist.



Rep. John Torbett, R-Gaston, listens as Rep. Tricia Cotham of Mecklenburg County, chairs a committee meeting. Cotham switched her party affiliation from Democrat to Republican in April.

• Particular character traits, values, moral or ethical codes, privileges, or beliefs should be ascribed to a race or sex, or to an individual because of the individual's race or sex.

Each of these ideas has been linked to Critical Race Theory. The bill does not address Critical Race Theory directly, but the vote on the measure comes as school systems across the country have adopted a curriculum that promotes those concepts.

Critical Race Theory teaches that racism and sexism are foundational to American history, culture, and government while portraying the white race as inherently oppressive.

Discipline bill

A bill that won approval from the House Education Committee,

also in mid-March, would give N.C. public school districts more leeway in creating disciplinary policies in classrooms.

House Bill 187, Standards of Student Conduct, would direct school districts to "use best practices to develop and enforce discipline policies that do not discriminate against students on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, gender, or disability."

Under current statutory law, a series of nonserious violations for school conduct include "the use of inappropriate or disrespectful language, noncompliance with a staff directive, dress code violations, and minor physical altercations that do not involve weapons or injury."

H.B. 187 strikes that language and leaves the determination of what conduct constitutes a major or minor offense up to school principals.

H.B. 187 also encourages school officials "to use in-school suspension over punishment that removes a student from the school building."

The measure drops as N.C. public schools have experienced a recent spike in misbehavior, threats against teachers, and crime.

The annual School Pulse Panel, a survey published by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute for Education Sciences, showed that more than eight in 10 public schools "have seen stunted behavioral and socioemotional development in their students because of the COVID-19 pandemic."

Across all N.C. high schools, instances of crime and violence increased from 4,850 reported for the 2018-19 school year to 5,991 reported for 2021-22 — a 24% increase — according to data recently presented to the State Board of Education.

SBE amendment

North Carolina Rep. Tricia Cotham of Mecklenburg County was the only Democrat to support a proposed constitutional amendment that would make members of the N.C. Board of Education elected rather than appointed.

The vote was taken Feb. 7 during the House K-12 Education Committee. Cotham is the newly minted co-chair of the committee, along with Republican Reps. Hugh Blackwell of Burke County and John Torbett of Gaston County.

Under the amendment, House Bill 17, membership on the board would expand to 14 seats, corresponding to North Carolina's number of congressional districts, and each member would be elected from a congressional district.

The amendment would also make Republican Superintendent of Public Instruction

Catherine Truitt the chair of the board.

With Cotham's support, H.B. 17 ostensibly would have enough votes to achieve the required 72 votes on the full House floor to pass. If approved by a three-fifths majority of both chambers, the amendment would appear on the ballot in the 2024 general election for a simple majority vote. Constitutional amendments are not subject to a veto by the governor.

The amendment is controversial because it could substantially shift the political balance of power on the state's top educational governing body.

Under the current framework, members of the board are appointed by Democrat Gov. Roy Cooper for eight-year terms, subject to confirmation by the General Assembly.

But of the currently serving members, only three are Republican appointees: Olivia Oxendine, Amy White, and Eric Davis, who chairs the board and is registered unaffiliated.

Republicans have added strength from ex officio members in Lt. Gov. Mark Robinson and State Treasurer Dale Folwell, who are not appointed and serve until their terms in office expire.

The bottom line is that Republicans often find themselves on the losing end of votes on key policy matters. The amendment could change that power dynamic.

During debate in committee, Blackwell said it makes better sense to have the elected superintendent of public instruction helm the state board rather than an appointed member.

"Rather than freezing parents and members of the public out of the process, it's appropriate to let them have a voice in who is making education policy for their children and grandchildren and their neighbors' children," Blackwell said.

NC Supreme Court could shift course in two major election-related cases

BY CJ STAFF

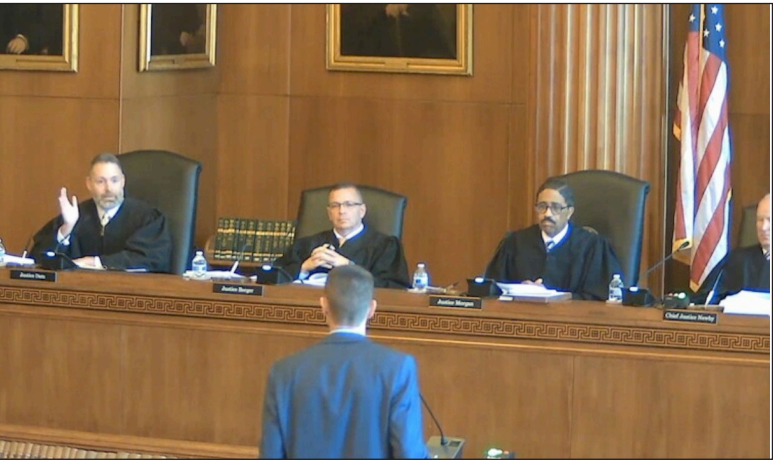
Most observers expect a long-term shift in the N.C. Supreme Court's approach to election-related legal disputes. Two cases from the middle of March offer the court a chance to make a major shift in the short term.

Justices decided to rehear cases dealing with election maps and voter ID. It's possible that the current court, with a 5-2 Republican majority, might erase party-line rulings issued last December by a 4-3 Democratic court.

Republican legislative leaders asked for both rehearings.

Election maps reviewed

In the case of Harper v. Hall, attorney Phil Strach argued on March 14 that the December ruling demonstrated the court's



The N.C. Supreme Court rehears a voter ID case.

flawed approach toward redistricting battles.

"Legislature, you are Charlie Brown, and we, the court, are Lucy, ... and we're going to pull that football right out from under you because we didn't really mean what

we said when we thought there was a clear rule that you could follow," Strach said. "Instead it's now going to be a holistic rule based on a bunch of expert reports that we, the court, will decide what the map will look like ultimately based

on a constellation ... of standards that only we know."

The old 4-3 Democratic-majority state Supreme Court produced two party-line rulings in the Harper case. Harper I, issued in February 2022, cited several provisions of the N.C. Constitution to invent a new ban on partisan gerrymandering. The ruling prompted state lawmakers to redraw maps for N.C. House, N.C. Senate, and congressional elections.

Harper II, issued in December, upheld a trial court's decision to throw out lawmakers' redrawn congressional election map. Trial judges ended up substituting a map developed by outside consultants known as "special masters." The state Supreme Court's Harper II ruling also threw out lawmakers' redrawn state Senate map, which had survived the trial court's review.

State legislative leaders be-

lieved the outgoing Supreme Court made constitutional errors.

"It created a partisan gerrymandering claim out of whole cloth, out of multiple vague state constitutional provisions that do not say anything about partisanism in redistricting," Strach said.

Democrats defend Harper

Strach spent much of his portion of the March 14 rehearing argument answering questions from the court's two Democratic justices. Both of them had endorsed the disputed Harper I and Harper II rulings in 2022.

Justice Anita Earls pointed to a trial court's findings that Republican election maps involved excessive partisan gerrymandering.

10 BUDGET & MEDICAID

POLICY MEASURES INCLUDED IN THE HOUSE BUDGET



MEDICAL FREEDOM/ COVID-19 VACCINATIONS

Discrimination against persons based on COVID-19 vaccination status would not be allowed.



ACADEMIC TRANSPARENCY

Informing the public of course materials used in a classroom.



MODERNIZE SELECTION OF INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

Local school boards will select and adopt instructional materials for courses in elementary and secondary school.




REMOTE CHARTER SCHOOLS

Enables the ability for charter schools to include or be solely based on remote enrollment/learning.



EXPAND ELIGIBILITY FOR OPPORTUNITY SCHOLARSHIPS

Expands eligibility for opportunity scholarships, no longer requiring children to attend public school before being eligible for the scholarships.




LIMITATIONS ON STATE FUNDS FOR ABORTIONS

Prevents state funds from being used in the performance or in support of the administration of an abortion unless certain exemption criteria are met.



PROHIBIT CAP AND TRADE REQUIREMENTS FOR CO2 EMISSIONS

No state agency, governor, or the Department of Environmental Quality may require certain public utilities to engage in carbon offset programs.



PROHIBITION ON STATE OR REGIONAL EMISSIONS STANDARDS FOR MOTOR VEHICLES

Prohibits any requirements on controlling emissions on new motor vehicles.



SBE/PROHIBIT ERIC MEMBERSHIP

Make it so that North Carolina may not become a member of the Electronic Registration Information Center.



MAKE STATE BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION INDEPENDENT

Insulates SBI from political interference, as recently uncovered by the outgoing SBI director, by making it completely isolated.

RAISE RETIREMENT AGE FOR APPELLATE JUDGES:

No justice or judge of the Supreme Court or Court of Appeals may continue in office beyond the last day of the month in which the justice or judge becomes 76 years old. This provision would raise the current mandatory retirement age of 72.

PROHIBIT PRIVATE DONATIONS IN ELECTIONS:

Prevents the State Board of Elections, any county board of elections, and any county commissioners from accepting private monetary donations for conducting elections, including employing individuals on a temporary basis.

TRANSFER STATE CRIME LAB TO SBI

The state crime lab would be transferred from the Department of Justice to be under the SBI.

Follow the Money: The SAVE Act

BY DONNA KING.

Stephanie Brinson is an advanced practice registered nurse seeing thousands of patients a year, along with five other APRNs, in a Garner practice open seven days week. They are filling a need for more providers in the state’s health-care system. However, like other APRNs, Brinson can’t see patients in North Carolina without a “supervising physician.” Their physician is not part of the daily operations of the office. According to Brinson, the APRNs spend about 15 minutes a year with the supervising physician and pay \$30,000 annually for sign-off on their work. If that doctor retires or moves on, they must close their doors until they find another supervising physician.

The SAVE Act, (House Bill 218/Senate Bill 175) filed in the state legislature would change this regulation, allowing nurses like Brinson to practice up to their level of certification, granting them “full practice authority.” More than 25 other states have already passed similar legislation.

“It’s a permission slip to go to



Cooper signs NC's Medicaid expansion into law.

work, and more and more people are understanding that the SAVE Act needs to be passed,” said bill sponsor Sen. Gale Adcock, D-Wake, a nurse practitioner herself who has been working to pass the bill for years.

Lawmakers have tried to pass the SAVE Act before without success. With support from Senate leader Phil Berger, the Senate voted in favor of a similar bill, 44-2, last year, but the House did not take it up. It is a sticking point as lawmakers debate policy on how

to increase access to care amid a growing provider shortage and Medicaid expansion, which will add more than 600,000 people to the Medicaid entitlement program.

The issue has generated debate but also big campaign spending. Physicians’ lobbying groups and the North Carolina Medical Society are the primary opponents of the bill, and, according to a review of campaign finance reports conducted by Rose Hoban at North Carolina Health News,

the eight PACs affiliated with the medical society donated a total of \$627,650 to General Assembly candidates in 2022 in the run-up to November’s elections.

Expanding NC’s pool of providers

The SAVE Act is intended to remove regulatory red tape and allow APRNs to practice to the full extent of their training and education. The legislation has a wide range of supporters, including AARP, Blue Cross Blue Shield of North Carolina, Concerned Veterans for America, and Carolina Journal’s founding organization, the John Locke Foundation. There were calls to include the SAVE Act in Medicaid expansion, recently passed by the legislature and signed into law by Gov. Roy Cooper, but it was not.

“Access is a real problem, even in our cities,” said Brinson. “I can’t even begin to imagine the access problems in rural North Carolina where there are no additional people to provide care. Medicaid is going to expand this summer, and I’m excited, but I don’t know who is going to take care of all those people.”

The debate

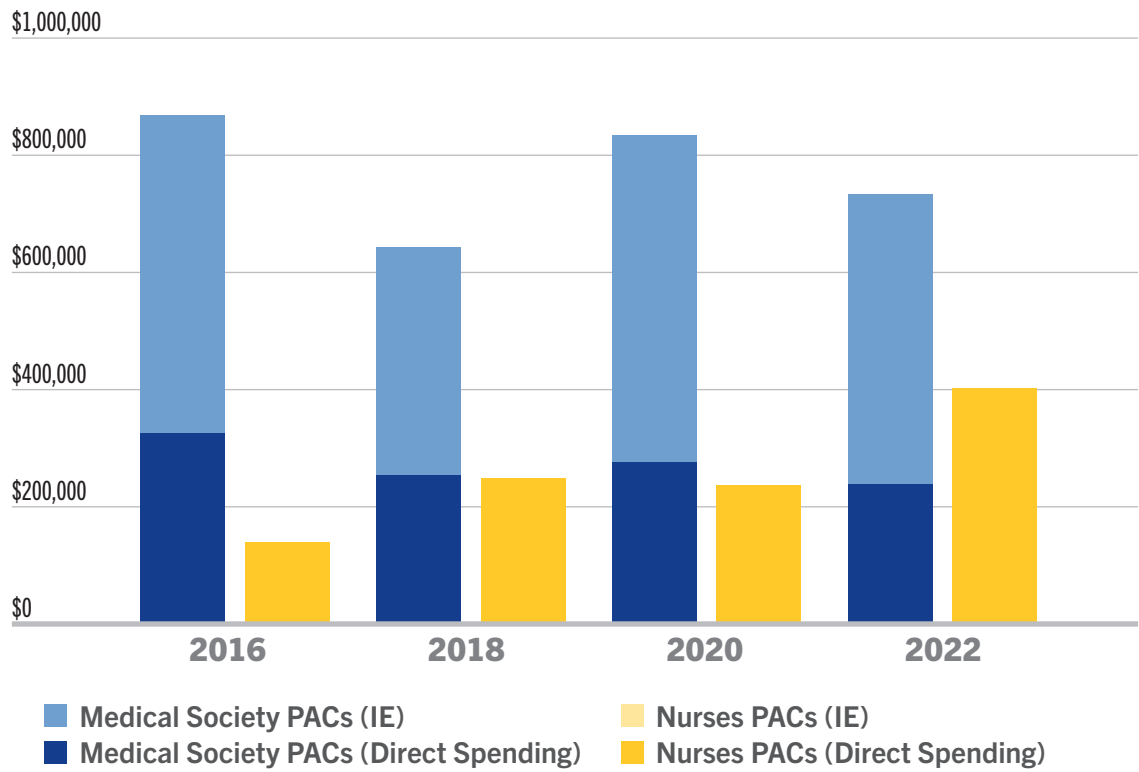
Proponents say the SAVE Act is a way to increase the shrinking pool of medical providers and taps a wide range of trained healthcare professionals. Opponents of the bill, like the N.C. Medical Society and N.C. Society of Anesthesiologists, say it risks patient safety.

“The North Carolina Medical Society supports keeping physicians involved in patients’ health-care,” the N.C. Medical Society said in a statement. “The SAVE Act would remove required physician involvement, allowing patients to be seen by nurses in all circumstances regardless of practice setting or patient’s condition. Eliminating physician involvement in the healthcare team will fracture continuity of care and create risks for patients.”

Rep. Timothy Reeder, R-Pitt, is an emergency room physician and one of the most vocal opponents of the SAVE Act in the N.C. General Assembly.

“Physicians are required to have 10,000 hours of clinical experience, and a nurse practitioner is only required to have 500 hours,”

FOLLOW THE MONEY: Medical Society and Nurse PAC Contributions



	2016	2018	2020	2022	Total
Medical Society PACs	\$871,097.13	\$642,703.52	\$836,508.00	\$735,082.28	\$3,085,390.93
IE	\$324,550.00	\$251,810.00	\$274,100.00	\$237,600.00	\$1,088,060.00
Direct Spending	\$546,547.13	\$390,893.52	\$562,408.00	\$497,482.28	\$1,997,330.93
Nurses PACs	\$136,550.00	\$246,550.00	\$235,050.00	\$402,159.00	\$1,020,309.00
IE	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Direct Spending	\$136,550.00	\$246,550.00	\$235,050.00	\$402,159.00	\$1,020,309.00

SOURCES: DATA FROM NCSBE AND NC HEALTH NEWS.

continued from PREVIOUS PAGE

said Reeder. “If they are practicing in a team setting with others, that’s one thing. The educational system for APRNs was not really designed for nurses to practice independently.”

Reeder cited a March study by the National Bureau of Economic Research that said nurse practitioners in an emergency setting practicing without medical supervision or collaboration had an 11% increase in hospitalizations. The AMA is actively fighting what they call “scope creep.”

“In terms of healthcare costs, there are studies that find that while NPs are paid less, they cost more because nurses will order more tests, they aren’t as efficient evaluating patients, have longer inpatient length of stay, and order more consultations,” said Reeder.

Reeder has co-sponsored a separate bill (House Bill 75) that addresses the supervision arrangements for physician assistants. It requires that in a team setting, a practice is majority-owned by physicians that have “consistent and meaningful participation in the design and implementation of health services to patients.” That bill passed the House in February but is sitting in the Senate Rules Committee. H.B. 75 allows for reduced supervision for PAs who practice in a team setting after 4,000 hours of clinical practice experience as a licensed PA and more than 1,000 hours of clinical practice experience within the specific medical specialty of practice.

However, a study from the Center for Growth and Opportunity at Utah State University reports that laws regulating “scope of practice” increase healthcare costs

by restricting the supply of providers. A study published by the National Institutes of Health found that states requiring physician oversight of nurse practitioners had a 28% increase in emergency room visits after expanding Medicaid, while states allowing NPs to practice without physician oversight had only a 7% increase.

“It’s not like these 600,000 people haven’t been getting health care. They’ve just been getting it in the emergency rooms, and they’ve been getting it sporadically when they are the sickest and can’t pay for it,” Adcock said. “They need to get care in their communities where it is less expensive, more appropriate when it will do the most good. That’s where we need not only nurses and midwives, but also pharmacists and physician assistants, working to the top of their license and not restricted by these archaic and patriarchal laws that say you can’t do your job unless some group, who doesn’t know anything about what you do, says you can.”

“It’s not only wrong; it is old-fashioned,” she added.

Campaign spending

Between the House and the Senate versions, the SAVE Act has 80 co-sponsors, Democrats and Republicans. Republican Sen. Ralph Hise is a regular primary sponsor of the bill, along with Adcock and Sen. Joyce Krawiec. Being an advocate for the SAVE Act puts a target on some members when it comes to elections.

In 2022, Hise had nearly \$80,000 spent against him in the primary election against Deanna Ballard as independent expenditures by NC Citizens for Patient Safety, a political action committee or PAC closely aligned with the

North Carolina Medical Society. Both Republicans, Hise and Ballard were “double-bunked” in the last legislative maps. Ballard also received \$2,000 in direct contributions from the N.C. Medical Society for the primary. The N.C. Nurses Association made direct contributions to both Hise and Ballard, giving \$2,000 to Ballard and \$6,600 to Hise in that primary election.

The N.C. Medical Society has spent heavily in favor of Reeder as well over the years, shelling out \$276,330.80 of Independent Expenditures in his race and \$23,200 in direct funding to his campaign from the group’s PACs in 2022. Reeder received more than \$130,000 from NC Citizens for Patient Safety, a donation that helped him beat Democratic Rep. Brian Farkas, a co-sponsor of the 2021 SAVE Act.

“While the Medical Society and its affiliate organizations have outspent nurses nearly three to one on elections, these numbers don’t show the full picture,” said Jim Stirling of the John Locke Foundation. “Anesthesiologists have spent an additional \$1.8 million toward General Assembly elections since 2015. When fully accounting the money for and against the SAVE act, this is truly David versus Goliath.”

Despite being outspent by opponents, supporters feel the SAVE Act has momentum. Adcock challenged House leaders to bring it up for a vote.

“I’m finding that more and more people here want to see it passed if only their leadership would let them take a vote,” said Adcock. “Everything looks impossible until its inevitable. That’s what happened with Medicaid, and that’s exactly what’s going to happen with the SAVE Act.”

OPINION

Medicaid expansion would deepen worker shortage

BRIAN BALFOUR
CONTRIBUTOR



North Carolina, along with the nation, is experiencing a worker shortage. Businesses are struggling to find workers, which hampers their ability to produce goods or serve their customers sufficiently.

According to a recent WRAL report, “In North Carolina, even if every unemployed worker was connected with an available job, there would still be nearly 160,000 open positions and no one to fill them.”

At the end of 2022, North Carolina’s labor force participation rate was still below pre-pandemic levels, totaling just 60.3% compared with 61.3% in February 2020. Our state would need more than 85,000 people to re-enter the labor force to return us to the previous level.

Expanding Medicaid in North Carolina will make that problem, among others, worse.

Recently legislative leaders announced that, after a decade of fighting it, they’ve come to an agreement to expand the state’s Medicaid program as provided for in Obamacare in 2010. The result would be the largest expansion of government entitlements in state history, with some estimating up to 600,000 new enrollees. The bill has been approved by both chambers and was signed into law by Gov. Roy Cooper on March 27.

There has been talk of including work requirements in North Carolina’s Medicaid expansion proposal, but other states have seen their work requirements rejected. There appears to be no appetite from the Biden Department of Justice to allow them.

Indeed, the legislation acknowledges such when it states that the state will develop a work requirement plan only “if there is any indication that work requirements as a condition of participation in the Medicaid program” may be authorized by the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.

For some perspective, there are currently 2.9 million North Carolinians enrolled in Medicaid — a 61% increase from enrollment 15 years ago (1.8 million). Adding 600,000 would bring it to 3.5 million, nearly doubling the number of enrollees since 2008. The result would be roughly 1 in 3 North Carolinians enrolled in the government program.

And during this time of massive swelling of the Medicaid rolls, the number of hospitals accepting Medicaid patients has fallen by 15%, and the number of physicians enrolled as Medicaid providers has risen by only 11%. The number of dentists accepting Medicaid has fallen by 35%.

Expansion may provide more people with a Medicaid card, but

Research — and common sense — tell us that expanding Medicaid will reduce participation in the workforce. For North Carolina, that could mean tens of thousands fewer jobs getting filled.

that card would not guarantee timely access to care.

Moreover, because the majority of the expansion population would be working-age, healthy, and childless adults, expansion could be felt particularly by North Carolina’s entrepreneurs.

Research — and common sense — tell us that expanding Medicaid will reduce participation in the workforce. For North Carolina, that could mean tens of thousands fewer jobs getting filled.

Because Medicaid expansion primarily reaches working-age, childless adults, it creates a new “welfare cliff,” meaning that new enrollees may face losing significant benefits if they take a job. The prospect of losing these benefits makes work even less attractive and causes more people to choose to stay unemployed so as to not risk losing their Medicaid benefits.

As Forbes reported in 2015, “a comprehensive study released by the National Bureau of Economic Research, for example, found that past Medicaid expansions to enroll able-bodied, childless adults reduced the likelihood of working by up to 10 percentage points. This means Obamacare’s Medicaid expansion could cause up to 2.6 million Americans to drop out of the labor force entirely.”

The Congressional Budget Office likewise released a report noting how Medicaid expansion will “reduce incentives to work,” and a study published by the Medical Care Research and Review journal found that “public health insurance eligibility is associated with a 2.2 percentage point decrease in full-time employment,” along with “a 1.4 percentage point increase in the likelihood of not working.”

More recently, Health Economics published a 2019 study finding “a 37% decrease in employment among newly eligible Medicaid enrollees” for the first two years following expansion.

North Carolina’s business community is already struggling mightily to find workers. Medicaid expansion would make that problem worse, while expanding a culture of government dependency over work.

Brian Balfour is senior vice president of research at the John Locke Foundation.

NC Supreme Court shifts course?

continued from PAGE 9

“You’re asking us to say that, in spite of those facts, this North Carolina Constitution offers no protection to voters.”

“Are you saying because ‘fair’ does not appear in the constitution, that elections don’t have to be fair? That it’s alright for them to have predetermined outcomes based upon where the legislature decides to draw the lines?” asked Justice Michael Morgan.

While Strach spent much of his time addressing Democratic justices’ questions, attorney Lali Madduri offered just 30 seconds of arguments supporting the state Supreme Court’s earlier Harper rulings before Chief Justice Paul Newby jumped in to ask her a series of questions. Newby’s queries lasted roughly 15 minutes. Madduri never did return to her prepared text.

Newby raises concerns

The chief justice asked whether a ruling requiring fair representation of political parties ought to apply to all N.C. county governments, city councils, and school boards, if the courts can dictate that outcome for congressional and legislative elections.

While he didn’t mention him by name, Newby appeared to question the role in the redistricting process of former N.C. Supreme Court Justice Bob Orr. A former Republican, Orr is now registered as an independent. He served as a special master reviewing and redrawing the legislature’s election maps. Orr also made congressional endorsements in the 2022 election campaign.

“If there were chosen special masters and advisers that have participated in elections ... where they clearly cannot be objective, what standard should a reviewing court have in evaluating this de facto commission?” Newby asked.

“It is true that one of the special masters who drew the congressional — or approved the drawing of the congressional district — actually campaigned for a candidate in one of the districts that person drew or assisted in drawing,” Newby added.

Justice Richard Dietz signaled that the court might be considering issuing sanctions to lawyers working for one set of plain-

tiffs in the case. The activist group Common Cause had filed paperwork opposing the Harper v. Hall rehearing. It filed a motion asking the state Supreme Court to treat the rehearing request as frivolous.

Dietz labeled the use of the word “frivolous” a “very serious accusation.” The basis for the rehearing “seems to me to be certainly so far away from being frivolous that it’s sanctionable to say that it’s frivolous,” Dietz said.

Parties in the case also debated how a reversal of the earlier Harper rulings would affect new drawings of state election maps. Plaintiffs conceded that the General Assembly can redraw the congressional and state Senate maps. They argued that state constitutional provisions prevent lawmakers from drafting a new map for N.C. House elections.

The legislature’s attorney responded that all maps could be redrawn if the state Supreme Court decides that the earlier rulings were wrong.

Cooper, Stein denied

Justices created some political buzz one week before the hearing when they rejected a friend-of-the-court brief in the case from Gov. Roy Cooper and Attorney General Josh Stein. Both are Democrats who oppose Republican lawmakers’ actions in drawing election maps. But the Cooper and Stein brief violated Rule 31(d) of the N.C. Rules of Appellate Procedure. That rule explains that the court will accept no amicus, or friend-of-the-court, briefs when rehearing a case.

The N.C. Republican Party characterized the rehearing as a “chance to restore the constitutional order after years of progressive activist judges subverting that order to personal political agendas.”

“This case is about righting the egregious wrongs committed by an out-of-control court and re-establishing the proper constitutional roles of our three branches of government when it comes to legislative redistricting,” said state party Chairman Michael Whatley. “The people of North Carolina deserve to know their judiciary, and our elections, follow the constitution — not Democrat schemes to force their radical agenda despite losses at the ballot box.”

Voter ID reconsidered

One day after Harper v. Hall, the state Supreme Court took a fresh look at Holmes v. Moore. That case targeted the state’s 2018 voter identification law. The court

could reinstate the law, reversing a decision handed down three months ago.

On Dec. 16, the outgoing Supreme Court’s 4-3 Democratic majority upheld a trial court’s decision to throw out the law, referred to in court as Senate Bill 824. Democratic justices agreed the law was unconstitutional because of racially discriminatory intent.

Two weeks later, two of those Democrats left the state’s high court. Two Republicans elected in November replaced them.

“What’s the direct evidence in the record that the legislators who voted for S.B. 824 intended it to be discriminatory?” asked Justice Trey Allen, one of the two new justices. “Are there any statements made by legislators, for example, around the enactment ... that you can point us to?”

Attorney Paul Brachman, representing voter ID critics, conceded there was no direct evidence that lawmakers intended the law to be discriminatory. He pointed to the history of a previous ID law struck down by federal courts as discriminatory. Brachman also cited the legislature’s decision to approve the challenged law in a lame-duck session after the 2018 election. Republicans had lost veto-proof supermajorities in that election.

“This law does bear more heavily on African-American voters because they’re disproportionately more likely to lack qualifying ID, more likely to face difficulties acquiring ID,” Brachman said, and as evidenced under the earlier ID law, “more likely to run into difficulties with the reasonable impediment provision.” That provision allows voters to cast a ballot without an ID.

Justices prove skeptical

Allen questioned how the law could discriminate against any voter.

“The legislature acted in what you called a lame-duck session to avoid having to pass a watered-down version of the voter ID law,” Allen said to Brachman. “I’m just curious as to what you think that would be because the law in front of us provides IDs free of charge and ... doesn’t actually prevent anyone from voting.”

Justice Phil Berger Jr. questioned the emphasis on the prior voter ID law struck down by federal judges.

“What you have argued is that because of the history in North Carolina, because of the previous legislation, ... that the legislative act in question here, [S.B.] 824, is somehow impermissible because

of connecting those dots,” Berger said. “At what point is there a severance of that line? I think of it like fruit of the poisonous tree. At what point is the taint removed such that this legislation, under your argument, could be passed by the legislature?”

Sitting next to Berger, Morgan emphasized the importance of the “earlier unconstitutional voter ID law,” along with the lame-duck vote, the number of legislators who supported both ID laws, expert trial testimony, and other factors that led to the trial court’s decision.

“How many more factors do you need in this case for the presumption to have been rebutted that the legislature had discriminatory intent here?” he asked Pete Patterson, lawmakers’ attorney.

Patterson reminded justices that the disputed law would not block any eligible voter from casting a ballot.

“There is no person in North Carolina that the plaintiffs have identified who, according to the terms of S.B. 824, will not be able to vote,” Patterson said. “It does not bespeak ... racially discriminatory intent to enact a voter ID law that allows everyone to vote.”

Earls, Dietz clash

Two justices sparred over the rehearing itself.

Earls, a Democrat, questioned why her colleagues took the rare step of reconsidering its December decision in Holmes v. Moore.

“Help me understand when any case would be final,” Earls asked Patterson. “In every case, there are two sides to the argument. The side that loses believes that we misapprehended the law and got it wrong. So where do we draw the line? When do we not allow rehearing?”

“How does that give us any finality in the law?” Earls added.

Dietz, a Republican elected in November, interrupted Patterson’s response. His questions to the lawmakers’ attorney reminded the court that it has 30 days to respond to any request for rehearing.

“You might ask why would the drafters of Rule 31 put that in there. It seems that the reason is finality,” Dietz said.

“There’s a tight time frame in there to get this thing done, and it’s not going to sit around with people wondering: Is this a final decision or not,” he added. “It seems like a very clear rule to follow.”

No recusals

All seven justices took part in the oral argument. Hours before the hearing, the court posted an

order noting that the full court had agreed Berger could participate. Though court rules allowed him to decide on a motion for recusal himself, Berger had submitted the issue to his colleagues.

Plaintiffs had challenged participation from both Berger and Justice Tamara Barringer. Barringer issued a separate order two days before the hearing confirming that she would take part in the case.

The path that the Holmes v. Moore case took to get to the high court in the first place proved controversial.

Back in September 2021, a three-judge trial court threw out North Carolina’s voter ID law by a 2-1 vote. Two Democratic judges overruled a Republican colleague in deciding that the ID law was racially discriminatory and violated the N.C. Constitution.

Following the trial court ruling, defenders of voter ID asked the N.C. Court of Appeals to hear their appeal, while plaintiffs asked the state Supreme Court to intervene. The high court voted along party lines to hear the case just weeks before the 2022 general election, when two seats on the high court held by Democrats were up for grabs.

‘Forum shopping’ alleged

Legislative leaders accused ID opponents of “forum shopping” based on the contrasting partisan compositions of the two appellate courts. Republicans then outnumbered Democrats, 10-5, on the Appeals Court. Democrats outnumbered Republicans, 4-3, on the state Supreme Court.

“Once more, the majority expedites the hearing of a case where no jurisprudential reason supports doing so,” Newby wrote for dissenting Republican justices when Democratic colleagues agreed to expedite the case.

If the state Supreme Court reverses course and upholds the law under the N.C. Constitution, the legal story will continue.

The voter ID law also faces a challenge in federal court. In an 8-1 ruling issued in June 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that state legislative leaders had the right to intervene in the federal case to defend voter ID. Originally scheduled for trial in January 2022, that federal case has not yet been rescheduled. No documents have been filed in the case since July.

There is no deadline for the state Supreme Court to issue new decisions in either the redistricting or voter ID cases.

Paper mill closes

continued from PAGE 8

er there’s a funding mechanism we can put together to help them through this difficult time.”

The impact to the local community in the wake of the paper mill closure affects not only Canton and Haywood County, but also other regional industries in Tennessee and South Carolina, which are vital to the effective operation of the mill.

The impacts are far-reaching and have required assistance from the state to address them. Smathers has also been in discussions with Gov. Roy Cooper about how

the state can respond to the closure.

“I talked to Gov. Cooper, and he referred to this as a statewide crisis, and he’s correct,” Smathers said. “The amount of money with trucking and all the tentacles of this place — it’s not just 1,300 jobs. It’s much greater than that — from Tennessee to South Carolina, the trucking industry, the shipping industry, mechanics, and machinery. Because it’s a statewide crisis, I agree with the governor that we have to respond with a statewide solution to make sure this economic black hole doesn’t swallow up other places.”

Smathers strongly believes that the town will rebound from the closure and that the local economy will bounce back.

“We pride ourselves on being a mill town. It’s on our stores; it’s on our children’s jerseys at the high

school. Being a mill town is not so much about having a mill and the machinery inside; it’s the people inside. It’s relationships, and it’s the blue-collar workers,” he continued.

“Those traits will carry us into the next chapter. This is not the end of this town or this county. It’s the turning of a page and the story of our comeback,” he said.

“We are a blue-collar town that has to fight its way back. We hope our comeback story inspires others, and we look to our sister cities and what they have faced and what they’ve been through. We will find a way forward again; that is what we’ve always done and will always do.”

U.S. Sen. Thom Tillis, a Republican, showed his support on social media, saying that his “office stands ready to assist the community as they work to overcome this new challenge.”

EPA standards for PFAS levels

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“Chemours, a chemical manufacturing company in Fayetteville, had been deliberately polluting the air and water with these chemicals for decades.”

Unlike prior advisories from EPA about PFAS and drinking water, the new proposed regulations come with enforceable metrics.

“EPA is proposing to establish legally enforceable levels for six PFAS known to occur in drinking water,” Regan said.

Currently, each state is left to handle its own regulations and enforcement.

In North Carolina, DEQ has a consent order with Chemours and Cape Fear River Watch which requires the chemical maker to reduce PFAS emissions by 99.9%.

“Long-term exposure to certain types of PFAS have been linked to serious illnesses, including cancer, liver damage, and high cholesterol,” Regan said.

However, the health effects of PFAS are still largely unknown.

“We anticipate that when fully implemented, this rule will prevent thousands of deaths and reduce tens of thousands of serious PFAS-related illnesses,” Regan said.

A public hearing on the proposed rule is set for May 4. Public comment can be submitted on the EPA website.



Are college degrees losing their luster?

DAVID LARSON
OPINION EDITOR

EMPLOYERS IN NORTH Carolina and across the country are struggling to find qualified workers to fill key positions in their organizations. As they reconsider the minimum qualifications they are willing to accept, those screening candidates are increasingly setting aside the requirement of a four-year degree.

Gov. Roy Cooper signed an executive order on March 13 that directed state agencies to treat experience as equivalent to a degree for most positions, a move that many other states have already taken.

An article earlier this year from WCNC in Charlotte highlighted that many major companies, like IBM, Google, and Delta, are dropping their degree requirements, too. They are in need of workers, and if someone shows they can do the job, a degree is irrelevant.

Arizona has even dropped the requirement for public school

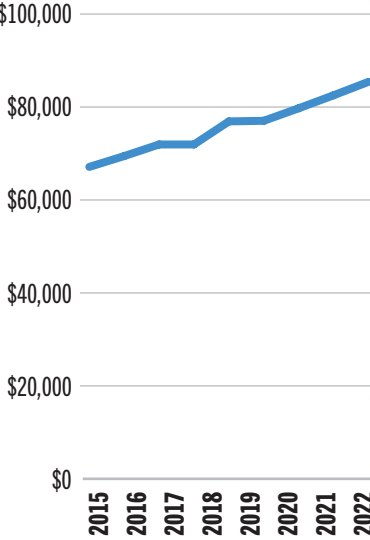
teachers to hold a four-year degree. North Carolina, while not going to that extent yet, will provide a new teacher certification process at community colleges for those whose four-year degree was in something other than education.

The college-debt crisis

This is disappointing news for young Americans who were told a four-year degree was the golden ticket allowing them to take part in the modern job market, and now find that their golden ticket may be losing its luster. Add to that the crushing college debt many are facing, and some will undoubtedly feel that it was all a waste.

According to the Council on Foreign Relations, “Student debt has more than doubled over the last two decades. As of September 2022, about 48 million U.S. borrowers collectively owed more than \$1.6 trillion in federal student loans. Additional private loans bring that total to above \$1.7 trillion, surpassing auto loans and credit card debt. On-

Duke University Cost of Attendance



SOURCE: TAX FOUNDATION

ly home mortgage debt, at about \$12 trillion, is larger.”

Part of the problem is clearly the rising price tag to attend. The 2022-23 estimated cost to attend Duke University in Durham

for a year is now \$84,517. After financial aid and scholarships, that number is much lower for many students. But someone (government, endowments, donors) pays the rest. The debt accumulated at the end of four years is often enough to financially cripple young adults until the middle of their careers, as they pay the equivalent of another rent payment every month.

Enrollment declining

If the costs of getting a four-year degree have gone up and the benefits have gone down, basic economics suggests that fewer people will choose to pursue these degrees. And that’s the undeniable trend.

Enrollment dropped at UNC System schools by 2% in 2022. Jenna Robinson at the James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal says this has been a nationwide trend since 2010, both due to fewer high school graduates and because fewer of those graduates are choosing to go to college.

My younger brother just reached the position of athletic director at a college in Illinois, only to hear soon after that the college was shutting down the entire campus, including athletics, and will only offer online degrees. They cited dropping enrollment.

While the decision not to attend college may be smart economics for many whose future career won’t require a degree, it is unfortunate to see this traditional rite of passage fading away. It had been a time for young adults to consider their best path forward and to study the “less practical” subjects of the humanities, like philosophy, history, literature, and the arts. Study in these has long been seen as the road to becoming a well-rounded person.

Arguably, both of these benefits of the college experience have been fading away though. On some campuses, students do less thinking about their future than they do about parties and social life, developing bad habits that

Why I changed my mind on expanding Medicaid

PHIL BERGER
CONTRIBUTOR



FOR MORE than 10 years I was one of the staunchest opponents to expanding Medicaid in North Carolina. The Affordable Care Act as enacted was and is bad federal policy and has done much to exacerbate problems in healthcare. However, given how our federal and state systems currently operate, our ability at the state level to alter policies at the federal level is severely limited.

I generally articulated three policy reasons for my opposition to Medicaid expansion:

- **The cost of expansion could potentially bust our state's financial stability.**
- **Our traditional Medicaid system was broken and could not handle hundreds of thousands of new expansion enrollees.**
- **For the people in the expansion population, a new government benefit would eliminate the incentive to work.**

All these reasons fall upon current examination.

Since it was enacted, every attempt in Congress and by the courts to reverse the ACA and Medicaid expansion has failed. When Donald Trump was president and Republicans controlled Congress, they did not repeal or significantly alter the ACA. It's not going away, and refusing to accept



Sen. Joyce Krawiec, R-Forsyth, chats with Senate leader Phil Berger, R-Rockingham

that reality hurts North Carolinians and the state's finances. Medicaid expansion if implemented in a reasonable, responsible manner is a positive for state fiscal and healthcare policy.

The Senate version of House Bill 76, "Access to Healthcare Options," is just that — a reasonable, fiscally sound approach to expanding access to healthcare.

First, this plan does not bust our state's budget. In fact, just the opposite is true.

The federal government pays outright 90% of the cost and instead of the state ponying up the 10% nonfederal share, hospitals pay that through a new assessment. Our state's hospitals will receive a new infusion of more than

\$3 billion, and even with the new assessment, expansion is a net positive for the hospitals. The bill provides that if at any point the assessment does not cover the 10%, the state will end the expanded coverage.

Second, since winning the majority, Republicans in the General Assembly have reformed the state's Medicaid program. What once was a broken, mismanaged, and fraud-prone system has become a solvent, well-managed program. That is in no small part because we moved Medicaid from a fee-for-service model to a managed-care model, which provides better budget predictability.

Lastly, the majority of adults that would be covered under ex-

pansion are already part of the workforce. These are working individuals who make too much to qualify for traditional Medicaid, do not qualify for exchange subsidies, and can't afford to buy health insurance on their own because of the perverted, and I believe, intentional design of the ACA. These working North Carolina citizens are caught between a rock and a hard place.

By expanding Medicaid now — on our own terms — we increase access to healthcare in a thoughtful, conservative way. We pass a plan that is good for North Carolina, and we take advantage of holding out for the past decade and secure a significant stimulus that avoids the financial hit the state would have taken years ago.

But we can't just expand Medicaid and call it a day. We must address the very real consequences of additional people on our Medicaid rolls.

One recent healthcare study found that across the 50 states and Washington, D.C., North Carolina ranked 49th in cost, 43rd in access, and 35th in outcomes.

North Carolina voters feel that strain every day. That's why 73% of North Carolinians — and 73% of rural North Carolinians — support Medicaid expansion. Republican voters also support expansion to the tune of 55% of all Republicans and 57% of Trump supporters.

We must find ways to drive down costs and increase the supply side of the healthcare equation. One way to do that is repealing and reforming North Carolina's antiquated certificate-of-need laws. Certificate-of-need laws pre-

vent competition, protect existing monopolies, and drive-up costs.

Instead of allowing the market to operate and enable where and when healthcare facilities can open or expand, these laws enable competitors and state government to block new facilities from opening and competing with existing facilities.

The Senate version of H.B. 76 includes the most robust certificate-of-need reform package in our state's history. The changes address the biggest impediments to the availability of healthcare and the regulations that drive up costs for all North Carolinians. These changes will make North Carolina more attractive for providers, healthcare facilities, and hospitals willing to do business and compete here.

On balance, this is a huge positive for North Carolina. It will increase the number of North Carolinians who have insurance, assert downward pressure on healthcare costs for those who have insurance by reducing the incidence of the cost of uncompensated care being passed along to those that pay, and increase the supply of healthcare providers and facilities.

This healthcare access package is fiscally responsible, improves our state's finances, and takes direct aim at regulations that drive up costs and prevent North Carolinians from receiving care.

Sen. Phil Berger is the current president pro tempore of the N.C. Senate. Berger was elected to the Senate in 2000 and has led the Republican-majority body since 2011, when his party won control of the chamber.

Teacher pay critics need math instruction

MITCH KOKAI
CONTRIBUTOR



A recent headline in a major N.C. newspaper declared "Average N.C. teacher pay is nearly \$58,000, state says. But educators argue many earn less."

Any person who understands the concept of a mathematical average could have responded, "Yes, and many earn more." Compare all teacher salaries — from lowest to highest — and one single figure represents the average. Any teacher who doesn't earn the average earns either more or less.

The article's opening paragraph explains that the average teacher pay figure appeared in a state report. "But state education leaders say that doesn't tell the whole story," reporter Keung Hui added.

Of course not. By design, an average cannot tell the "whole story." It offers useful information, but it cannot describe the circumstances every teacher faces.

Official statistics from the N.C. Department of Public Instruction indicate that the average compensation for a public school teacher is \$57,805. That's \$1,804, or 3%, more than the prior year.

Advocates of higher teacher pay complain that the figure paints too rosy a picture.

"This is not the story of North Carolina's financial situation for teachers, and that average is infuriating to me," said Leah Carper,



er, a Guilford County teacher who advises the State Board of Education. Carper made that comment during a state board meeting, according to the newspaper article.

Carper went on to say, "That's not the number. That's not the story." She invited board members to call her so they could see her pay stub.

With starting pay set at a floor of \$37,000 in school districts with no local salary supplement, it's clear that North Carolina will have plenty of teachers who earn less than the average.

No one argues otherwise.

One should expect the average figure to document the salary of a mid-career teacher in a district

that falls in the middle of the pack in providing extra local pay.

One also should expect that the number of teachers earning more than the average is comparable to the number earning less. If we're talking about "median" teacher pay, just as many teachers earn more as those who earn less. By definition, median teacher compensation must be the figure sitting right at the midpoint among all teachers. Tens of thousands of teachers will earn less. The same number will earn more.

The "mean" teacher compensation figure is a bit different. Especially low or especially high figures could skew the average.

If Carper and fellow crit-

ics of the current average believe the number skews too high, they ought to be willing to publicize pay rates of North Carolina's most highly compensated teachers. The only way it can be true that \$58,000 overstates the average is if the highest-paid teachers get paid so much that they throw the calculation off balance. Their high pay must counteract the entry-level teachers at the bottom of the pay scale.

I won't hold my breath waiting for teacher pay critics to shine their spotlight on those collecting the largest paychecks. Publicity of that type would spoil the narrative of an underpaid profession.

Complaints about average teacher pay remind us that the number can be misused. For years, advocates for pay hikes have trumpeted reports suggesting North Carolina ranks among the states with the lowest average teacher pay. Critics often urge North Carolina to pursue the "national average."

Each time that complaint arises, those with a better understanding of averages chime in with important caveats. National comparisons rarely factor in significant cost-of-living differences between states. National rankings fail to account for differences in experience levels of teachers from state to state. (For years, a growing state like North Carolina featured a higher-than-average share of younger, less experienced teachers at the lower end of the pay scale. That younger pool

of teachers lowers the average.)

National comparisons often fail to account for wide variations in health and retirement benefits offered from state to state.

My former John Locke Foundation colleague Don Carrington raised an important point in 2014. Carrington reminded readers that pay for teachers and other public employees depends on a robust private sector generating tax revenue to foot the bill.

In 2012, not long after Republicans won control of the N.C. General Assembly, public school workers earned 85.1% of the average pay of their peers nationally. At the same time, North Carolina's private-sector workers earned 87.5% of the average pay of private-sector peers nationwide, Carrington reported.

That meant advocates who wanted to see teachers paid at the "national average" would have been asking for them to fare roughly 14% better financially than the private-sector employees who collectively fund public-sector salaries.

One can use and misuse statistics in many ways. That's especially true when the statistic is an average that can mask wide variations.

But at least we should expect people who cite an average figure to understand what "average" means.

Mitch Kokai is senior political analyst for the John Locke Foundation.

Let's build more housing

JORDAN ROBERTS
CONTRIBUTOR

The American dream of owning a home is falling out of reach for many in our state. Home prices continue to rise in North Carolina as we lag pre-recession levels of new construction. Simultaneously, our state welcomed over 100,000 new residents just last year. Both current residents and newcomers to North Carolina will face hardships in affording starter homes or upgrading homes as family needs change, unless reform happens. That reform needs to focus on allowing more homes, and homes of a different variety, to be built.

A review of available data illustrates the case for why we need to build more homes. It also provides a cautionary tale of how other states have failed in this policy area. Lawmakers and local leaders can look to California to see the fate of a state that doesn't allow supply to match demand. Our state is in a similar position to California's a few decades ago: steady economic growth and a mass influx of new residents. After years of failing to allow enough housing to be built, California's housing market has priced out many of its residents, who are now fleeing to lower-cost states.



A recently released paper by Michael Tanner of the CATO Institute illustrates some parallels between where North Carolina's housing market is now and where California's was before it went out of control. Tanner found many troubling trends in North Carolina's housing market in the paper. For example, North Carolina will need 900,000 new homes over the next decade to meet projected demand. Furthermore, vacancy rates for homes and apartments have fallen steadily since 2010, further illustrating the point of low supply. Lastly, the inflation-adjusted price of homes is up more than 30% since 2010, while rents have grown by more than 14%. All in all, supply is

down, and prices are rising.

What can we do?

This debate of what to do manifests itself on two fronts. First, within local communities: Some who wish to prohibit new development or different types of homes are pitted against those who see the need for more housing and density built. Similarly, you have a broader debate about whether localities or the state government in Raleigh should determine zoning and land-use policies.

To address the latter first, North Carolina is a Dillon's rule state, which means, in most circumstances, municipalities get

their authority delegated to them by Raleigh. Whether or not that is the proper arrangement between the state and localities is a debate for another day. The General Assembly can rein in most of the power it delegates to municipalities for governance, just like the arrangement between the legislature and the executive agencies whose authority is also delegated by the General Assembly.

On the former, upward mobility and homeownership should be shared goals of all residents of a community. Not every individual or family will always opt for homeownership. Still, we should be promoting markets that are conducive to a high supply of homes and housing that meets the individual needs of families and residents. Housing and homeownership have serious implications for economic growth and individual prosperity, so we should encourage policies that allow developers to meet the community's needs.

Many municipalities have taken steps on their own to reform zoning. This is good and should continue as cities and towns grapple with a population increase. However, Raleigh can set a statewide policy for how zoning, permitting, and plan approval should happen at the local level.

A good blueprint for the types of reforms that could happen appeared in 2021, Senate Bill 349. This piece of legislation was a proposed statewide zoning policy that

would have significantly reformed the regulations allowing different types of homes to be built on residential property. The bill would legalize "middle housing" — defined as duplexes, triplexes, quadruplexes, and townhomes — on all land zoned for residential use. Further, the bill would have allowed homeowners to build and rent accessory dwelling units. Lastly, the bill had provisions that better balanced the scales between property owners and local governments. All are worthwhile reforms that will alleviate pressure on housing supply and boost property rights.

Zoning reform is based on free-market principles. Limiting the types of homes that can be built threatens the economic prosperity of North Carolinians and the continued growth of our state. It skews the market toward specific types of houses that may be out of reach for many looking to become homeowners. To combat this, lawmakers in Raleigh should look for ways to reform local zoning regulations and direct municipalities to limit delays in getting construction finished. To continue to grow as a state, we must have the housing inventory to keep up with demand to avoid the fate of California. Simply put: We need to build more houses.

Jordan Roberts is government affairs director for the John Locke Foundation.

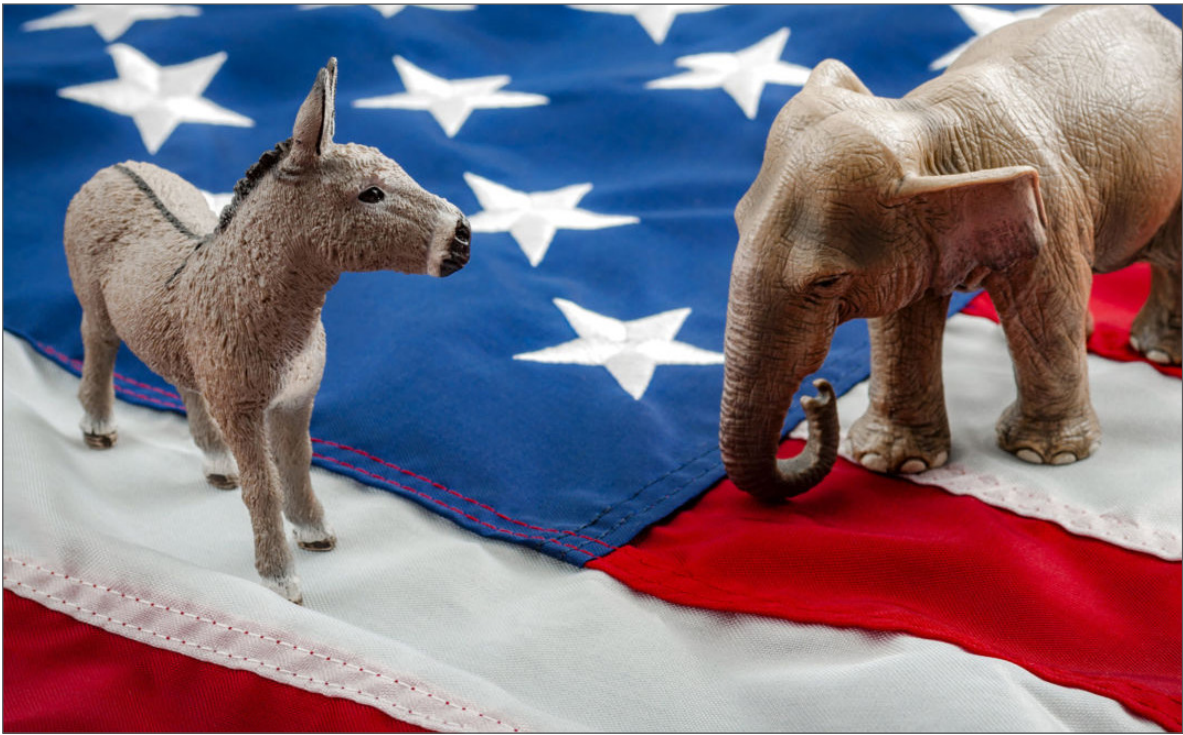
Partisan elections are the best kind

JOHN HOOD
CONTRIBUTOR

WHEN I RETURNED home to North Carolina from the nation's capital in 1989 and subsequently registered to vote, I opted not to join a political party. Although my conservative views were already well-established — and publicly on display in the syndicated newspaper column I'd created three years earlier — I considered it inappropriate for a journalist to join a partisan team. I was, and remain, unaffiliated.

At the time, North Carolina was an overwhelmingly Democratic state. Since then, the share of voters registering as Democrats has fallen precipitously. The Republican share rose for a while, then leveled off. The ranks of independent voters have, by contrast, kept growing rapidly. As of early March, about 36% of the state's 7.2 million voters are unaffiliated, with 33% registered as Democrats, 30% as Republicans, and the rest as Libertarians or Greens.

I'm unaffiliated. So is a plurality of the state's electorate. Nevertheless, I strongly favor partisan elections. They're more transparent. They're more competitive. And with few exceptions, those who strongly advocate non-partisan elections are partisan actors who think their team benefits by keeping voters in the dark about their favored candidates' affiliations.



That's what happened two decades ago when the General Assembly removed the party labels from elections for North Carolina Supreme Court and Court of Appeals. The Democrats then in charge of state government had been entirely comfortable with decades of partisan elections for those offices — until voters started choosing Republicans.

In 1998, the GOP won a majority on the high court for the very first time. Republicans had also been doing better in other judicial races.

Was this because swing voters without much else to go on as-

sumed Republican judges would be tougher or crime and less likely to legislate from the bench? Probably. Whatever the explanation, by 2002 Democratic leaders had seen enough. They took the party labels off. Both major parties kept running candidates for the appellate courts, of course, but it became much harder to convey their philosophical differences to voters. That was the plan. It helped keep Republicans from increasing their majority on the high court. Indeed, they went down a seat in 2004.

Years later, after voters put Republicans in charge of the state

legislature, it was the GOP's turn to play the game. In 2016, strategists feared the party would have a rough election cycle with Donald Trump at the top of the ballot. Worried about losing the one Supreme Court race up that year, they first tried to convert it into a retention election, placing only the incumbent's name on the ballot for an up-or-down vote. Once this was (properly) ruled unconstitutional, they consciously kept the Supreme Court race nonpartisan even as they restored party labels for Court of Appeals.

The gambit backfired. While Republicans ended up having a

pretty good cycle — winning all five Court of Appeals races, for example — they lost the "nonpartisan" race for Supreme Court. That's probably because, by the luck of the draw, the name of the Democrat, Mike Morgan, was listed above that of the Republican incumbent, Bob Edmunds. In the partisan races of 2016, the Republicans were listed above the Democrats. Morgan got lots of votes from North Carolinians who assumed he was the Republican.

The legislature finally ended the farce of nonpartisan judicial elections. So why am I revisiting the issue today? Because lawmakers have also been converting previously opaque school-board races into transparent ones. A decade ago, only one in 10 school boards featured officially partisan elections. Today it's one in three. More will follow. Democrats are up in arms about this. Not coincidentally, Republicans are winning most of the newly labeled school board races.

Now, I'm open to the argument that we shouldn't elect our judges. I've long been convinced that we should let county commissions appoint school boards as administrative bodies. But as long as we elect these public officials, voters should have as much information as possible about them — including their party affiliations, if any.

John Hood is a John Locke Foundation board member. His latest books, "Mountain Folk" and "Forest Folk," combine epic fantasy with early American history.

Free expression and constructive dialogue vital for UNC System students

MARK MCNEILLY
CONTRIBUTOR

The University of North Carolina System has a number of fundamental missions. These include knowledge generation and transmission; developing future leaders and citizens; fostering success and prosperity for future generations; and providing students with the values, knowledge, and skills necessary to exercise their democratic responsibilities. Academic freedom, free expression, open inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and constructive dialogue are essential factors in fulfilling those missions.

Various universities in the system have taken steps to ensure these fundamental attributes exist on their campuses. At UNC Chapel Hill, my university, the good news is we have taken several steps to promote these attributes and foster an environment where these values can thrive.

These steps include being awarded the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression Green Light Rating in 2015, which indicates that the university has no speech codes that infringe on free expression.

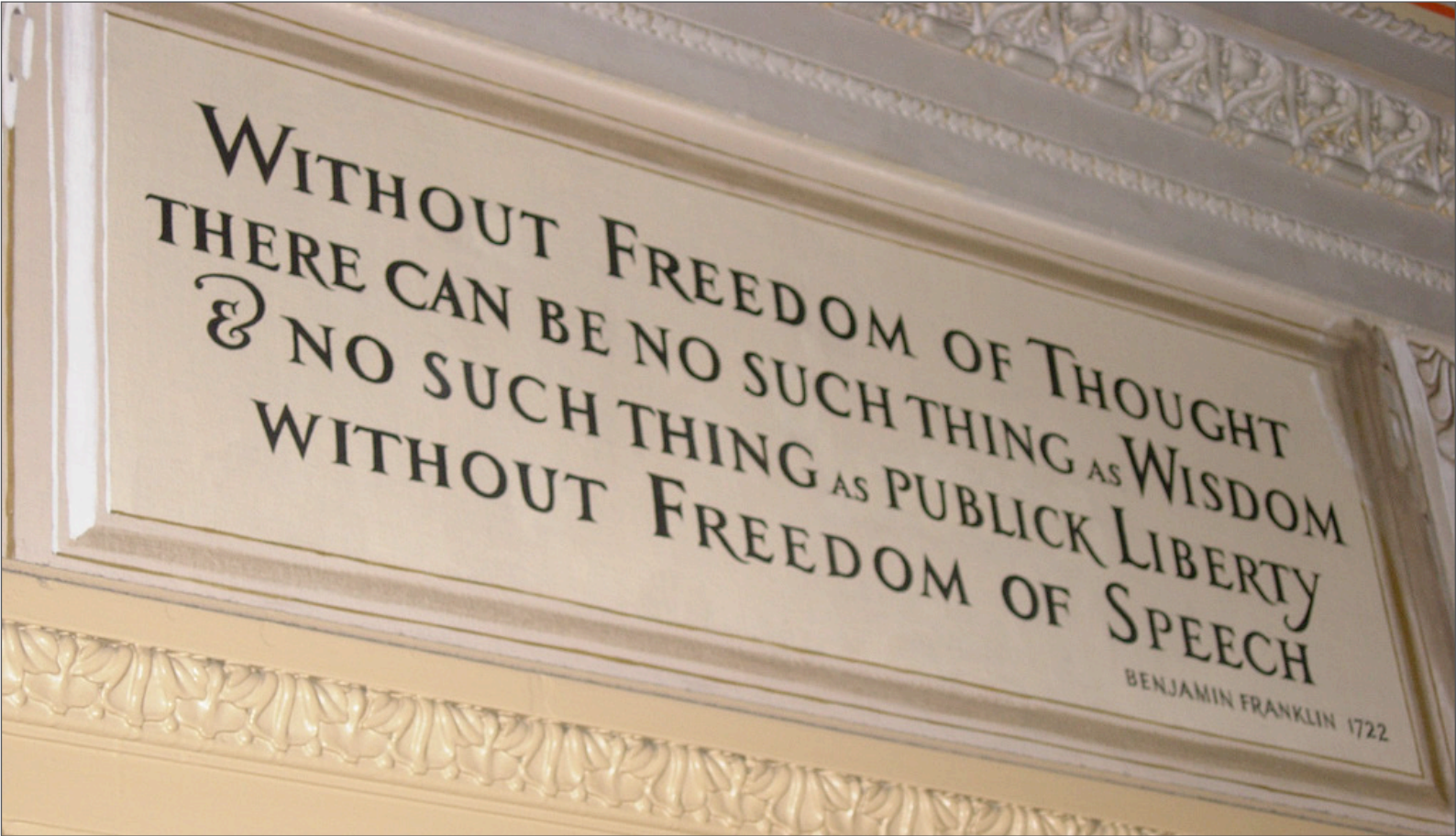
In 2018, the UNC Faculty Council adopted the University of Chicago Free Speech Statement, which has been adopted by many universities and affirms the importance of free and open discourse in the pursuit of knowledge.

UNC's Program for Public Discourse, launched in 2019, models constructive discourse in its public events and has the Agora Fellows Program, which offers opportunities for students to learn how to engage in productive dialogue.

UNC's commitment to free expression and constructive dialogue has also been reflected in the rankings. In 2022, FIRE ranked UNC 26th out of over 200 universities, placing it in the top 15%. Also in 2022, the trustees adopted the University of Chicago Statement and Kalven Report. The latter document commits the university and its subunits to be institutionally neutral so that faculty and students feel free to speak openly on controversial topics of the day without feeling pressure to conform to university leaders' positions. Lastly, the UNC Faculty Council passed a resolution on the right and duty of faculty members to speak freely and the duty of the university to protect faculty speech.

What does the research say?

While these efforts have made a difference, 2022 faculty research across eight UNC System universities revealed that more work needs to be done in the areas of free expression and constructive dialogue. The major findings of the study are be-



low. While I will be citing UNC Chapel Hill data, the trends are directionally the same across all eight campuses.

1 - Faculty generally do not push political agendas.

The vast majority of students believe faculty encouraged participation from conservative and liberal students alike.

2 - Campuses do not consistently achieve an atmosphere that promotes free expression.

At UNC, 35% of students were concerned about the opinion of their peers if they stated their sincere political beliefs in the classroom, and 24% were concerned about the opinion of the professors as well. Almost 20% of students self-censored more than once during the semester when a political topic was discussed in class.

3 - Students who identify as conservative face distinctive challenges.

At UNC 83% of conservative-identifying students were concerned about the opinion of their peers if they stated their sincere political beliefs in the classroom, and 93% were concerned about the opinion of the professors as well. More than half (54%) self-censored more than once during the semester.

Also at UNC, about a third of liberal students are unwilling to have conservative students as friends or classmates, and almost three-quarters of liberal students think their conservative peers are racist.

4 - Students across the political spectrum want more opportunities to engage with

those who think differently.

The good news is that at UNC, 50% of liberal students and 67% of conservative students want more opportunities to engage with their political opposites. This is a hopeful sign; however, UNC System universities need to give the students the skills to do this constructively or such engagements may not lead to better understanding but more misunderstanding and polarization.

As I've said elsewhere, universities do a great job recruiting smart students, showing them how to research subjects and then argue their positions to win the argument. Perhaps we do it too well. As Musa al-Gharbi points out in his article, "Navigating Moral Disagreements": "In fact, the more intelligent, educated, or rhetorically skilled one is, the less likely it becomes that someone will change their minds when confronted with evidence or arguments that challenge their priors." It seems that, in the polarization wars, universities may be the arms suppliers.

Moving forward

The UNC System has made a major step by giving eight of its universities the data they need to understand the state of free expression and constructive discourse on their campus.

As pointed out above, UNC Chapel Hill has made significant strides in this area.

However, as the research points out, there is more to be done. The good news is that there are several faculty and administrators on campus who recognize change is necessary and are working diligently to improve things.

To build on the momentum

above, UNC Chapel Hill is also doing the following:

1 - UNC Program for Public Discourse momentum

PPD has made a difference on campus by modeling constructive discourse and giving professors and students the skills to make the classroom a place where all can share their views positively and freely. The organization will continue to build on its past success going forward.

2 - UNC Committee on Academic Freedom and Free Expression (CAFFE)

UNC's Chancellor, Kevin Guskiewicz, has created a committee to "advise the chancellor on ways to advance academic freedom and articulate free speech norms and best practices for the Carolina community." This is an important step in institutionalizing academic freedom and free expression on campus.

3 - UNC Heterodox Academy Campus Community

UNC is one of 23 universities chosen by Heterodox Academy to implement one of its Campus Communities. The UNC chapter has about 25 faculty now and expects to grow over time. The mission is to build a community of scholars who enjoy discussing heterodox ideas about campus, U.S., and global issues.

4 - Academic freedom resources website

This is a public website I created for faculty and others who are interested in learning about academic freedom and free expression on campus. It contains definitions, research, policies,

etc., on these topics and is a handy one-stop shop for those interested.

5 - School for Civic Life and Leadership

The idea behind this university unit began with UNC's provost, and, although a resolution supporting it was passed by the UNC Trustees, it is still in germination mode. Its goal is to provide students with the communication skills necessary to become productive and engaged citizens.

This is one of the UNC System's missions and the "promote democracy" pillar of UNC's Strategic Plan. A key focus of this organization will be to teach students constructive dialogue.

Conclusion: Progress has been made. But more is left to be done.

In sum, the UNC System universities have a key role in preparing our college students to become citizen leaders in North Carolina and beyond.

While there are areas our universities can improve, progress has been made, and more plans are in place to make our campuses places where faculty and students can engage in constructive dialogue.

In a polarized country, we must keep in mind the words of Abraham Lincoln, who said in an even more tumultuous time, "Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?"

Mark McNeilly is a professor of marketing and organizational behavior at UNC Chapel Hill's Kenan-Flagler Business School.

* The opinions expressed here are those of Professor McNeilly and should not be viewed as representing the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill or the UNC System.

Medicaid expansion would hurt, not help North Carolinians

REP. BEN MOSS,
CONTRIBUTOR



MEDICAID EXPANSION has been a topic of lively and lengthy debate in the North Carolina General Assembly for the better part of a decade. As a representative of the people, I have thoroughly reviewed the presented data, listened to the feedback provided by my constituents and concerned citizens in neighboring counties, and have come to the conclusion that Obamacare Medicaid expansion is a bad deal for North Carolina.

Here's why:

- 1 - It would force many North Carolinians out of private insurance.**
Currently, many able-bodied adults in the state qualify for free, silver-level private health care plans on the federal exchange. This benefit would be eliminated if we expand Medicaid, and these North Carolinians would be forced onto Medicaid — coverage that is accepted by fewer providers.
- 2 - It would trap North Carolinians into government dependency and keep them out of the workforce.**
Nationally, more than half of all able-bodied adults on Medicaid don't work — in part because the Biden administration has banned work requirements in the program. The state has nearly 400,000 job openings, and expanding Medicaid would make it



- even harder for businesses to find workers.
- 3 - It would shift resources away from North Carolinians with disabilities who are already on Medicaid waiting lists.**
More than 15,000 people with disabilities in our state are waiting to get the help they need — many end up waiting years. Adding thousands of able-bodied adults to Medicaid would mean fewer truly needy North Carolinians get the care they need. At the very least, it would give them even longer wait times.

- 4 - It would put our hospitals on the chopping block.**
Roughly two in every five states that expanded Medicaid saw hospital job losses as a result, and many affected hospitals end up closing. Medicaid shortfalls in expansion states were in the billions, too, because Medicaid reimburses providers at a fraction of the rate of private insurers. A recent report from the Center for Healthcare Quality and Payment Reform points to low payments from Medicaid patients being the primary cause of losses at rural hospitals. Many rural hospitals are, indeed, at risk —

- but expansion is not the answer. Eliminating certificate-of-need laws, passing the SAVE Act, and keeping more North Carolinians on private plans with higher reimbursement rates would all be better options.
- 5 - It would lead to high expenditures on Medicaid.**
If we want to know what Medicaid expansion would look like here, all we have to do is consider the other states that have tried expansion and found it to be a huge failure. In state after state, Medicaid enrolls far more able-bodied adults than projected. For ex-

ample, in Idaho, it was estimated that 62,000 able-bodied adults would enroll — but the grand total was closer to 120,000, nearly double original estimates. Virginia's enrollment was more than twice what was expected, too. As has happened in other states, these dramatic underestimates in enrollment will result in catastrophically high expenditures on Medicaid. Our state already spends about 30% of our budget on Medicaid. If Medicaid is expanded to thousands more in North Carolina, we will face what other states have experienced: welfare expansion crowding out other critical budget priorities like public safety and education.

Bad for North Carolina

Expanding Medicaid to able-bodied adults is a lose-lose scenario. It would force many North Carolinians off private insurance, trap more people into government-dependency, shift resources away from those who truly need it, put our hospitals at risk, and lead to high expenditures on Medicaid. As a representative of the people, I cannot, in good faith, vote for a measure that would push the truly needy to the back of the line, threaten to cost jobs and close hospitals, and crowd out other critical priorities in our state budget. These are the facts that have led me to oppose Medicaid expansion in North Carolina. I implore my colleagues in the General Assembly to consider these points carefully and make the best decision for the people of our state.

GOT AN OPINION?

Carolina Journal is accepting letters to the editor and guest opinions (op-eds)* on issues related to North Carolina. We cover the state from a limited-government and free-market perspective but will consider varying viewpoints, depending on relevance and quality. A good guideline for letters is 200-500 words and 550-800 words for op-eds. A letter to the editor is comment or disagreement with a published CJ piece; an op-ed is a guest opinion argument.

Please email any submissions to opinion editor
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*We retain the right to edit or to not publish any submitted letters or op-eds.

THE CAROLINA JOURNAL

Justice Earls openly flouting NC Code of Judicial Conduct

DALLAS WOODHOUSE
CONTRIBUTOR



Democrat N.C. Supreme Court Justice Anita Earls, a well-known liberal activist before and during her time on the bench, appears to be actively ignoring and defying North Carolina's Code of Judicial Conduct, the state's ethical rule book for judges and Supreme Court justices.

Look at Gov. Roy Cooper's controversial Task Force for Racial Equity in Criminal Justice. Along with Attorney General Josh Stein, Earls is the co-chair of the task force, created in the summer of 2020 by Cooper.

Carolina Journal recounted how the task force made 125 recommendations that amount to a liberal soft-on-crime wish list. The three most high-profile N.C. Democrats have continued to push for the task force's recommendations, which make it "harder to catch criminals, collect evidence, convict criminals, and keep them behind bars," according to John Locke Foundation experts on crime and the law.

However, it is Earls' involvement with the task force's advocacy efforts that are causing concern in the legal community over alleged conflicts of interests and possible violations of North Carolina's Code of Judicial Conduct, the state's rule book for judges.

It appears Earls has ignored rules that require she recuse herself from certain high-profile cases or seek written consent from parties on both sides of these cases to continue. Earls has done neither.

North Carolina's Code of Judicial Conduct is 15 pages long and includes seven "canons" covering a wide range of practical, ethical, and administrative rules for judges. The code is adopted by members of the N.C. Supreme Court, and it covers those same justices and all lower court judges. It was last amended in 2015. The preamble states, "An independent and honorable judiciary is indispensable to justice in our society, and to this end and in furtherance thereof, this Code of Judicial Conduct is hereby established."

The N.C. Supreme Court recently held a hearing on whether North Carolinians who have been convicted of felonies should have the right to vote before their sentences are complete, including while on probation or parole.

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures: "It has been common practice in the United States to make felons



Justice Anita Earls ignores and defies North Carolina's Code of Judicial Conduct.

ineligible to vote, in some cases permanently."

In fact in 11 states, felons lose their voting rights indefinitely, at least for some crimes. To regain them, it may require a governor's pardon, or they may face an additional waiting period after completion of sentence (including parole and probation).

North Carolina's Constitution bans all felons from voting, unless the privilege is restored under conditions set by legislation passed by the General Assembly.

North Carolina is among 16 states where felons lose their voting rights during incarceration and while on parole and/or probation.

Under a 1973 law passed by a legislature dominated by Democrats, felons must pay any outstanding fines, fees and/or restitution before their rights are restored.

The case, *CSI vs. Moore*, is a challenge to North Carolina's felony re-enfranchisement law, which provides the process for felons to once again vote once they have completed their obligations to the state and their victims. Even though the 1973 law was praised by civil rights advocates at the time for making it easier for felons to vote once again, the plaintiffs now claim that making felons pay fines and restitution to victims is racist.

Earls is not a disinterested party in this dispute, as her task force urged the state to "expand voting rights to those on probation, parole, or post-release supervision for a felony conviction."

Additionally, four different recommendations also attack the use and reliance on fines for convicted criminals as a racist practice.

Earls' participation on the task force recently came up during a Supreme Court hearing over race and jury selection. The court is weighing the case of a black Forsyth County man on death row who alleges that a training document was used to keep potential black jurors off the jury that heard his case. Russell William Tucker, 56, was convicted in February 1996 of first-degree murder in the death of Maurice Travone Williams, 23.

Tucker's case was among four heard by the court on Feb. 8 involving defendants convicted of murder. Attorneys for Tucker say that five potential black jurors were removed from the jury pool based on their race.

Based on the 1986 U.S. Supreme Court Case *Batson v. Kentucky*, which determined that states are not permitted to use peremptory challenges to automatically exclude potential members of the jury because of their race, these challenges are known

as *Batson* challenges. The result of a successful *Batson* may be a new trial.

However Tucker's argument suffers procedural challenges including the establishment of a *prima facie* case that the peremptory challenge was exercised on the basis of race, which the trial court determined Tucker was unable to do, in part because the juror was sleeping through much of jury selection.

Much of the hearing focused on the existence of this procedural bar. However, Earls and the task force don't believe the procedural limitations should exist and recommended "abolishing the *prima facie* case" requirement.

In court filings, Tucker's attorneys noted that this limitation contravenes the "position of the Attorney General," Josh Stein.

When asked about this by Justice Phil Berber Jr., Tucker's attorney said, "The Governor's Task force on Racial Equity has made some findings of fact about the problems of race discrimination in jury selection."

Tucker's attorney noted that the attorney general is co-chair of the task force, as is Earls.

Specifically, the Earls-endorsed report says the "implementation of these recommendations will strengthen the *Batson* standard." Another recommendation is to "Amend Motion for

Appropriate Relief statute to allow a judge to overcome technical defects in the interest of justice or where the petition raises a significant claim of race discrimination."

What is quite stunning is that Earls acknowledges in other sections of the report that her work on the task force can be problematic for the administration of justice. In the section recommending the legislature re-adopt the controversial misnamed "Racial Justice Act," which in effect ended capital punishment for monstrous killers of all races, footnote 105 states, "Justice Earls took no part in the discussion or vote on this recommendation."

Several parts of the code appear to address Earls' work on the task force.

Canon 4 states: A judge may participate in cultural or historical activities or engage in activities concerning the legal, economic, educational, or governmental system, or the administration of justice ... if in doing so the judge does not cast substantial doubt on the judge's capacity to decide impartially any issue that may come before the judge.

Canon 5 adds: A judge may participate in civic and charitable activities that do not reflect adversely upon the judge's impartiality or interfere with the performance of the judge's judicial duties.

Canon 3 mandates that judges: should perform the duties of the judge's office impartially and diligently. The judicial duties of a judge take precedence over all the judge's other activities.

With those ground rules put in place, Earls' behavior comes seriously into question under the administrative section of Canon 3 when it comes to disqualification.

This section lists several reasons that judges should recuse themselves on their own or a motion by the parties involved if the "judge's impartiality may reasonably be questioned," including:

"The judge has a personal bias or prejudice concerning a party; or an interest that could be substantially affected by the outcome of the proceeding."

Should a judge not recuse under these circumstances, Canon 3 lays out what is necessary to continue to sit on the case:

"A judge potentially disqualified by the terms of Canon 3C may, instead of withdrawing from the proceeding, disclose on the record the basis of the judge's potential disqualification. If, based on such disclosure, the parties and lawyers, on behalf of their cl-

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Are college degrees losing their luster?

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set them back rather than prepare them for a life of productive work at their vocation. And those once-enriching humanities courses are increasingly becoming one-sided and dogmatic.

I have a friend who is a plumber and graduated with a GED from our high school, never attending college.

As an adult, he has gained a curiosity for the humanities, and during his commutes between jobs has been voraciously consuming the classics of literature, like Homer's Odyssey, Dante's Inferno, and Shakespeare, on audiobook.

Even if college is not necessary in the future for many jobs, technology and curiosity thankfully will keep knowledge available to the masses. Even before audiobooks, many of the wisest figures in history, like Abraham Lincoln, were autodidacts.

The four-year college paradigm served our nation well for many years. But if the investment of time and money puts it out of reach for most people, and if it's no longer seen as necessary to qualify one for most jobs, we should prepare ourselves for a dramatic shift in attitude toward college.

Some professions (doctors, lawyers, engineers, etc) will always need extensive education and training to do their high-stakes, technical jobs well. Higher education will remain the only path forward for them.

But for millions of others, skipping four years of college may simply be the right decision as degrees cease being the ticket to a high-paying job.

Earls defies NC Code of Judicial Conduct

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dents and independently of the judge's participation, all agree in writing that the judge's basis for potential disqualification is immaterial or insubstantial, the judge is no longer disqualified, and may participate in the proceeding. The agreement, signed by all lawyers, shall be incorporated in the record of the proceeding."

However, Earls has never filed such a disclosure in the felon voting case, the jury race cases, or in past and upcoming redistricting cases where she served as counsel previously for interested/connected parties.

"Judges owe it to the people to avoid cases where they have an ac-

tual bias or are perceived to have a strong investment in the outcome," said Jeanette Doran, president and general counsel for the N.C. Institute for Constitutional Law.

Doran pointed to Canon 1 of the Code of Judicial Conduct, which states:

"A judge should participate in establishing, maintaining, and enforcing, and should personally observe, appropriate standards of conduct to ensure that the integrity and independence of the judiciary shall be preserved."

Doran added, "Justice Earls' work on the task force addresses or deals with the same subjects she is considering as a justice. Some people, maybe many people, will see that as a problem because it casts doubt on the independence of the court."

Should a complaint be filed based on Earls' conduct, the North Carolina Judicial Standards Commission would investigate, and if necessary would make confidential discipline recommendations to the state Supreme

Court, on which Earls, of course, sits.

Doran questioned why Cooper, a lawyer and former attorney general, picked Earls for the task force.

"Putting a sitting justice on that kind of project is just asking for trouble," said Doran. "The risk of bias or the appearance of bias is significant. The governor could have asked a retired justice if he wanted a judge's perspective, but he tapped Earls for some reason."

Perhaps the reason is that Earls is willing to push and/or cross the line of acceptable conduct for justices and is more than willing to compromise Lady Justice in the pursuit of dangerous soft-on-crime policies.

Dallas Woodhouse was the investigative political analyst for Carolina Journal until April 28, 2022. Woodhouse formerly served as the director of strategic initiatives for the Civitas Institute and was executive director of the North Carolina Republican Party.



CON repeal is critical

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for behavioral health hospital beds and chemical dependency beds. For counties with more than 125,000 people, the deal also proposes lifting CON laws for purchases of magnetic resonance imaging and opening ambulatory surgery centers. The second two repeals would kick in three years from now, maybe more. Only 15 counties have more than 125,000 people, so 85 counties would benefit from only two of the four CON repeals.

Dialysis is among the many life-saving treatments that were left behind in the rush to get Medicaid reform out the door. According to 2021 data from the American Kidney Fund, there are more than 26,000 North Carolinians living with end-stage renal disease, or kidney failure. More than 19,000 of them rely on dialysis to live. Nearly all of the state's 189 dialysis centers are run by one of just two companies that provide this lifeline for so many. CON law protects that "duopoly."

According to a study from The Mercatus Center at George Mason University, which examined outcomes analysis in certificate-of-need laws in different states, the laws actually drive prices up.

Patients in a state like North Carolina would gain greater access to higher-quality and lower-cost care if CON laws were to be eliminated.

- Matthew Mitchell
Mercatus Center

They also found that health outcomes fall in states with CON laws because patients have less access to medical facilities and are more likely to be denied a bed in the local hospital. When compared with patients in non-CON states, patients in CON states like North Carolina, have higher mortality rates following heart attack, heart failure, and pneumonia.

"They can look to the experiences of Americans in non-CON states to see what is likely to happen," said study author Matthew Mitchell of the Mercatus Center. "These experiences, documented in dozens of careful studies, strongly suggest that patients in a state like North Carolina would gain greater access to higher-quality and lower-cost care if CON laws were to be eliminated."

Other states have repealed archaic CON laws. It's time North Carolina did too.

A tale of two states

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Arabella Advisors, a left-wing consulting company controlling nearly a billion-dollar nonprofit nexus from its plush headquarters in Washington, D.C., opened its fifth national office in Durham.

With all those resources, why hasn't North Carolina "flipped"? Having been involved in both states, the answer isn't complicated, at least not from my perspective.

First, North Carolina enjoys better leadership among the center-right network and those who invest in it. They've done a superb job building a public-policy and capacities infrastructure. A number of influential entities, including the John Locke Foundation and our news outlet Carolina Journal, operate in that space.

Second, notwithstanding Medicaid expansion, N.C. GOP elected officials, especially in the legislature, have focused primarily on unifying issues like tax reform, voter ID, safe streets, reliable power, and educational choice. These policies provide individuals, families, businesses, and communities the freedom to thrive.

I can't stress enough the im-



N.C. Democrats believe they need to focus on rural voters.

portance of unity. One of the original funders of Colorado's flip is the state's current governor, Jared Polis, who said, "Discussion of issues that might divide the group was strictly verboten. ... All the participants checked their political agendas at the door." Colorado Democrats had the discipline to stay on message about issues that concerned Colorado voters. It worked.

Third, North Carolina has a large percentage of pragmatic, rural voters. Shoot straight with them about good ideas like those mentioned above. Leave their guns alone. Let them worship as they choose.

New state Democratic Party Chair Clayton Anderson believes the party needs to focus on rural

districts. She's not wrong. However, Democrats may find that's a losing investment because they're advancing a party more focused on identity politics and an oppression narrative than economic prosperity.

I live in rural North Carolina. Residents take pride in their communities and place faith in local institutions like churches, schools, and small businesses. Scolding them about the past and criticizing them about the present while touting government-dictated, cradle-to-grave programs won't win hearts and minds.

Everyone in North Carolina should take pride in freedom's success, but don't get complacent. That's when Colorado's professional left will say, "I told you so."

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