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Stalled state budget negotiations: House and Senate at odds

BY ALEX BALTZEGAR

State budget negotiations have been stalled as House and Senate lawmakers were too far apart to reach a deal. But leaders in both chambers have announced that they are finally making significant progress and a vote can be expected, likely in mid-August. Initially, June 30 had been the assumed deadline.

The Senate is prioritizing accelerated personal income tax cuts for North Carolinians, building and legalizing multiple new casinos across the state, and funding a \$1.425 billion private endowment project called NCInnovation.

The House wants to install revenue triggers onto the tax cuts as a means of ensuring sufficient state revenue and prefers funding NCInnovation at a lower level annually instead of via a one-time endowment. The two chambers also vary on how much to raise state employee and teacher pay, with the House proposing more than the Senate.

The Senate budget proposed raising average teacher pay by 4.5% over the next two years but increased starting teacher pay by nearly 11% over the same period. The Senate budget also gives state employees a 5% raise over the next two years.

On the other hand, the House

proposed giving teachers more than 10% raises over the next two years while raising pay for state employees by 7.5%.

Democratic criticisms of negotiations

Democrats have begun to seize on the delayed budget agreement, claiming that the legislative Republican supermajorities are incapable of governing.

In a social media post, Rep. Wesley Harris, D-Mecklenburg, accused Republicans of not being able to govern and attributed it to fighting among themselves.

"We're 10 days into the new fiscal year, and the NCGOP is

still weeks away from passing a budget," Harris said. "It's a damn shame that even with a supermajority, they *still* can't stop fighting among themselves long enough to actually govern."

Ford Porter, a spokesperson for Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper, echoed those sentiments in a statement.

"For years, we saw breathless coverage about who was responsible for budget impasses," Ford said, alluding to times when Republicans needed Democrats to work with them. "This session, with two GOP supermajorities, [North Carolinians] have gotten a close look at the broken NCGA culture [that Republicans have]

created."

Porter goes on to say Republicans have "no ability to work together or govern."

Legislative Republicans disagreed with Democrats' claims of not being able to govern.

"Democrats must have a short memory considering their own track record on passing budgets," Sen. Brent Jackson, R-Sampson, told Carolina Journal. "Back when they had control of the legislature, budgets were routinely passed after July 1, teachers were furloughed, and taxpayers were burdened with billion-dollar deficits."

continued PAGE 10

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Stand for something



DONNA KING
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

It is nearing a wrap on summer 2023, and kids are heading back to school. We've come a long way in three short years. Three years ago, millions of North Carolinians saw an unsure future for their families here. Today, that dark time is still a reality for them. Even if those without school-aged kids have moved on, it is critical to recognize the unique position that the next generation is still in.

In August 2020, our children were forced to isolate from their friends, teachers, schools, and sports for more than a year, as executive branch orders halted athletics, ordered them to maintain six feet of distance from others, and pushed them to conduct their lives online.

In 2020 and 2021, the state legislature passed multiple measures to allow public schools and churches to re-open on a case-by-case basis. Restaurants, bowling alleys, and gyms would've been allowed to let some light in if they were not already out of business. Student athletes would've been allowed to take to the field with their parents in attendance. Gov. Roy Cooper vetoed those bills, including one that would've allowed North Carolina commu-

nities to hold fireworks displays on Independence Day. The irony on that one was clear to most. In 2022, he vetoed unmasking students in public schools, long after most of us did not wear masks to work. Without a supermajority, the Republican-led legislature was unable to override his veto.

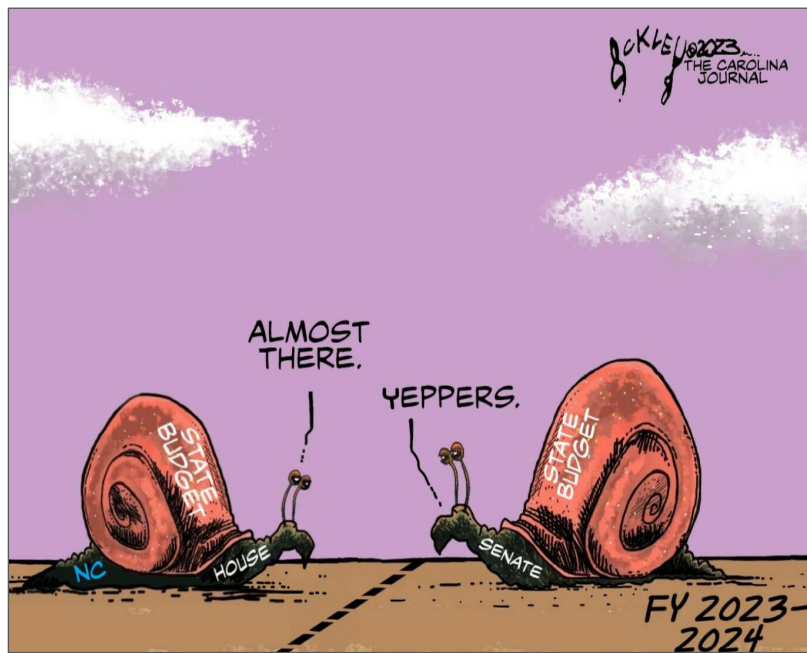
This summer, Cooper again got out his veto stamp, this time to block legislation to expand school choice, create a charter school board, and give parents more say in their children's education — despite a 66% approval for school choice even among Democrats. He claims the measures undermine public education. Now, as in 2020 and 2021, his tone-deaf approach comes at the expense of North Carolina students, parents, and teachers.

Today, the damage is still evident. Research of 2022 data shows that just 45% of North Carolina's K-12 students passed state reading, math, and science exams. For black students it was 28%, for Hispanic students it was 32%.

North Carolina schools received \$6.1 billion in federal money to help remedy the impacts of the pandemic-related school closures and virtual learning. In September 2022, 54% of those federal COVID funds remained unspent and more than half the funds that were spent went to salaries. The 20 school districts with the

continued PAGE 19

Budget snails



SEE PAGE 20 for more Carolina Journal political cartoons.



WILLIAM ZHANG - COURTESY WIKI COMMONS

Freedom Conservatism stands against authoritarianism of the left and right



DONALD BRYSON
PUBLISHER

It was a great television piece that would help shape American conservatism for the next 35 years. In a 1979 interview, Phil Donahue and Nobel laureate Milton Friedman discussed political power, capitalism, and greed. To counter Donahue's argument about the problems with an economic system and society based on greed, Friedman responded, "You know, I think you're taking a lot of things for granted. Just tell me where in the world you're going to find these angels who are going to organize society for us."

At that moment, Friedman crystallized an idea that dates back to Enlightenment philosophers like Thomas Hobbes and John Locke — humans are and will always be fallible beings, so consolidating power in a select group of people through the force of government does not

lead to a virtuous or prosperous society.

The world will always have bad and flawed actors, which means that a society based on individual freedom and limited government is the best way to mitigate the risk of bad actors in consolidated pools of power like the economy and government.

On July 13 I joined more than 70 other conservative leaders nationwide by lending my signature to a statement of principles on Freedom Conservatism.

My decision arises from a growing concern over the escalating wave of authoritarianism from the left and right, which threatens the United States and extends its ominous reach around the globe.

We are witnessing a disheartening trend of self-described conservatives saying that the conservatism of the American Founders and Friedman-esque capitalism are no longer relevant in the 21st century.

Their answer is to redefine

continued PAGE 19

This Issue

4

Speaker Moore: NC ranks No. 1 in business in spite of Cooper

5

Fish in Cape Fear River tainted with 'forever chemicals'

8

'Do your homework': NC Justice Center report on vouchers draws criticism

11

Greensboro facility set to house migrant children beginning in August

Applewhite receives 'frightening' messages after women's sports bill vote

BY ALEX BALTZEGAR

After voting in favor of House Bill 574, "Fairness in Women's Sports Act," Sen. Val Applewhite, D-Cumberland, found herself receiving "frightening" messages.

Other than Applewhite, the vote fell along party lines, passing by a margin of 31-17.

The bill would prevent transgender athletes who are biologically male from participating in women's sports. The bill does not prevent transgender individuals from participating in co-ed leagues, or prevent biological females from playing in men's leagues.

An article from the Fayetteville Observer said Applewhite received violent threats following the vote. However, Applewhite said she wouldn't characterize the messages as violent, but more "frightening."

Applewhite's side of the story

"We've taken a lot of votes this session, from gun rights to abortion, and you always get the emails that support your position or not," Applewhite told Carolina Journal in a phone interview. "Some of them are happy, and some of them are not, but I have not received any that characterized me as transphobic."

Applewhite said that, following her vote on H.B. 574, she was called many things that "you probably can't print."

"The one that kind of captures it all was that I was a 'transphobic cisgendered whore,'" Apple-



Sen. Val Applewhite, D-Cumberland, received "frightening" messages about House Bill 574.

IMAGE COURTESY OF VAL APPLEWHITE NCSENATE

white said. "I don't want to go through the rest of them."

Applewhite said she has been in politics for a long time, and the comments she received after voting for H.B. 574 scared her to some extent.

"What's a little frightening for me, personally, is that I've been doing this a while now," Applewhite said. "I served on city council and now in the Senate. We live very public lives, and the environment that we're in, you just don't know what people will do."

Not all of the messages Applewhite received following the vote were negative or threatening.

"Some have been very supportive," she said. "Some have

said 'Wow, you cross lines. You [voted] what you believed reflected your constituency.' I've gotten a lot of supportive calls, but I've never been called a transphobic cisgendered whore [before]."

"Afraid" to speak publicly

Another concern for Applewhite was a lack of people who were willing to speak out publicly on the issue.

"I'm telling you: People are afraid to speak out publicly," Applewhite said. "Like to say, 'Val, I agree with you,' because you become labeled as transphobic or you're met with backlash."

Applewhite recalled conver-

sations with longtime friends and constituents.

"Even the coaches and parents that I spoke to, they don't want to say it publicly," she said, referring to their support for women's sports. "That's not good when we are afraid to have public discourse over issues."

Applewhite said even the impassioned debate surrounding the legislature's vote on Senate Bill 20, which imposed new restrictions on elective abortions, was "just different."

"People were willing to speak out about S.B. 20, but this one, people just don't want to be caught up in backlash," she said.

Concerning her vote on H.B. 574, Applewhite re-emphasized her deliberation and said she did



I also wonder if Applewhite's liberal supporters will feel a sense of buyer's remorse and consider looking elsewhere come next primary season in 2024.

- Myron Pitts
opinion editor
Fayetteville Observer

not feel like it was a partisan issue.

"I was very intentional about this," Applewhite said. "When I saw it in the House and I knew it was coming, I took time to gauge what people were feeling."

When asked whether she had discussed the issue with Gov. Roy Cooper or anyone from his team, Applewhite said she had not.

"In fact, I didn't tell anyone what I was going to do," Applewhite said. "After I had my conversations, I made my decision. I just voted what I believe. People say elected officials [should] vote [their] conscience and constituents."

Applewhite alluded that she knew she might be the only Senate Democrat to vote for the bill.

"I knew where I would be and that I would be by myself, and I was okay with that."

The House also passed H.B. 574, but Cooper vetoed it. The legislature has Republican supermajorities in both chambers that will likely be able to override

continued PAGE 12

Voter ID exception forms cause controversy at NC Board of Elections

BY ZACH ROUNCEVILLE

In the wake of the April 28 N.C. Supreme Court ruling requiring government-issued photo identification in order to vote in North Carolina elections, exception forms created by the State Board of Elections have been introduced that would allow individuals to vote without showing proper identification.

Tina Forsberg, campaign manager for congressional candidate Christian Castelli, raised awareness of the questionable language in the forms through a Facebook post and prompted calls for the General Assembly to take action. Many see the forms as providing a mechanism to circumvent the law requiring identification to vote, namely, the form section titled "Reasonable Impediment," which lists various options for why an individual is unable to present the required identification.

"It's really disappointing that Democrats on the Board of Elec-



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF CALIFORNIA - WIKICOMMONS

tions are once again end-running voters and now the courts of North Carolina. We must be able to have confidence in our election process, and that includes boards and agencies abiding by the will of the people," Forsberg told The Carolina Journal.

State Treasurer Dale Folwell told CJ in an interview that he is grateful to Forsberg for bringing

this issue to the public eye.

"Thank God for people like Tina Forsberg. The fact that she is putting sunshine on these nonsensical forms is a blessing," he said.

Folwell also likened the exception forms to a catfish amendment, a term used by legislators to describe statutory or regulatory language designed to under-

mine legislative intent.

"This seems very much like something that happens in the legislature, which is sometimes referred to as a catfish amendment," Folwell said. "It smells, looks, and feels like a catfish form, which is meant to do away with the intent of the General Assembly."

Both the absentee and in-person exception forms are not readily apparent to viewers via the NCSBE website. Users must click on several tabs in order to access them by navigating to the site's meeting minutes section and clicking on the meeting minute documents for June 27, 2023.

Although the forms were unanimously approved by the five-member board at its June 27 meeting, all election-related rules are temporary until given final approval by the Rules Review Commission for the upcoming elections this year.

Patrick Gannon, public information director for the NCS-

BE, weighed in on the controversy, saying in an emailed statement to CJ that the forms are legal and that critics misunderstand the functionality of them.

"The exception forms are required by the photo ID law. See GS 163-166.16(d) and (e)," Gannon told CJ. "Some of the criticism regarding the exceptions displays a misunderstanding of how the law operates as written. The law is designed to require photo ID when voting, but it provides broad exceptions for voters who are unable to present photo ID, to ensure that every voter who presents to vote is able to cast a ballot."

Gannon stated that the General Assembly set forth the necessary statutory parameters for the board, which inform people of their rights with respect to voting procedures.

"In fact, when the legislature enacted the photo ID requirement

continued PAGE 12

4 NORTH CAROLINA

Speaker Moore: NC ranks No. 1 in business in spite of Cooper

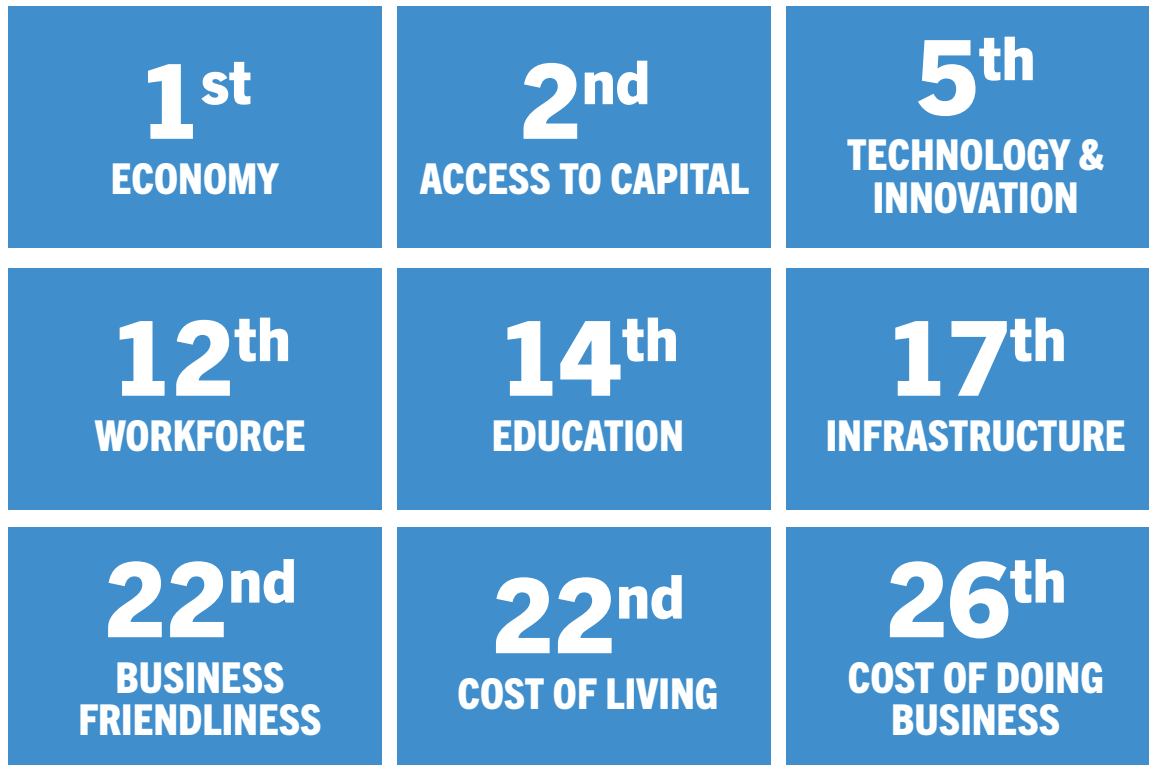
ALEX BALTZEGAR

For the second year in a row, North Carolina earned the top spot in CNBC's annual "America's Top States for Business" rankings out of all 50 states. Gov. Roy Cooper, a Democrat, wasted no time taking credit in an interview with CNBC. However, House Speaker Tim Moore, R-Cleveland, said there's more to the story.

"If you look at what I believe have been the biggest factors that have really improved the state — fiscal accountability, lower taxes, lower regulations — many of those things had to be done or were done in spite of the objections from [Cooper]," Moore told Carolina Journal. "In all fairness, I don't think he can take credit for those."

Although Moore wouldn't give the governor credit for creating a favorable business environment, Moore did give Cooper credit for helping recruit those businesses to North Carolina.

"Certainly when it has come to working to recruit companies to come to the state, the governor has absolutely worked with the General Assembly on those," Moore said. "So, you know, I think there have been those items where we have agreed and it's paid off. And I think there's times where we haven't agreed, and it has still worked out to the benefit of the state."



NC's rankings according to CNBC

Sitting in front of Asheville's Biltmore House, Cooper spent nearly his entire CNBC interview criticizing the direction in which the General Assembly wants to take North Carolina.

"We are not here to fight Mickey Mouse," Cooper said, implying the General Assembly is taking a

similar approach to social issues as Republicans in Florida. "We are here to fight for jobs in North Carolina."

When pressed, Cooper said he does not think the Republican-led General Assembly's social policies will cause businesses to leave the state. However, he said he thinks

it will lead to fewer businesses coming in.

"I think the damage is more long term in the culture wars," Cooper said. "You still see people going to Florida and Texas, but you begin to see an erosion over time."

Senate leader Phil Berger,

R-Rockingham, also took a shot at Cooper in a press statement, saying the governor deserves little credit for North Carolina's top business ranking.

"We should all celebrate that North Carolina's business climate continues to be the best in the nation, notwithstanding the Governor's obstructionism and vetoes of business-friendly legislation," Berger said. "Efforts by partisan voices to highlight policy disagreements to score cheap political points and create negative impressions have failed. The good work put in by the people and businesses here in North Carolina overcame those efforts."

Berger credited Republican lawmakers' long-term vision for the state.

"Republicans had a vision and plan when we won control of the General Assembly back in 2010, and improving our state's business climate was a big part of that," Berger said. "It's rewarding to see North Carolina prevail over several other qualified contenders."

In CNBC's category rankings, North Carolina scored first in "Workforce," third in "Economy," seventh in "Education," and 10th in "Business Friendliness."

According to CNBC, North Carolina is only the second state ever to secure the No. 1 spot in back-to-back years.

Alex Baltzegar is the statehouse reporter for the Carolina Journal.

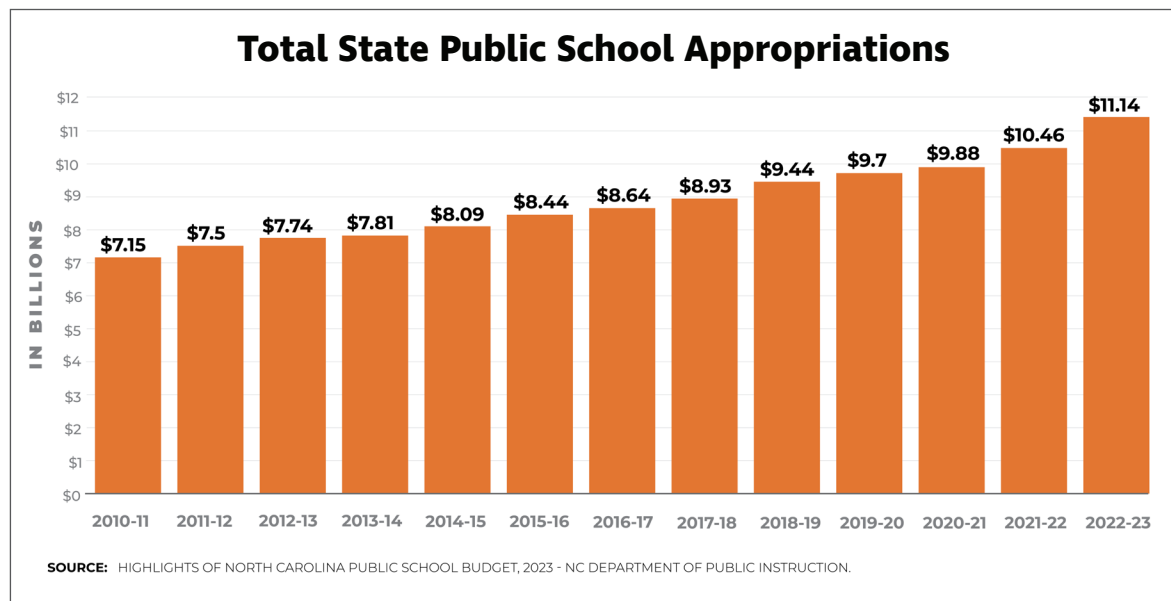
Cooper doubles down on K-12 public school funding 'emergency' order

DAVID BASS

Gov. Roy Cooper is doubling down on his declared "state of emergency" over K-12 public education funding in North Carolina. This summer, Cooper put out a press release referencing more than 25 school districts that have spoken out against a yet-to-be-determined state budget currently being worked out by lawmakers in the House and Senate.

"North Carolina's public schools are in jeopardy due to dangerous Republican legislation that would siphon funds away from the classroom and make our teacher shortage worse," Cooper said in a statement. "As they learn about this, local school board members and superintendents from rural and urban areas are beginning to call on legislators to do the right thing and invest in public schools."

Cooper's press release specifically mentioned 10 school districts that have passed resolutions urging lawmakers to significantly grow spending on pub-



lic education. His release also referenced additional school leaders who have spoken out against a proposed expansion of the state's Opportunity Scholarship Program, creating a pathway for more families to send their children to a private school of their choice.

The House and Senate have

passed their own versions of a spending plan for the next two years, both of which increase spending on public schools.

On the Senate side, the budget allocates \$11.5 billion to K-12 public education in fiscal year 2023-24 and \$11.7 billion in 2024-25. Teachers would receive an average raise of 4.5%

over the biennium, with starting teacher pay increasing by almost 11%. The plan also creates a new School Health Personnel Allotment and increases funding by \$10 million to help schools hire about 120 more nurses, counselors, social workers, and psychologists.

Meanwhile, the House bud-

get is even more generous in doling out raises — a 7.5% across-the-board teacher pay bump over the biennium, in combination with other targeted boosts and step increases, resulting in a total average increase of 11.2%. The overall spending amount is roughly in line with the Senate's, at \$24 billion across the two-year period.

"Would Republican budget actions to expand school choice decimate the public schools? Hardly," noted Robert Luebke, director of the Center for Effective Education at the John Locke Foundation. "The fearmongering is in full swing, but the facts don't square with Gov. Cooper's narrative. Let's remember: The K-12 education budget has increased for 12 consecutive years, soon to be 13, growing from \$7.1 billion to \$11.1 billion. Moreover, per-pupil expenditures have increased from \$7,800 to \$12,300. Does that sound like a system that's being decimated?"

David Bass is a senior contributor to the Carolina Journal.

Fish in Cape Fear River tainted with 'forever chemicals'

CJ STAFF

The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services has released new guidance about consuming certain types of fish from parts of the lower Cape Fear River.

The new recommendations are the latest in the fallout from the discovery of contaminants known as per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, or PFAS, in the Cape Fear River.

Also known as "forever chemicals," PFAS are an emerging public health concern in the water and air.

In March former North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality Secretary Michael Regan, who now leads the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, announced national standards for PFAS levels.

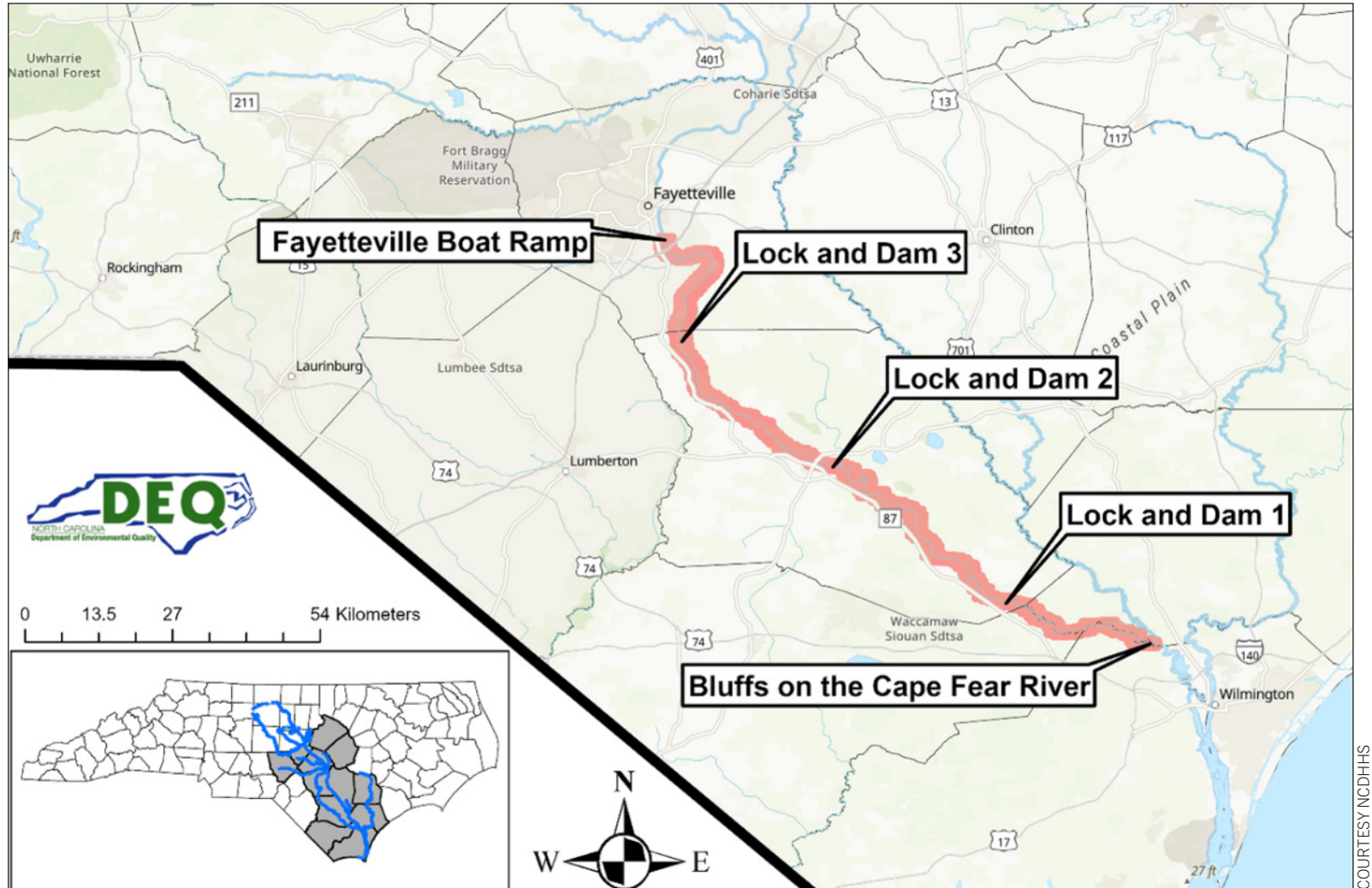
DEQ and the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission conducted a fish collection and testing operation spanning from Cumberland County to the New Hanover County line along the river.

During this study, PFAS were detected in all fish that were caught and tested. Notably, certain species exhibited significantly higher levels of contamination.

Bluegill, flathead catfish, largemouth bass, striped bass, and redear all had higher levels, with American shad, blue catfish, and channel catfish producing lower levels.

DHHS notes that exposure to PFAS from fish may be higher among communities that catch and eat fish frequently.

"Studies have documented



the many benefits of eating fish," said Dr. Elizabeth Cuervo Tilson, state health director and DHHS chief medical officer.

"We want residents to have these recommendations so they can make informed decisions

about fish consumption, particularly if they regularly catch and eat fish from this part of the Cape Fear River."

Advisory limits are lower for women of childbearing age, pregnant women, nursing moth-

ers, and children.

"Communities in the middle and lower Cape Fear Region have been requesting information about PFAS in fish since GenX was found in the river," said Dr. Zack Moore, DHHS

state epidemiologist.

Anyone with concerns about possible health effects of PFAS exposures can use the DHHS Clinician Memo, which lays out risks and behavior recommendations.

UNC-Chapel Hill chancellor disappointed in SCOTUS admissions decision, but 'will comply'

BY GRANT LEFELAR

North Carolina officials, politicians, and analysts offered mixed reactions to the U.S. Supreme Court's June decision rejecting the use of race in admissions policies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Harvard.

In an email to UNC students and faculty, Chancellor Kevin Guskiewicz of defendant UNC-Chapel Hill wrote, "Our leadership team will need time to thoroughly review the details of this outcome and its potential impact before determining specifically how we will comply with this decision. In the coming weeks, we will communicate our plans with the campus community."

The decision

Chief Justice John Roberts wrote the court's 6-3 majority opinion in both *Students for*



Hussman School of Journalism at UNC Chapel Hill.

Fair Admission v. UNC and SFFA v. Harvard, two linked cases concerning the use of race when admitting applicants into universities. In the opinion, Roberts wrote that both UNC and Harvard admissions "lack sufficiently focused and measurable objectives

warranting the use of race, unavoidably employ race in a negative manner, involve racial stereotyping, and lack meaningful end points."

SFFA v. UNC originated from controversy over the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's ad-

missions process. UNC had long admitted that it used race as a factor when sifting through student applications but maintained that its standards were legal under *Grutter v. Bollinger*, a 2003 SCOTUS case that allowed affirmative action in admissions.

Decisions in both *SFFA v. UNC* and *SFFA v. Harvard* directly overturned the affirmative action standards for admissions set by *Grutter* 20 years ago, stating they violate the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment.

"Proxy factors"

Guskiewicz announced that while the university is disappointed with the decision, it will comply. "Carolina remains firmly committed to bringing together talented students with different perspectives and life experiences and continues to make affordable, high-quality education accessible to the people of North Caroli-

na and beyond. While not the outcome we hoped for, we will carefully review the Supreme Court's decision and take any steps necessary to comply with the law," said Guskiewicz.

UNC's Board of Trustees, partially appointed by the Republican-led General Assembly, said it will "ensure that the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill complies fully with today's ruling," in a statement from Chair David Boliek.

In the lead-up to the decision, some academics proposed ways colleges could circumvent court rulings that place limits on affirmative action. At an April panel discussion hosted at defendant Harvard University, participants stated that "proxy" factors, such as recruiting students from certain geographical areas or eliminating standardized testing, could target a diverse field of potential stu-

6 NORTH CAROLINA

Private NCInnovation pushes lawmakers for \$1.4B earmark in state budget

BY DONNA KING

One of the sticking points in the state budget negotiations is the \$1.4 billion proposed in the Senate version for NCInnovation, a private nonprofit created by some N.C. business leaders in 2018, aimed at providing grants for applied research at select UNC System universities. The project has raised \$23 million over the last five years, with pledges for more, but now its leadership wants taxpayers to provide the sizable allotment to bridge the gap between North Carolina's research and development capacity and the state's ability to increase commercialization of those outputs in the marketplace.

The \$1.4 billion would represent nearly 5% of the state's total \$29 billion budget, but under the language in the Senate proposal, would be exempt from public records laws, open meeting laws, and all university chancellors who currently sit on its board would be removed. The Senate proposal says no government employee may sit on its board. Carolina Journal has requested interviews with the UNC System chancellors involved in the project, but all have yet to do so. There are also pending public records requests on it, which have not garnered a response yet.

While the economic develop-



ment goals of the project have sparked excitement around the Republican-led state legislature, its governance is raising eyebrows. The John Locke Foundation, the founding organization of the Carolina Journal, has published calls to increase oversight and scale back the taxpayer money for it.

NCInnovation CEO Bennet Waters told WRAL that \$1.4 billion is the "minimally acceptable amount" of state money because NCInnovation plans to spend

\$106 million yearly on grants.

The N.C. House agrees with the concept of NCInnovation, but not that price tag. The House proposed \$50 million in its House budget, but the numbers are reportedly far north of that at this point in the negotiations.

The schools included in NCInnovation's vision are Western Carolina University, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, North Carolina A&T, and East Carolina University. The Senate language prohibits board

members and their immediate family members from personally investing in the commercialization projects. The language also requires annual reporting to a legislative committee on NCInnovation's investments, salaries, and other financial information.

Track record from other states

NCInnovation points to what it says are similar programs seeing success in states like Ohio,



NCInnovation is just another example of a government program using taxpayer dollars to tip the scales in favor of select companies.

- Brian Balfour
vice president of research
John Locke Foundation

Texas, Massachusetts, and Kentucky.

Locke, a long-time opponent of publicly funded corporate incentive programs, has published research on those states. Texas' program, the "Texas Emerging Technology Fund," was launched in 2005 for \$100 million under former Gov. Rick Perry. It quickly became embroiled in scandal as large percentages of the grants went to companies associated with many of its board members or political donors. The program was ended by a nearly unanimous vote of the state legislature in 2015.

Two-thirds of Massachusetts' \$1 billion Life Science Center program is structured more like

continued PAGE 12

After recent prosecutions, PPP fraud in NC totals \$40M

BY KEVIN GARCIA-GALINDO

Since the start of the pandemic in March 2020, at least 50 individuals have been prosecuted for pandemic relief fraud in North Carolina, totaling nearly \$40 million in COVID-19 relief fraud.

The most recent North Carolinian to be federally charged is Steven Andiloro, 51, from Mooresville.

According to a press release from the United States Attorney's Office in the Western District of North Carolina, Andiloro was charged with having connections to an alleged investment fraud scheme and also fraudulently obtaining more than \$2.6 million in COVID-19 relief funds.

The allegations in the indictment say that Andiloro operated an investment fraud scheme in which he induced people to invest their money in nonexistent businesses.

Andiloro made false statements and promises about where the money invested would go and then instead used the funds for personal expenses and other



Ponzi-type payments to other investors.

For example, he allegedly told some of his investors that they would be investing in a marijuana

dispensary business in exchange for a 10% ownership in the business.

From then on, Andiloro filed fraudulent applications to obtain

funds from the Paycheck Protection Program from April 2020 to March 2021. His application for his business included fake employment data, inflated revenues,

and cost and payroll expenses which allowed him to obtain more than \$2.6 million in fraudulent PPP funds.

The maximum sentence that Andiloro could receive would be 20 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine for each offense, including securities fraud and wire fraud, as well as for money laundering, which separately carries a maximum penalty of 10 years.

According to communications from U.S. attorney's offices in the Western, Middle, and Eastern districts, of the 50 individuals charged with PPP fraud, at least 17 have been convicted and sentenced to a combined 108 years and nine months in prison.

So far, in the Western District, 23 individuals have been charged with fraud, totaling more than \$13.4 million; only four individuals have been identified in the Middle District, totaling over \$3.3 million; and 23 individuals have been charged in the Eastern District, totaling \$22 million, according to Center Square.

Kevin Garcia-Galindo is an intern with The Carolina Journal.

Budd, Tillis demand answers on Chinese Communist Party ‘service centers’ on US soil

BY THERESA OPEKA

U.S. Sens. Ted Budd and Thom Tillis of North Carolina are among a contingent of 10 Republicans seeking answers from the Department of Justice about seven “service centers” with ties to the Chinese Communist Party operating across the United States, including one in Charlotte.

The group, led by Budd, sent a letter to Attorney General Merrick Garland in July, stating they had “grave concerns regarding reports of ‘Overseas Chinese Service Centers’ (OCSCs) operated by an intelligence service of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in conjunction with the PRC’s national police force.”

According to the letter, the Charlotte OCSC is reportedly housed at the Carolinas Chinese Chamber of Commerce and was first announced in 2017.

The other centers are co-located with nonprofits in San Francisco, California; Houston, Texas; Omaha, Nebraska; St. Paul, Minnesota; Salt Lake City, Utah, and St. Louis, Missouri.

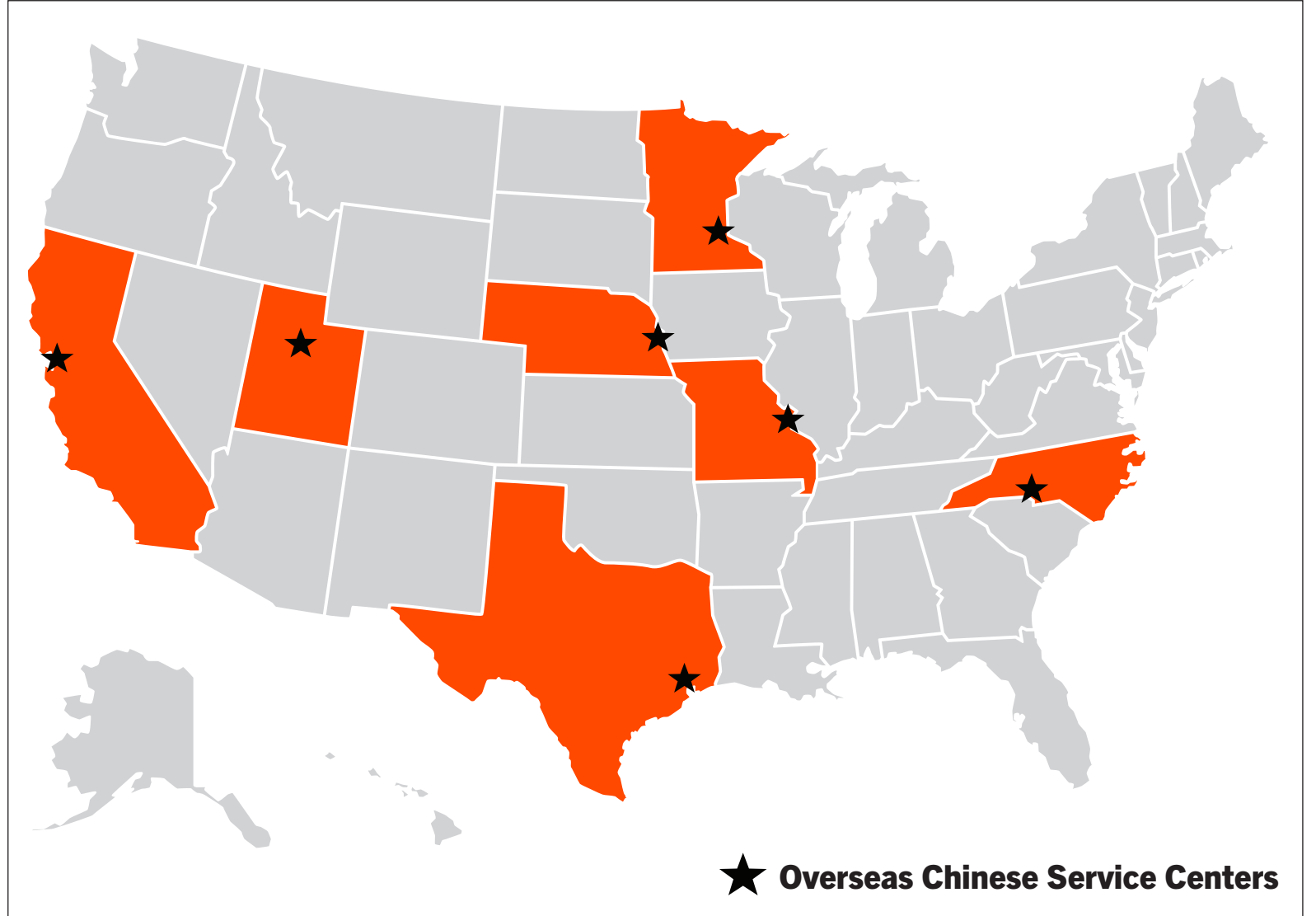
The centers have reportedly been openly operating for several years and were established throughout the United States during the past decade.

In its annual report to Congress, the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission has identified that OCSCs are run by the Chinese Communist Party’s United Front Work Department and are a “Chinese intelligence service.”

The letter goes on to say that the report states that U.S.-based OCSC representatives met with officials of the PRC’s national police force, the Ministry of Public Security, on a trip to China to discuss the use of technology to conduct “cross-border remote justice services” overseas.

The concerned senators say DOJ has warned that MPS conducts covert “intelligence and national security operations far beyond China’s borders,” including “illicit, transnational repression schemes” on U.S. soil.

The senators ask DOJ if its response has sufficiently addressed



the threat given the ongoing discovery of additional OCSCs, which have openly operated for several years, and their activities have been reportedly documented in Chinese state media and social media posts.

Budd told Nick Craig during an interview on WAAV radio in June that the best way to deal with situations like this, along with the stealing of intellectual property and military threats like the Taiwan Strait, is to be strong against aggression.

“We noticed that China has become more aggressive under Biden because Biden projects weakness,” Budd said.

Budd, Tillis, and their colleagues — Sens. Josh Hawley of Missouri, Eric Schmitt of Mis-

souri, Ted Cruz of Texas, John Cornyn of Texas, Mike Lee of Utah, Mitt Romney of Utah, Deb Fischer of Nebraska, and Pete Ricketts of Nebraska — summed up the letter by asking DOJ to respond to five questions by July 31, due to the serious nature of the issue:

Does DOJ assess that any of the seven aforementioned OCSCs is engaging in any illegal activity? If so, please describe this illegal activity.

What action, investigative or otherwise, is DOJ taking in relation to the seven aforementioned OCSCs?

Is DOJ aware of additional OCSCs or similar PRC facilities operating in the U.S. that have not been previously acknowl-

edged by DOJ? If so, please identify and describe them.

What actions will DOJ undertake to ensure that it has identified every OCSC or similar PRC facility in the United States?

What actions will DOJ take to ensure that the PRC does not establish additional OCSCs or similar facilities in the United States?

In April, DOJ charged two men from New York City with operating an illegal overseas police station of the Chinese government on behalf of MPS.

Missouri Attorney General Andrew Bailey announced recently that he would investigate the St. Louis OCSC.


When Carolina Journal emailed North Carolina Attor-



We noticed that China has become more aggressive under Biden because Biden projects weakness.

- U.S. Sen. Ted Budd

ney General Josh Stein’s office to see if he would take similar action, Nazneen Ahmed, a spokesperson for Stein’s office, said they wouldn’t be taking any action.




THE THURSDAYS @ 7:30PM

DEBRIEF

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CAROLINA JOURNAL'S WEEKLY RECAP OF MAJOR DEVELOPMENTS IN STATE POLITICS AND PUBLIC POLICY.



'Do your homework': NC Justice Center report on vouchers draws criticism

BY DAVID BASS

A report by the left-wing North Carolina Justice Center claims to have uncovered 61 instances of private schools receiving more funds from the Opportunity Scholarship Program than they have students enrolled. The author cited a total of \$2.3 million in fraudulent payments.

But critics of the report contend that it inaccurately represents the truth, using old and mismatched data.

The report prompted the notice of Gov. Roy Cooper, a Democrat, who put out a press release citing the research.

"It's bad when taxpayer dollars are spent on private schools that have no accountability, but it's even worse when public schools are being dramatically shortchanged at the same time," Cooper said.

"The numbers cited in the report are inaccurate, and the Justice Center should immediately publish a correction," said Robert Luebke, director of the Center for Effective Education at the John Locke Foundation. "Comparing these sets of numbers is like comparing apples and oranges. The ultimate goal clearly wasn't to arrive at the truth but to generate a catchy headline that will stoke further anti-school choice sentiment."

The Justice Center report, penned by school choice opponent Kris Nordstrom, landed as lawmakers considered a significant expansion of the Opportunity Scholarship Program. The



Students at Peletah Academic Center for Excellence in New Bern, take part in class instruction.

program, which celebrates its 10-year anniversary this year, helps North Carolina families choose an alternative to their locally zoned public school.

The Justice Center report compares two sets of data — one from the Department of Administration's Division of Non-Public Education and one from the State Education Assistance Authority. DNPE tracks enrollment at private schools across the state, while SEAA keeps a tally of students receiving Opportunity Scholarships. The report claims a discrepancy between these two

numbers.

"These discrepancies could represent innocent mistakes, or they could represent massive fraud. Unfortunately, lawmakers have failed to equip either DNPE or SEAA with the staff or authority to determine the reason for the discrepancies," Nordstrom wrote.

But a document provided by the SEAA, which oversees Opportunity Scholarships, undermined the basis of Nordstrom's reporting.

"Researchers have previously encountered challenges when at-

tempting to compare the data ... there are differences in the timing and manner that the data is collected and presented. These obstacles make it difficult to accurately reconcile datasets from two agencies," the memo reads.

While DNPE data only reflects a school's "enrollment at one point in time," the "SEAA data is continually updated," according to the memo.

"For example, students, both Opportunity Scholarship recipients and other students, transfer into and out of schools during the school year. Enrollment can

vary from semester-to-semester or even within the same semester."

The memo also notes the two-factor verification process needed for a student to obtain an Opportunity Scholarship. Both the parent and the school must individually verify that a student is enrolled once the semester begins.

Dawn Baldwin Gibson, superintendent of Peletah Academic Center for Excellence in New Bern, shared with Carolina Journal that current DNPE numbers for her own school are wrong because the agency continues to publish outdated numbers.

The Justice Center report cited Peletah as having 21 students enrolled in 2021 but 23 Opportunity Scholarship recipients.

"For the 2023-24 school year, we have an anticipated enrollment of 32 students. Of those 32, approximately 27 will utilize the Opportunity Scholarship," Gibson said.

"It should be noted that the Nordstrom list is 89% comprised of reporting during COVID-19 when some North Carolina governmental agencies had suspended reporting requirements," Gibson added. "Old data was utilized by DNPE for those years for many of the schools and thus caused them to be on the Nordstrom list."

"Our bottom line message to the Justice Center: Do your homework," Luebke added.

David Bass is a senior contributor to *The Carolina Journal*.

Carolinas Academic Leadership Network hosts kickoff event in Charlotte

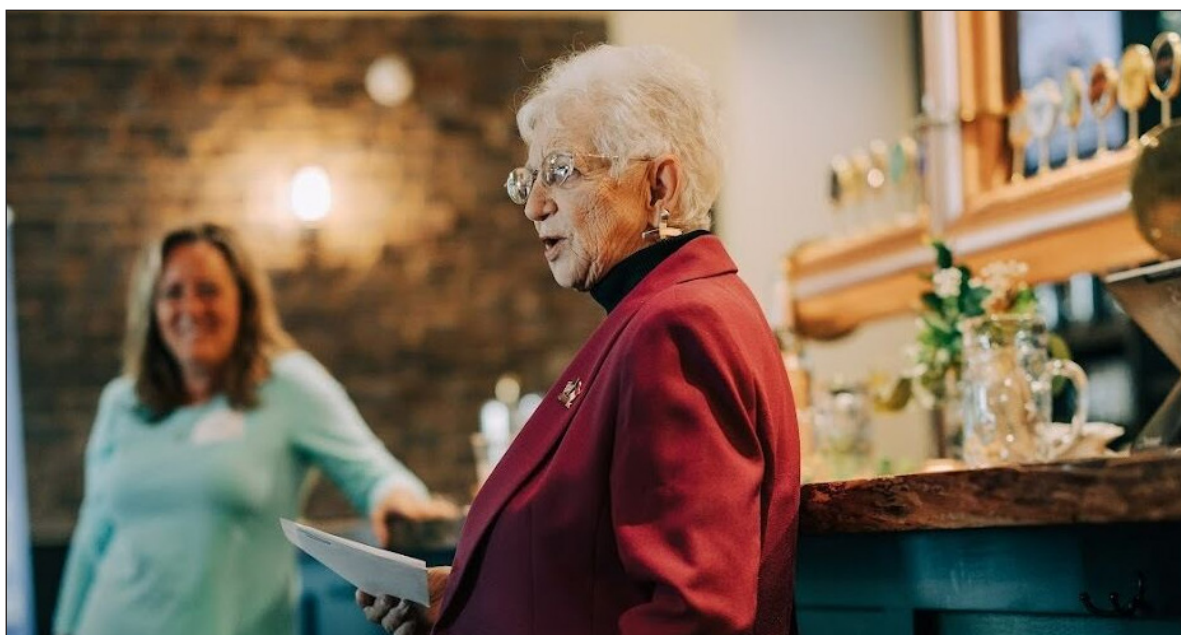
BY ZACH ROUNCEVILLE

A new initiative designed to train and support local school board members in North Carolina and South Carolina kicked off in Charlotte this summer. The Carolinas Academic Leadership Network aims to foster a commitment to student achievement, parental empowerment, and academic excellence among school board members and prepare them with tools to effectively improve student achievement in their districts.

CALN was created by the John Locke Foundation in partnership with the Palmetto Promise Institute and South Carolina Policy Council.

At the Charlotte kickoff, retired Brigadier Gen. Mitchell Zais, who served as superintendent for the state of South Carolina and later as acting Secretary of Education under former President Donald Trump, was the keynote speaker.

Zais highlighted several topics he believes school administrators, teachers, school board members, and parents can use as valuable educational resources.



U.S. Rep. Virginia Foxx of North Carolina speaks at a kickoff event for the Carolinas Academic Leadership Network.

He focused his comments on school budgets and finance, the impact of poverty on student learning outcomes, public school staffing and student enrollment, and key courses of action for

school board members.

U.S. Rep. Virginia Foxx, R-5th District; U.S. Congressman Ralph Norman, R-South Carolina; South Carolina state Sen. Wes Clymer; and Terry Stoops, director of Aca-

demically Successful and Resilient Districts for the Florida Department of Education, shared ways to improve the education system through policy at both the federal and state levels.

Foxx, who chairs the House Education Committee, said the federal government should be less involved with educating America's children, favoring more local oversight and approach.











"If I could, I would get us out of education in a heartbeat," she said. "I think the decision by the founders to exclude the federal government from education was a pruden- tial one made with great care and great insight. The founders understood that the Lockean natural rights of life, liberty, and property could only be preserved by educated people. Still, they also knew the corrupting threat to the republic posed by sprawling bureaucracies and unitary decision-making; and that's what we have right now. That threat is more present than ever."

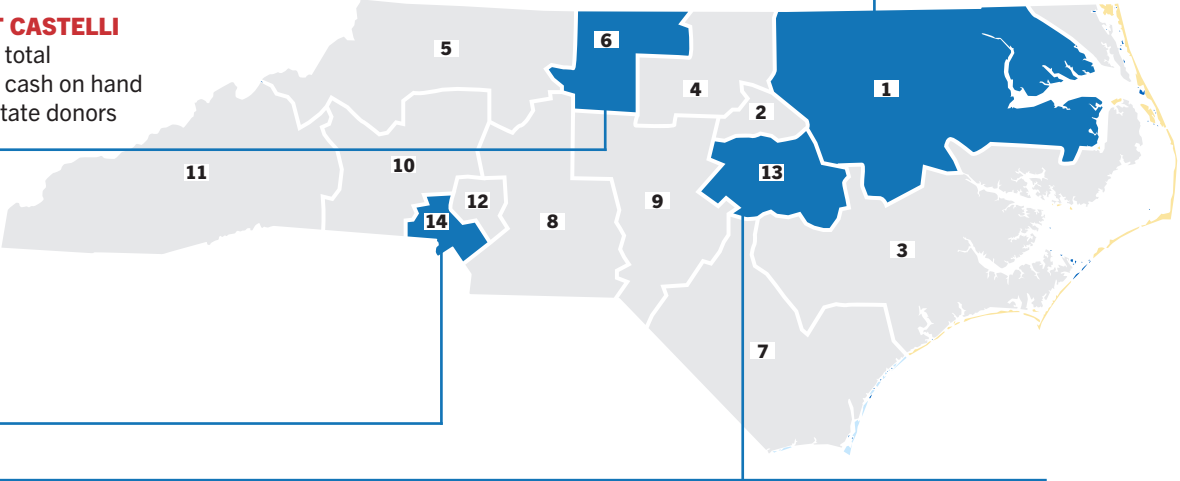
Carolina Journal spoke with Norman, who stressed the importance of the CALN initiative.

"CALN is needed now more than ever because we're losing our younger generation," he said. "They're willing to put the time

Follow the Money:

OUT-OF-STATE DONORS BUILD WAR CHESTS FOR INCUMBENT CONGRESSIONAL DEMOCRATS

| CD | INCUMBENT: | CHALLENGERS: |
|-------|--|--|
| CD 1 |  REP. DON DAVIS \$373,011 total \$284,408 cash on hand 5% in-state donors |  SANDY SMITH \$272,831 total \$144,126 cash on hand 11% in-state donors |
| | |  FRED VONCANNON \$110,310 total \$110,046 cash on hand 88% in-state donors |
| CD 6 |  REP. CATHY MANNING \$579,940 total \$583,024 cash on hand 17% in-state donors |  ROBERT CASTELLI \$57,308 total \$36,122 cash on hand 61% in-state donors |
| | | |
| CD 14 |  REP. JEFF JACKSON \$723,415 total \$662,741 cash on hand 33% in-state donors | |
| | | |
| CD 13 |  REP. WILEY NICKEL \$904,061 total \$709,804 cash on hand 27% in-state donors |  JOSH MCCONKEY \$363,755 total \$335,151 cash on hand 11% in-state donors |
| | |  DEVAN BARBOUR IV \$108,315 total donations \$118,947 cash on hand 100% in-state donors |
| | |  BO HINES \$79,381 total donations \$3,492 cash on hand 2% in-state donors |



Democrat donors look to defend four competitive NC seats as Gov. Cooper takes his 'culture war' message nationwide.

BY DONNA KING

This legislative session, Gov. Roy Cooper vetoed 14 bills from the Republican-led General Assembly by Aug. 1, using his stamp to highlight in national media what he calls a “culture war” instigated by Republicans.

The national spotlight on his effort to push back against a Republican-led legislature doesn't seem to be changing lawmakers' policy or shifting veto override votes, but the summer's campaign finance reports indicate that it is drawing out-of-state money for Democrats.

“With such a very closely divided political state raising that recognition, especially outside of the state to get resources into the state, is really one of the key dynamics that he's going to be able to bring to the overall race,” said Michael Bitzer, professor of

politics and history at Catawba College.

Cooper has vetoed bills that restrict abortions after the first trimester, ban ESG investing in state retirement plans, and ban the state from requiring employees and job candidates to make a statement of ideology. The legislature voted to override eight of his vetoes before Aug. 1, with more override votes scheduled. His vetoes on bills to expand and strengthen charter schools, ban transgender surgeries for minors, keep biological males out of sports designated for biological females, and the Parents Bill of Rights are expected to be overridden by the legislature in August.

Cooper is using these policy losses to present the state as a front in the Democrats' national battle to take back state legislatures. Term-limited, Cooper will not be on the ballot, but his fundraising for Democrats ensures that he will still have a powerful role in the 2024 election. Cooper is pounding the national pavement to sound political alarms over the state legislature's abortion law, school choice, and parental influence in the classroom.

Is it working?

The numbers are incomplete as candidates prepare their campaign finance reports, but so far, in most closely watched congressional races, numbers show that incumbent Democrats are building a war chest for 2024 with a lot of out-of-state money. However, the biggest war chests are for incumbent Republicans Rep. Virginia Foxx and Rep. Patrick McHenry, who each report more than \$2.5 million in campaign cash on hand as of June 30, 2023.

The John Locke Foundation's Jim Stirling analyzed data

available for North Carolina's federal races, including their totals raised, how much cash they have on hand, how much of their campaign contributions are coming from out-of-state sources, and how much some have loaned their campaign. So far, 13th District Republican primary candidate Josh McConkey has the largest loan in the congressional races, at \$250,000.

“When calculating in-state versus out-of-state funding, I choose to remove a candidate's loans to their committee from their in-state contributions,” said Stirling. “Many candidates choose to invest significant amounts of their personal finances into their committee in the early stages of the election. Since candidates are not limited in how much they choose to invest in their campaign committee, this can inflate their in-state money and give the impression that they have greater financial backers in their home state than in reality.”

North Carolina's 7-7 congressional maps will be redrawn this fall after the court-drawn maps were used for 2022 only. The lineups may shift in the months ahead as lawmakers return to Raleigh for redistricting. Four key congressional districts are getting the most attention from analysts and donors.

“With Republicans only holding a narrow majority in Congress, political scientists are closely monitoring North Carolina's 1st, 6th, 13th, & 14th congressional districts,” said Stirling. “These four districts are the most likely districts in North Carolina's congressional delegation to see any kind of political party change.”

Cooper's effort to stop North Carolina Republicans' impact at the border appears to be resonating with out-of-state donors with an eye on the congressio-

nal races. But a focus for Democrats in 2024 is wresting back Republicans' decade-long control of the state. As de facto head of the Democratic Party since 2016, Cooper saw Republicans win the majority three times in the legislature, twice on the N.C. Supreme Court, and maintain a majority in the Council of State.

Can Cooper turn Republicans' election tide?

“I would attribute the general November electorate to being pretty much a 46/47 split on either side,” said Bitzer. “The Council of State races have been ones where Democrats can win and Republicans can win on the same ballot, but it flips back and forth. I think what Cooper certainly wants to do is leave a resource trail for Stein, if he's the ultimate nominee, but also make sure that the party, particularly at the state legislative level, is perhaps able to negate supermajorities.”

Josh Stein, current attorney general and Democrat candidate for governor, is taking that lesson from Cooper, raising money out of state and focusing his public comments on “culture wars” with Republicans. He reported taking in more than \$10 million in donations as of June 30, outpacing the front-running Republican Lt. Gov. Mark Robinson, who reported raising \$2.2 million, with \$3.2 million in cash on hand.

Robinson's campaign says there is more momentum than money, pointing out his 22,000 individual contributions.

“Lieutenant Governor Robinson raised \$2.2 million on this report and has \$3.2 million cash on hand, which is more than any Republican governor candidate

in North Carolina history,” Robinson campaign manager Conrad Pogorzelski told CJ.

An unapologetic conservative, Robinson has been a target for Stein, who proved his discipline in fundraising in 2020. In his race for attorney general, Stein outraised his opponent Republican Forsyth County District Attorney Jim O'Neill, by more than 10-1. However, he defeated O'Neill by less than 15,000 votes, or 1% of the total votes cast.

“In this day and age, I think it's more about the dynamic of the ground game, the turnout operations, rather than the great money wars that everybody tends to focus on, like how much money is being spent on campaign advertising,” said Bitzer. “It's now about getting your folks to show up — identifying them, getting them energized and mobilized to show up and cast a ballot.”

In June, 46.2% of responding N.C. voters said that on a 2024 generic ballot they are likely to vote for the Republican congressional candidate, compared to 42.8% for the Democrat. However, that is down for Republicans from January of 2023 at 48.1%. Those voters did not shift to Democrat. They seemed to have shifted to the “undecided” column, which grew by a point and a half since January.

“That is the dynamic of North Carolina's elections nowadays,” said Bitzer. “The margin of victory is going to be within the margin of error, and that is typically 3 to 4 percentage points. What that 3 to 4% does is anybody's guess.”

Carolina Journal's Follow the Money series is completed with the research of Jim Stirling, research fellow at the John Locke Foundation's Civitas Center for Public Integrity.

10 GOVERNMENT

House & Senate at odds

continued from PAGE 1

Although Republicans do not need Democrats to vote with them in order to pass a budget, Republican legislative leadership in both chambers appointed Democratic lawmakers to be on the budget conference committee, which means they get to take part in negotiations to some degree.

High-level negotiations typically only occur between top budget leaders in each chamber, which excludes Democrats.

A divide running deeper than partisanship

There is a mantra among North Carolina Republican state House members that goes something like this: "The Democrats are the opposition party, but they are not the enemy. The enemy is the Senate."

Senate Republicans have a similar perspective toward the House, and this dynamic is especially true when Republicans have supermajorities.

With Republicans holding supermajorities in both chambers and Medicaid expansion being tied to the budget passing, there are no partisan roadblocks for the state budget to overcome. Instead, the hurdles are different priorities of the House and Senate chambers.

"It's important to note that the friction between the two chambers, House and Senate, is nothing new, and it has little to do with the fact that Republicans are in charge but more about the different priorities of chambers and their membership," Rep. Jason Saine, R-Lincoln, told Carolina Journal. "Much like the founders of our country knew, our model works because it keeps government in check because of the natural friction between both houses of the legislature."

Adding to tensions, House Speaker Tim Moore, R-Cleveland, recently announced that medical marijuana legalization, the top priority of the second most powerful Senate leader, would not be moved in the House.

Brian Lewis, a lobbyist for New Frame Inc., has been actively involved in policy matters with the General Assembly since the early 2000s. He draws an interesting analogy, likening this year's budget negotiations to a repetitive show, playing the same storyline with different actors.



Senate Leader Phill Berger and House Speaker Tim Moore announce "significant progress" on the state budget.

"This is the same movie that's been playing for the last 23 years; it just has different actors," Lewis told Carolina Journal. "The Senate has always been willing to play the longer game, the hardball, and they've always been willing to walk away, too. That is a Senate playbook that I've seen since the early 2000s. I think that's kind of what we are seeing now."

Speaking about the differences between the two chambers, Lewis said the Senate is run a little more top-down, while the House operates more like the "wild, wild west."

"This is nothing new," Lewis said. "I remember back in the day when Marc Basnight played the part of the president pro tem, and Jim Black played the part of the speaker." Basnight and Black were both Democrats.

Saine also noted that tensions were just as high between the two chambers when Democrats had power.

"For decades when Democrats were in control of both [chambers], these same dynamics played out, as they should, and budgets were delayed because of the disagreements," Saine said.

While he noted the natural tensions between the chambers, Saine pushed back against the narrative that the House and Senate are enemies.

"The House and Senate are not enemies," Saine said. "I would characterize this conflict like those from decades before as intentional discussions that ultimately will get resolved for the betterment of our state."

Lewis pointed out one major difference between negotiations prior to 2016 and now, noting

that delayed budget decisions no longer shut down the state government.

"I think it was the Senate that drove the 2016 continuing resolution that [allows the prior budget to stay] in place now," Lewis said, adding that he thought it was a good thing for the Senate's negotiating position. "I think it was a negative for the House [because] it probably took away a little bit of their bargaining position. The Senate has always been willing to go back to last year's budget."

Mitch Kokai, who spent almost every day at the state Legislative Building from 2002 to 2005 as a reporter and now serves as the senior political analyst for the John Locke Foundation, agreed with Lewis's sentiment.

"I saw how things worked when Democrats had complete control of the budget process," Kokai said.

"I saw how things worked when a Democratic Senate had to work with an evenly divided House," he said. "In both cases, loyalty to budget priorities in one's own chamber often trumped party-line divisions."

Inside the House and Senate budget proposals

Aside from some of the fiscal differences like spending projects and tax cuts, the Senate's proposed budget contains several differences from the House budget. The Senate did NOT include the following House policy provisions in its proposal:

- **Make State Bureau of Investigation independent department:** Insulates SBI from political interference, as recently uncovered by the outgoing SBI director, by making it completely independent.

- **Transfer State Crime Lab to independent State Bureau of Investigation:** The state crime lab would be transferred from the Department of Justice to be under the SBI.

- **Prohibit private monetary 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.

However, there were many similarities. Both House and Senate budgets contain the following policy provisions:

- **Medical freedom/COVID-19 vaccinations:** Discrimination against persons based on COVID-19 vaccination status would not be allowed.

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

- **Raise mandatory 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. However, they may apply to become an emergency justice via an express letter to the governor as long as they meet certain criteria.

- **Prohibit cap and trade requirements for carbon dioxide (CO2) emissions:** No state agency, governor, or the Department of Environmental Quality may require certain public utilities to engage in carbon offset programs.

- **SBE/Prohibit ERIC membership:** Make it so that North Carolina may not become a member of the Electronic Registration Information Center Inc.

- **Prohibition on state or regional emissions standards for motor vehicles:** Prohibits any requirements on controlling emissions on new motor vehicles.

- **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, such as the mother's life being in danger or the pregnancy being the result of rape.

Additionally, the Senate budget contains a provision that would prohibit doctors from using a supervisory requirement for nurses to earn "passive income," potentially paving the way to remove a sometimes prohibitive cost barrier for nurses to work in North Carolina.

Both budgets include funding to expand North Carolina's Opportunity Scholarship Program, a win for school choice advocates. Parents, regardless of income level, will be eligible to receive scholarships for their kids to attend non public schools, including private and home schools. Scholarship amounts vary based on income level.

State of budget negotiations

On July 28, Berger announced that the House and Senate reached an agreement on a tax package and several other "key differences." He called it "significant progress."

Moore put out a similar statement, saying lawmakers expect to pass a "full budget for North Carolina in mid-August." Previously, mid-August seemed optimistic.

Alex Baltzegar is statehouse reporter for The Carolina Journal.

Greensboro facility set to house migrant children beginning in August

BY THERESA OPEKA

The opening of a facility in Greensboro proposed to house 800 unaccompanied migrant children from the southern border appears imminent, possibly as soon as August.

In June, approximately four buses of workers began arriving at the former American Hebrew Academy, which will be known as the Greensboro Influx Care Facility, according to WGHP television.

The academy, which closed in 2019, leased the 100-acre property to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Agency for Children and Families, Office of Refugee Resettlement, in June 2022.

The facility, which will become the federal government's largest active housing facility for unaccompanied minors, will be the interim home for children ages 13-17 until they can be united with family or sponsors. The average stay is expected to be between two and three weeks. Children will not be allowed to leave the campus during their stay.

Current facilities on campus will be utilized for education, housing, mental health, medical, and case management needs.

DHHS issued a press release on June 23 that stated, "They are working diligently with interagency partners to ensure that unaccompanied migrant children are placed with family members or other vetted sponsors in the U.S. as quickly and safely as possible."

ORR operates a network of 296 facilities/programs in 27 states and has 5,956 children in its care.

The office says it has a proven track record of accountability and transparency for program operations, as well as being a good neighbor in the communities where facilities are located, and the impact of these shelters on the local community is minimal.

The press release mentions that there is no current activation date for the Greensboro facility, and the opening will depend on various factors, including capacity require-



IMAGE BY MANI ALBRECHT - DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE.

A U.S. Border Patrol agent apprehends migrants who surrendered after crossing the Rio Grande River in El Paso, Texas.

ments and unaccompanied child referral rates, among other considerations.

But an official, who was granted anonymity to discuss the matter, told CBS News that ORR intends to open the facility in Greensboro in August.

The report also quotes Neha Desai, a lawyer for the National Center for Youth Law, a group representing migrant children in a landmark court case, as saying the government is relying too heavily on influx care facilities and should use shelters licensed by state child welfare authorities instead.

Child migration rates reached an all-time high in 2022, with nearly 130,000 migrant children entering the government's housing system.

The Biden administration received criticism in 2021 after videos were released showing children in crowded Border Patrol facilities in Texas with plastic enclosures and foil blankets.

In June 2022, North Carolina's

Republican congressional delegation penned a letter to U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra and Office of Refugee Resettlement acting director Andrea Chapman asking for more details.

"Due to the failures of the Biden administration to secure our southern border, every state, including North Carolina, is now suffering from the impacts of the Biden border crisis," the letter said.

The letter continued by saying, "Given the effects of this crisis and decision to house UACs in our state, we demand answers to the following questions to help protect our constituents.

1. When did communication between the ORR and the American Hebrew Academy begin, in relation to using the Academy as a transition site for UACs?
2. What plans do you have in place to ensure standards of humane treatment of UACs

at the Academy? Specifically, what plans do you have to prevent overcrowding, violence, and outbreaks of disease from occurring?

3. Are there other locations in North Carolina your office is in discussions with to house UACs?

4. What actions are being taken by the Biden Administration to ensure the use of the Academy as a transitional campus does not pose a danger to North Carolina communities?

5. How much money are the taxpayers paying to house UACs in North Carolina? How much money are taxpayers paying to house UACs across the nation?"

Rep. Richard Hudson, R-8th District, who organized the effort, was joined by U.S. Sen. Ted Budd (who was a representative at the time) and fellow U.S. Reps. Vir-

ginia Foxx, David Rouzer, Madison Cawthorn, Greg Murphy, Patrick McHenry, and Dan Bishop, all representing districts in North Carolina, in signing the letter.

"My colleagues and I have been fighting for answers on this facility for months, and this sudden announcement is a blatant stab in the back by the administration," Hudson said in an emailed statement to CJ after this article was first published in June. "Placing these unaccompanied minors in different states across the nation is not the answer to how to solve our border crisis. I will continue to hold the Biden administration accountable for their blatant disregard for the people of North Carolina and the impacts this decision will have on our state."

Foxx, who serves as chairwoman of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, recently spoke in favor of House Resolution 461, which condemns the use of elementary and secondary school facilities to provide shelter for aliens who are not admitted to the United States. She said it would require Democrats to confront the tragedy of their own making at the southern border.

"Democrats must confront reality," she said. "There are real human consequences to losing operational control of our southern border."

Cities like Chicago and New York are planning to house migrants in public schools.

Situations such as these, Foxx said, are why "Republicans say every state is a border state and every town is a border town."

"H.R. 61 is a crystal-clear rebuke of the chaos at the border," Foxx said. "It applies to K12 institutions because, make no mistake, Democrats are making elementary, middle, and high schools a battleground for chaotic border policies."

On June 22, the House passed H.R. 461 by a vote of 223 to 201.

Theresa Opeka is the executive branch reporter for The Carolina Journal.

Gas pipeline raises concerns once again

BY CJ STAFF

The possibility of a Mountain Valley Pipeline extension into North Carolina cropped up once during more than an hour of arguments at the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in late July. Appellate judges are debating whether to dismiss a case from environmental activists challenging pipeline permits.

Judges Roger Gregory, James Wynn, and Stephanie Thacker conducted their arguments just as the U.S. Supreme Court threw out two separate 4th Circuit orders that had blocked the pipeline project from moving forward.

The 303-mile Mountain Valley Pipeline is designed to transport natural gas from West Virginia to Virginia. Owners have said that the pipeline is roughly 94% complete.

It still requires a 3.5-mile section through the Jefferson Na-

tional Forest, along with river and stream crossings and final restoration work.

A separate MVP Southgate project would extend another 75 miles from Virginia into central North Carolina, passing through Rockingham County and ending in Alamance County.

The 4th Circuit hearing addressed only the original MVP project. But questions Gregory aimed at former U.S. Solicitor General Donald Verrilli, representing pipeline owners, brought the N.C. project into play.

Verrilli argued in favor of the motion to dismiss environmentalists' suit against MVP permits. He cited a provision in the recent federal debt ceiling legislation. It included language approving the pipeline project and declaring that "construction and operation ... is required in the national interest."

The U.S. Department of Interior and pipeline owners argue

that the law limits the 4th Circuit's ability to address legal challenges against MVP.

"We have to know when we can be judges again and actually adjudicate things," Gregory said. "Who decides when that resumes? That's all I'm asking."

"In a situation in which Mountain Valley Pipeline, hypothetically, comes back to the federal government and says, 'We want to build additional spurs, we want to build something beyond ...,' Verrilli responded.

"Like in North Carolina," Gregory interjected.

Verrilli's response didn't mention North Carolina or MVP Southgate specifically. He argued that permits and authorizations needed beyond "construction and operation at full capacity" of the original pipeline would be "outside the statute" tied to the debt ceiling deal.

"That's certainly an area where

there would be traditional review," Verrilli said.

Most of the hearing dealt with whether 4th Circuit judges had any authority to block the pipeline's completion.

"What substantive change do you have in the law other than a license for Mountain Valley to complete this without any guardrails that were put in place? ... You just gave a license and then told a court, 'You can't do anything about it,'" Gregory said.

Wynn asked about the limits Congress faces when it removes a case from the federal courts. "Congress can intervene. Can it intervene in any type of case we have and take away jurisdiction, and that's the end of it?"

"Congress didn't say to the judiciary, 'You shall dismiss this case,'" Verrilli responded. "It said here's the new law. Then it's up to the court to decide whether the permits and authorizations that

petitioners are challenging are ones that the statute covers and protects."

Kimberley Hunter, arguing for one group of pipeline critics, argued that Congress went too far in blocking 4th Circuit action. "What it is doing with that act is swooping in and telling a court exactly how it has to decide a case," Hunter said. "That's what it has done here by ratifying the approvals which are at issue before this court. What it's telling this court is you can't decide whether those approvals are legal or not."

As the 4th Circuit panel considers the original Mountain Valley Pipeline project, the MVP Southgate project also has attracted recent attention.

The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission originally determined that the N.C.-related project had to be completed by June. Pipeline owners have requested an extension to 2026.

12 CONTINUED

NCInnovation

continued from PAGE 1

a governmental incentive program. The portion set up like NCInnovation's vision is \$25 million for ten years and has the chair of the university system on its board. That program has distributed \$22.5 million so far. JobsOhio is a non-profit economic development firm funded through the state's liquor franchise. At the same time, Ohio's other program, Third Frontier, spent nearly \$1.6 billion in state funds last year and created or retained slightly more than \$1 billion in private-sector payrolls. Kentucky just launched its program and returns are not yet available.

"NCInnovation is just another example of a government program using taxpayer dollars to tip the scales in favor of select companies," said Brian Balfour, Vice President of Research for the John Locke Foundation. "If these tech startup companies want capital, they should solicit private investors, not leverage a government program for taxpayer funds."

Taxpayer-funded economic development grants are not unusual, as North Carolina has enjoyed an influx of new businesses and headquarters projects over the last decade. For example, the Jobs Development and Investment Grants and Golden Leaf Foundation program each play an important role in the state's rapid growth, but with extensive oversight from governmental stewards of taxpayers' money. The state also has private invest-

ment vehicles in the state pension plan and the Venture Capital Multiplier Fund, both controlled by the state Treasurer's office and subject to public records.

State budget negotiations

Still, the plan to capitalize on the robust research coming out of North Carolina's public universities, particularly those in more rural areas, is gaining traction. Lawmakers, chancellors, and scientists regularly see that work snapped up by venture capital groups outside the state and brought to market elsewhere.

"NCInnovation is seeking to undertake a herculean task that has laudable goals," said Donald Bryson, CEO of the John Locke Foundation. "However, it is critical to ensure that governance structures are well thought out to ensure transparency, accountability, and public success."

As lawmakers continue to hash out differences in the state budget, NCInnovation's lobbying firepower at the state legislature is impressive, with nine contract lobbyists registered with the Secretary of State. Business executives on NCInnovation's board of directors include former Truist CEO Kelly King, former Waste Industries CEO Ven Poole, Piedmont Triad Partnership CEO Stan Kelly, and Pathalys Pharma CEO Neal Fowler.

Donna King is editor-in-chief of The Carolina Journal.

CALN

continued from PAGE 8

and the talent toward mentoring young people and making sure they're prepared to compete in a world that is challenging, to say the least. It's an honor for me to get involved and an honor for me to be here."

"If we can't stand up for our children, what can we stand up for?" said Norman during his remarks.

He spoke about defunding and downsizing the bureaucratic National Education Association due to its large budget and staff and poor performance, among other issues with the labor union. He also advised attendees to become involved at the local level by being informed on the policy and organization of local school districts.

Stoops also addressed today's education climate during the event. He formerly served as director of Locke's Center for Effective Education and has written extensively on North Carolina education policy solutions.

CJ also spoke with Sean Strain, a former school board member for Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, about his impressions of the event and how to apply the lessons learned moving forward.

"The organization that is being created here and, more importantly, the program is really about being student-centric and mission-focused so that the or-

ganization is focused on making sure that we're educating and preparing kids," said Strain. "That is what came through in spades in this program is how you go about, as leaders in education, making sure that we are achieving the objectives and holding the organizations to account, whether financially or just by performance metrics and measurement, establishing at every level that we are executing per our mission and people are performing at a level they need to."

The objectives put forth in the program apply across the board to all school districts regardless of their size and are analogous to concepts involved in any business operation, according to Strain.

"This sentiment applies full stop in any school district," he said. "These are effectively business principles around performance and accountability that almost never get applied to government institutions."

"The argument for years, as I sat on the board, was whether those principles applied, and of course they do, because what we are talking about is creating a high-performing organization that delivers its mission for its clients. Our clients are our families and, specifically, our children. When we're not holding people to account, whether it's the teacher, the bus driver, the superintendent, or individual board members for advancing that, we are failing our kids."

In a statement emailed to CJ, former Locke CEO Amy Cooke



Judging from the conversation and questions, I think we'll look back on this evening as the day a group of committed North and South Carolina school board members prioritized student achievement, academic excellence, and parental involvement.

- Amy Cooke
John Locke Foundation
former CEO

said she believes the initial kick-off was a resounding success.

"Judging from the conversation and questions, I think we'll look back on this evening as the day a group of committed North and South Carolina school board members prioritized student achievement, academic excellence, and parental involvement," Cooke said. "I'm incredibly proud of this project and the three groups that came together to make it happen."

Zach Rounceville is a reporter covering western North Carolina for The Carolina Journal.

Voter ID

continued from PAGE 3

in 2018, it specifically instructed the State Board of Elections to inform voters of the following: "All registered voters will be allowed to vote with or without a photo ID card. When voting in person, you will be asked to present a valid photo identification card. If you do not have a valid photo ID card, you may obtain one from your county board of elections prior to the election, through the end of the early voting period. If you do not have a valid photo ID

card on election day, you may still vote and have your vote counted by signing an affidavit of reasonable impediment as to why you have not presented a valid photo ID." SL 2018-144, sec. 1.5(a)(10)," Gannon said.

This sentiment was reiterated at the June 27 meeting. The NCBSE is simply complying with laws passed by the General Assembly regarding the forms, according to Gannon.

"The legislature clearly recognized that it may take some time for the state's 7 million voters to get accustomed to this new procedure," Gannon said. "That provision in the law allowing for this reasonable impediment was nev-

er given effect, because the photo ID requirement has not been enforced until now due to court decisions.

"Given all the back-and-forth about the photo ID law in the legislature and the courts, the State Board recognized that voters may understandably be confused about the photo ID requirement, and there is very little time in 2023 to educate millions of voters before this fall's municipal elections. Additionally, there have been no funds appropriated to educate voters about this significant change in the voting process.

"In addition, voters who do not show an ID must complete and sign the exception form, at-

testing that the information they provide on the form is true, and vote a provisional ballot."

Sen. Jim Perry, R-Lenoir, who serves as a Senate majority whip, stated in an email to CJ that the legislature plans to rectify issues with the exceptions to voter ID, including the notion that the forms provide a way for NCSBE to violate state election law.

"Ignorance of the law is no excuse for breaking the law, nor is it an excuse for a partisan board to ignore the law," Perry told CJ. "The chairmen of our Election Committee are aware and will address this issue. This is unacceptable and clearly an attempt to circumvent the decision of the peo-

ple to require voter ID.

"I believe some are playing games by referencing language that a prior General Assembly considered under a previous version of voter ID that was struck down. These temporary forms also have a section at the top that provides an assurance that your vote will count, which sets up future court cases. Only legal votes should count, and we can't guarantee that everyone who fills out a form is eligible to vote.

"Partisan gamesmanship is alive and well at the State Board of Elections."

Zach Rounceville is a reporter covering western North Carolina.

UNC 'will comply'

continued from PAGE 9

dents.

Reaction

Gov. Roy Cooper heavily criticized the SCOTUS decision, stating it would "undermine decades of progress made across the coun-

try to reduce systemic discrimination and promote diversity on campuses."

"Campus leaders will now have to work even harder to ensure that North Carolinians of all backgrounds are represented in higher education," Cooper added.

State Attorney General and Democratic gubernatorial front-runner Josh Stein took to Twitter to offer more tempered criticism of the rulings, alluding that the decisions will negatively affect diversity on campuses.

On the Republican side, gu-

bernatorial candidate and former congressman Mark Walker praised the decision on Twitter.

Fellow GOP gubernatorial candidates Lt. Gov. Mark Robinson and Treasurer Dale Folwell did not release statements immediately after the ruling.

Andy Jackson, director of the Civitas Center for Public Integrity at the John Locke Foundation, told Carolina Journal, "The ruling is a victory for fairness in college admissions."

"The court did not overturn precedent with today's rul-

ing," said Jackson. "The court put a 25-year time limit on race-conscious admissions in its Grutter v Bollinger ruling in 2003. Today's ruling did no more than move up that deadline by five years. UNC can still use any number of factors in admissions, including how applicants' race impacted their lives. They just cannot use the color of their skin as a factor."

North Carolina's senior U.S. Sen. Thom Tillis celebrated the decision on Twitter, saying, "The Supreme Court made the right decision today. Colleges should



The Supreme Court made the right decision today.

- Sen. Thom Tillis

not be able to discriminate against applicants based on the color of their skin."

Grant Lefelar is a student intern for The Carolina Journal.

'Frightening' message...

continued from PAGE 9

the veto and still make it law.

Cooper's choice

In 2022, Gov. Cooper decided to support a primary challenger to one of his own Democrats,

Sen. Kirk deViere, D-Cumberland. In Cooper's eyes, deViere did not vote with the party consistently enough, especially when it came to budget matters. The primary challenger Cooper selected, Applewhite, beat deViere in the Democratic primary, 56% to 37%.

Applewhite went on to win the general election against her Republican opponent, former state Sen. Wesley Meredith, by a 4-point margin.

Applewhite's success was Cooper's victory. However, following the 2022 election results, Republicans held a supermajority in the Senate, meaning that Applewhite's vote likely would not matter after all.

Applewhite has been a loyal Democrat, toeing the party line on most issues. She even voted against the state budget, despite the budget being tied to Medicaid expansion and seven of her Democratic colleagues voting for

it.

Myron Pitts, the opinion editor at the Fayetteville Observer and a Democrat himself, seemed frustrated with Applewhite's vote.

"I do wonder what the governor thought about the matter," Pitts wrote, referring to Applewhite presumably disagreeing with Cooper on H.B. 574. "I also wonder if Applewhite's liberal supporters will feel a sense of buyer's remorse and consider

looking elsewhere come next primary season in 2024."

Cooper has received criticism for caring too much about loyalty.

Rep. Michael Wray, D-Northampton, was the only Democrat in the House who voted in favor of H.B. 574.

Alex Baltzegar is the statehouse reporter for The Carolina Journal.

OPINION



Know your enemy (and quote them, too)

DAVID LARSON
OPINION EDITOR



During my formative years, the United States and the West in general were said to be locked in a “clash of civilizations” with the Islamic world, or at least radicals within it. Groups like Al Qaeda, the Taliban, Al Shabaab, Boko Haram, and later ISIS dominated the news. There was always a bombing, beheading, stoning, or other act of barbaric terror somewhere in the world to draw our attention.

I became very curious about cultures within the Muslim world and distinctions between the various groups and belief systems. I tried to learn Arabic and read some books that likely put me on an FBI watchlist or two.

One of those books was “Milestones” by Sayyid Qutb, considered the equivalent of “The Communist Manifesto” or “Mein Kampf” for radical Sunni Muslims. Qutb was an Egyptian revolutionary in the mid-20th century who was executed for his part in a plot to kill Egyptian President Gamal Nass-



Totalitarian leaders include Joseph Stalin, Benito Mussolini, Adolf Hitler, Kim Il-sung and Mao Zedong.

er. He was the lead propagandist for the Muslim Brotherhood, but his writings are also the inspiration for the even-more-extreme

Salafi movement, which includes groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS. The “salaf” were the founding fathers of Islam, and Salafis be-

lieved all those before and most of those after the salaf lived in ignorance. The only solution was to force them to live under an

Islamic state with strict Shariah law.

I wanted to know what these groups thought and why, and reading “Milestones” was the easiest way to get a firsthand account. Interestingly, Qutb’s rage was sparked after traveling to the United States in 1948 to study our education system, not unlike how Alexis de Tocqueville traveled to the early U.S. to study our prison system. And like de Tocqueville, he came away with observations on many other subjects. The trip greatly shocked Qutb, as his stay in Colorado exposed him to the free mixing of men and women, alcohol use, skimpy female bathing suits, and what he saw as a generally shallow and individualistic culture.

As I read, some of his observations actually seemed reasonable, like on our superficiality and pleasure-seeking commercialism, but his drastic conclusions about the need for a violent global jihad obviously were over the top. I had a similar experience reading Karl Marx. He made some fair observations on poverty and exploitation, but then mixed in very bad anthropology and economics, which

Our COVID outcomes were average

JOHN HOOD
CONTRIBUTOR



Because Gov. Roy Cooper's former secretary of Health and Human Services, Mandy Cohen, just got the nod from President Joe Biden to be the next director of the Centers for Disease Control, politicians and analysts are again debating how North Carolinians fared during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Defenders of Cooper and Cohen argue that their comparatively stringent regulations saved many lives when compared to states such as Florida, where lockdowns were shorter and mandates less severe. Detractors argue that North Carolinians suffered greater economic pain, including lost jobs and incomes, than was necessary to combat the virus, and that the state's decision to keep public schools closed longer than neighboring states was particularly indefensible.

I opined frequently about these issues during the pandemic, criticizing Cooper's school closures and violations of the separation of powers. But I also urged everyone to try to keep a cool head, to recognize the unprecedented nature of the crisis and the difficult decisions our governor and other officials were compelled to make.

That being said, we have more data now than we did in 2020, 2021, or even 2022 to assess the effectiveness of policy respons-



N.C. Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Dr. Mandy Cohen at a May 2020 COVID-19 briefing.

es to the pandemic. The clearest finding, in my view, is that closing public schools for more than a brief period in spring 2020 was a wrongheaded and counterproductive policy. Schoolchildren were at extremely low risk and didn't prove to be major vectors of transmission to vulnerable populations.

What about lockdowns, business closures, mask mandates, and other nonmedical interventions? Some studies suggest the stringency of such regulations exhibited little correlation with the spread of the virus. Others, such as a major paper published in the British journal *The Lancet* this March, found that while

regulatory stringency had some relationship to infection rates, it wasn't associated with death rates.

That latter COVID outcome measure was always the better one. Infection rates have more of a reporting bias. Places that test more will detect more infections, while a death is a death, although some ambiguity about its cause may persist.

As for comparing the pandemic experience of North Carolinians to, say, Floridians, I'm afraid that far too many politicians and activists continue to hurl accusations based on the wrong statistic. They use COVID

deaths per capita without adjusting for pre-existing risk factors such as age. That's silly. Many of the same people would (properly) insist on adjusting for student characteristics when assessing school performance, for example.

When adjusted for age and comorbidities, Florida's COVID death rate from 2020 to mid-2022 was lower, not higher, than North Carolina's. The *Lancet* study ranked Florida as having the 12th lowest rate in the country. North Carolina was 27th.

On the other hand, many other states in the Southeast had worse death-rate rankings than we did, including South Carolina (35th), Tennessee (38th), and

Georgia (43rd).

Still, the *Lancet* authors found "no statistical association between the party affiliation of a state governor and cumulative death rates from COVID-19." To the extent there was a political explanation for differences in mortality, it had less to do with lockdowns and masks than with the uptake of vaccines. Republican-leaning places tended to have lower vaccination rates — and that translated into higher mortality for vulnerable populations.

Now, here's what I got wrong in 2020: I thought the economic damage from Cooper's lockdowns would last longer than it did. While North Carolina did experience a worse-than-average drop in economic activity, we also bounced back faster. Big losses in employment, especially in restaurants and other service sectors, were very painful in the short run. Then loose eligibility standards for unemployment insurance induced some North Carolinians to stay out of the workforce for a while. When those standards tightened back up, most went back to work. (Many of those who didn't return appear to have severe drug addictions or mental illnesses).

In most ways, North Carolina's experience with COVID was close to the national average. Unexciting but true.

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

Moore v. Harper could prove problematic for political left

MITCH KOKAI
CONTRIBUTOR



PERHAPS the political left should have listened to Clarence Thomas in *Moore v. Harper*.

A U.S. Supreme Court decision issued three days after that major redistricting ruling helps explain why.

In *Moore v. Harper*, North Carolina's Republican legislative leaders had asked the high court to reverse a 2022 ruling from the N.C. Supreme Court.

Lawmakers argued that state courts had concocted a dubious interpretation of the state constitution to strike down lawmakers' preferred congressional election map. The court had invented a state constitutional ban against overly partisan gerrymandering.

The U.S. Supreme Court rejected lawmakers' plea on June 27. A 6-3 decision authored by Chief Justice John Roberts affirmed the N.C. Supreme Court's right to issue its own election map ruling.

Yet the high court's decision did not amount to the clear loss

for N.C. Republicans that major media outlets reported.

A political shift on the N.C. Supreme Court after the 2022 elections had produced a new election map ruling in April. The state's highest court threw out its challenged 2022 decision. Justices disavowed the dubious legal reasoning that underpinned the earlier decision.

Because of the state Supreme Court's reversal, legislators are free to draw new election maps this year. Critics cannot challenge those maps in state court under claims of partisan gerrymandering.

The April state Supreme Court decision gave legislative leaders the outcome they wanted, regardless of the U.S. Supreme Court's *Moore v. Harper* ruling.

That was the key point Thomas made in his dissent. The longest-serving member of the high court argued that his colleagues should have dismissed the case as "indisputably moot."

"This is a straightforward case of mootness," Thomas explained. "The federal defense no longer makes any difference to this case — whether we agree with the defense, disagree with it, or say

nothing at all, the final judgment in this litigation will be exactly the same. The majority does not seriously contest that fact."

Yet Thomas' argument secured only three of the court's nine votes. The three clearly left-of-center justices all supported Roberts' majority opinion.

That support could come back to bite left-wing partisans.

Beyond the N.C. dispute, the *Moore v. Harper* majority staked out new constitutional ground.

State courts can review state legislatures' election maps and other legislation linked to the U.S. Constitution's Elections Clause. But state courts do not have "free rein." The top federal court will step in when state courts overstep their authority.

"In interpreting state law in this area, state courts may not so exceed the bounds of ordinary judicial review as to unconstitutionally intrude upon the role specifically reserved to state legislatures by Article I, Section 4, of the Federal Constitution," Roberts explained.

While the *Moore* majority technically affirmed the N.C. Supreme Court's 2022 decision, Roberts stated clearly that jus-

tics "decline to address" whether the state court "strayed beyond the limits" of acceptable behavior.

Three days after *Moore v. Harper*, the Supreme Court addressed an Ohio case, *Huffman v. Neiman*. In that dispute, Ohio's Republican legislative leaders challenged their state Supreme Court's decision to toss a congressional election map.

Justices in Washington could have rejected the *Huffman* case. Or they could have affirmed the Ohio court's ruling, pointing toward the still-fresh *Moore v. Harper* decision.

Instead the high court accepted the *Huffman* case, vacated the state ruling, and sent the case back to Columbus for reconsideration.

It's clear at least some justices believe the Ohio court botched its decision. *Moore v. Harper* confirmed that the U.S. Supreme Court could tell a state court not to "exceed the bounds of ordinary judicial review."

Unlike North Carolina, Ohio uses a redistricting commission to draw election maps. Ohio lawmakers argued that the state's top court rejected the commission's congressional map because

it failed to guarantee six Democratic victories. "It also dictated the vote share of the Democratic-leaning districts, concluding that Democrats were not really favored to win districts with Democratic vote shares of 52.15%, 51.04%, and 50.23%," according to Ohio legislators' court filings.

It's unclear whether *Moore v. Harper* will prompt the Ohio Supreme Court to reassess its earlier ruling. It's also uncertain whether the U.S. Supreme Court would consider the Ohio dispute again.

But top courts in North Carolina, Ohio, and the rest of the country are now on notice. Federal courts will step in when they believe state courts have intruded on legislators' proper roles in drawing congressional election maps.

Given the court's current composition, increased federal involvement will offer little comfort to the political left. Had their favorite justices sided with Thomas in *Moore v. Harper*, future court battles over congressional maps might have taken a different turn.

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

'Sound of Freedom' is an intriguing, disturbing film — not a QAnon flick

GRANT LEFELAR
INTERN



While scrolling through the wasteland that is my Twitter feed, I stumbled upon a post that got my immediate attention.

This tweet, from one of the various film-obsessed anonymous accounts I follow, mentioned a “QAnon movie” recently released in theaters nationwide. The QAnon movement, for those who aren’t familiar, is associated with hardcore supporters of Donald Trump, who believe cryptic messages, from an anonymous source named “Q,” reveal how a global cabal of elite satanic cannibalistic pedophiles worked to undermine the former president and control the world.

The film’s QAnon-linked status derived from its narrative: an allegedly true story of the rescue of sex-trafficked children and the capture of their villainous captors. My eyes immediately opened wide after reading the phrase “QAnon movie,” and my head began to race with how this movie might look: ultra-low budget, no-name actors, terrible dialogue, horrible production, a wonky script about how the “elites” traffic children to satisfy their depraved pedophilic desires, etc.

Soon after, I came across a Rolling Stone review condemning the film as a “superhero movie for dads with brainworms.” Rather than aiming solely at the film’s merits, the reviewer instead spent a hefty portion of the text taking cheap shots at the “mostly white-haired audience” for the crime of being intrigued by an action drama.

Other outlets also took note. The Washington Post’s headline on the film read, “‘Sound of Freedom’ is a box office hit whose star embraces QAnon,” in reference to lead actor Jim Caviezel’s previous appearances at QAnon-linked conferences. Across the pond, The Guardian called the film a “QAnon-adjacent thriller seducing America.”

However, when looking more into this “QAnon movie,” I learned it had an impressive cast of talent beyond Caviezel, with notable names Bill Camp and Mira Sorvino. Furthermore, reviews from mainstream critics were so far positive, something I would



THIS PROMOTIONAL IMAGE IS PROVIDED BY ANGEL STUDIOS.

not expect from a film allegedly derived from the QAnon conspiracy lore. The film also boasted a budget of nearly \$15 million — a hefty amount if it were centered on fringe, objectively insane beliefs.

But the film’s box office numbers truly caught my eye. Despite being released over the long July 4 weekend against Harrison Ford’s swan song in “Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny,” it pulled in an impressive nearly \$20 million opening — not bad for a film released by Angel Studios, a Christian independent distributor. Undoubtedly, the film’s strong word-of-mouth-based marketing campaign contributed heavily to this number.

After learning these nuggets of info, I knew I absolutely had to see this film. The movie in question: “Sound of Freedom.”

So, at my local, overpriced theater in Chapel Hill, I booked a ticket for the Monday night screening, not exactly knowing what I was getting into.

But, when entering the theater, I did not come across the Baby Boomer symposium that Rolling Stone got my hopes up for. No, instead the crowd was diverse in age, gender, and race — everyone from young couples to whole families.

The theater was nearly three-fourths full, no small feat for a movie on a Monday evening — not exactly a popular movie-going day of the week. Not everyone here could be a Q-obsessed crazy.

When the lights dimmed

and the seemingly never-ending stream of previews were out of the way, the film before me was not a conspiracy-laden piece of propaganda intended to brainwash me into the QAnon cult, but a competently made action thriller whose over-two-hour run time is worth every second.

In “Sound of Freedom,” director Alejandro Monteverde, a name I have not been previously familiar with, smartly weaves the “based on a true story” tale of Tim Ballard (Caviezel), a DHS agent committed to catching child pornography peddlers, often at his own physical and mental risk.

Realizing that catching pedophiles is worth very little compared to saving their young victims, Ballard successfully saves a young Honduran boy previously kidnapped in the film’s opening scene and reunites him with his father. As the two part ways, Ballard promises to rescue the boy’s sister, who sex traffickers also stole away.

Committed to his promise, Ballard travels to Colombia to expose a sex-trafficking ring with the cooperation of law enforcement officials and colorful underground figures.

By no stretch is the film an easy watch. It deals with an incredibly sensitive subject that any viewer with a hint of empathy or taste will find deeply disturbing. The subject matter proved too much for some reviewers, with the Rolling Stone review accusing “Sound of Freedom” of “fetishizing the torture of its child victims

and lingering over the lush precludes to their sexual abuse.”

Yet, the film’s unflinching look at how child sex traffickers operate works in the film’s favor, giving a believable, horrific, and never over-the-top depiction of the practice.

The movie’s antagonists are unmistakably immoral figures, driven by greed, perversion, and a deficit of morality. The script, co-written by Monteverde, never portrays them as cartoon villains, but as real people who could blend into a crowd and not force a second glance.

Monteverde’s influences are clear from the get-go. While based on true events, the film takes dramaturgical liberty, as nearly every biographical film does, in telling Ballard’s story. Evident in the film’s direction and script are hints of “Apocalypse Now,” as Ballard descends down a river into the heart of darkness during the film’s exciting finale. Moody film noir visuals also make their way to the screen.

Characterwise, Camp’s portrayal of Vampiro, a former drug-cartel associate who works underground to save sex-trafficked children, is the film’s standout. Acting as the film’s comic relief and Ballard’s guide into the world of Colombian sex trafficking, Camp’s rugged, street-smart character works surprisingly well, given the film’s downbeat tone.

Despite being released by Utah-based Angel Studios, the creators of Jesus Christ biopic series “The Chosen,” the film treads

lightly on the religion and heavy on the drama. While the film makes allusions to the filmmaker’s faith as Caviezel’s character proudly states, “God’s children are not for sale,” “Sound of Freedom” does not hit viewers over the head with a religious message — as many explicitly Christian films do. Instead, the message is purely one of morality.

“Sound of Freedom” does not come without its flaws. Oscar winner Sorvino, who portrays Ballard’s wife, is sadly unheard throughout the majority of the feature, only occasionally peeking her head in to offer Caviezel’s character words of encouragement.

The film’s narrative suffers from her lack of involvement, and when she appears, her character has no discernible purpose, confusing the viewer in the process.

Furthermore, the film’s production design is adequate — neither outstanding nor cheap — but does not differentiate itself from the latest original offerings from Netflix and other mid-budget films of the genre.

Yet, in some of the more hysterical negative reviews of the movie, a deep discussion of what makes “Sound of Freedom” good, bad, or “meh” is lost to paranoid ramblings about a cadre of old folks getting sucked into weirdo far-right conspiracy theories.

Don’t be mistaken; Jim Caviezel’s kooky statements on elites draining children of their blood in the past few years are fair game for criticism and ridicule. And so are the crazy views of other actors and filmmakers, be it Oliver Stone, Sean Penn, and obviously Tom Cruise.

But, on face value, “Sound of Freedom” does not indulge in Caviezel’s beliefs. In fact, the film was produced in 2018, well before Caviezel fell down the rabbit hole and embraced bizarre claims.

It’s a shame that deciding whether a movie — especially one that does not indulge in politics — is good or not is now so often subjected to partisan tribalism.

When audiences view “Sound of Freedom,” they will not see a film trying to drag them into a world of conspiracy but a decent action thriller that at least shines a spotlight on an underreported, very real, and ultra-uncomfortable issue.

Grant Lefelar is a student intern for Carolina Journal.

'Bidenomics': A political slogan undercut by reality

BRIAN BALFOUR
CONTRIBUTOR



PRESIDENT BIDEN has of late unveiled the term "Bidenomics" in an attempt to brand his administration's economic agenda a success story. "Good jobs and lower costs: That's Bidenomics in action," he declared.

Unfortunately for him, the American public isn't buying it. Recent polling shows only 34% of Americans approve of his handling of the economy.

The disconnect between Biden's optimism and the American public's skepticism is justified. While Biden touts falling rates of inflation and a strong labor market, with a little digging you will find flaws and weaknesses in his argument. Moreover, several other important indicators suggest a recession on the horizon.

Inflation news not as positive as Biden wants you to believe

The inflation rate for June was reported at a 3% annualized rate. That's the lowest rate in more than two years. We must remember, however, that this inflation is tacked onto price levels from June 2022, when inflation had spiked by 9.1% over the previous year — the largest annual increase in 40 years. When Biden brags about "lower costs," it's simply a lie. Prices keep rising, just at a slower pace, and are layered on top of previous historic price hikes.

Overall, prices are roughly 16% higher today than when Biden entered office about two-and-a-half years ago. Indeed, prior to June, the annualized inflation rate had remained at or above 4% for 28 consecutive months, something not seen in four decades. The fact

that prices continue to rise at any pace at all over the massive surge experienced the previous two years means households, especially low-income households, continue to get hammered.

Labor market not as strong as topline number suggests

Following what he considered a strong jobs report for June, Biden bragged about how he helped "create" more than 13.2 million jobs during his administration. Indeed, the national unemployment rate stands at 3.6%, considered quite low by historical standards.

Of course, those jobs supposedly "created" are more accurately described as "recovered" — as in jobs being recovered as the economy reopened after the COVID shutdowns.

Furthermore, economists will tell you that employment is a lagging indicator, meaning that the economy can be faltering for a while before the unemployment rate surges. When you look beneath the surface a little, you will see red flags in the labor market.

The category with the largest job gains in June was government, not a sign of a robust economy. Nearly 30% of new jobs in June were government hires.

Moreover, there continues to be a disconnect between the household survey and the establishment survey data. The household survey discovers how many people are working. The establishment data show how many people are on payrolls. If a person works two different jobs, he will be counted once in the household survey but twice on the establishment survey because he is on two different payrolls. Since June of last year, the household survey shows roughly 800,000 fewer jobs added compared to the establishment survey (3.7 million versus 2.9 million), which strongly suggests a growing

number of people taking second jobs in order to get by.

Indeed, the number of people counted as working part-time for economic reasons climbed by 15% over the past year.

Moreover, the BLS revised May and April job counts downward by a combined 110,000 jobs, putting a dent in what was previously thought to be strong months of job growth.

And at 62.6%, the labor force participation rate remains below pre-pandemic levels.

Several other warning signs

Digging through important economic data and indicators strongly suggests a looming recession, an economic downturn the president no doubt hopes will be delayed until after next year's election. One must examine the following points and ask themselves if these are the signs of a healthy economy.

• Consumers are tapped out:

Wages have not kept pace with inflation over the past couple of years. As a result, consumers have had to rely on debt to finance purchases, piling up the highest credit card debt on record. Combine the record debt with record high credit card interest rates, and many households will have serious trouble digging out. Making matters worse, the resumption of student loan payments this fall is projected to divert up to \$18 billion a month from consumer spending, or a roughly 2% drop in spending on nonessential items.

• **Bank failures:** Multiple bank failures this spring, including the second largest in history, may have served as the canary in the coal mine. One study suggested nearly 200 more banks across the United States are at risk of a similar fate.

• Surge in corporate bankruptcies:

So far this year, the number of corporate bankruptcies is more than double this time last year, and it's at the highest rate since the economy was still struggling with the Great Recession in 2010.

• Housing bubble redux?:

The recent dramatic rise in mortgage rates combined with the previous years-long run-up in housing prices buoyed by historically low rates has helped make housing less affordable than it's been in 30 years. As a result, existing home sales have fallen by about one-third over the last year and a half.

• Inverted yield curve:

Long-term bond yields are typically higher than short-term bond yields. In times of economic distress, however, oftentimes short-term yields will be higher than long-term yields. This is referred to as an "inverted yield curve." One measure of the yield curve, the 10-year minus the 2-year yield, has been inverted for an entire year, and it is the longest and deepest such inversion in more than 40 years. An inverted yield curve has preceded all 10 recessions since 1955.

• Leading economic indicator flashing red:

Another well-watched and reliable economic gauge is the Conference Board's Leading Economic Index, which is designed to provide "an early indication of significant turning points in the business cycle and where the economy is heading in the near term." The LEI has been negative for 14 consecutive months, which points to "weaker economic activity ahead."

• Investment falling:

Gross private domestic investment continues to fall. Investment was down in three of the last four quarters, and in Q1 of 2023 it was down 8% in inflation-adjusted terms compared to a year



The economy is wobbly at best, like a house of cards still propped up by unprecedented money printing in the wake of the COVID lockdowns.

prior.

• **Credit crunch:** With the Federal Reserve raising target interest rates at the fastest clip in 40 years, loans are becoming far more expensive. Combine this with rising economic uncertainty, which leads to banks tightening credit standards, and we have a credit crunch developing. Less credit slows economic activity, especially for major consumer purchases and business investment.

Conclusion

President Biden wants to convince you that the economy is booming. He is so confident that he's even coined the term "Bidenomics" to take ownership of it.

But upon closer scrutiny, the economy is wobbly at best, like a house of cards still propped up by unprecedented money printing in the wake of the COVID lockdowns. Even Biden's two go-to indicators, slowing inflation and low unemployment, are not quite as strong as he makes them seem.

If the recession many are predicting hits, it will be interesting to see how quickly he tries to memory-hole the term "Bidenomics," disassociate himself from the economy, and lay the blame elsewhere.

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

To lower lumber and housing prices, liberate NC sawmills

KELLY LESTER
CONTRIBUTOR



North Carolina has a housing and sawmill problem. The number of local sawmills in North Carolina has been declining, while the population of North Carolina, and the subsequent demand for housing, continues to rise exponentially. North Carolina officials have found that the state will be short a little under a million houses by 2030.

On June 27, the North Carolina Senate Agriculture Committee passed the Promote Local Sawmills Act on to the Senate Commerce and Insurance Committee. The bill, which passed the state House last year but stalled in the Senate, aims to empower local sawyers, landowners, and builders by addressing the regulatory processes that hinder the use and sale of local lumber.

The act would clear two major barriers that impede the utilization of local lumber. First, it expands the ability of landowners and small sawmill owners to sell their unstamped (also referred to as ungraded) lumber to others for residential construction purposes, pro-



CREATIVE COMMONS VIA PEXELS USER MARK STEBNICKI.

moting a vibrant marketplace for local wood products.

Second, the bill eliminates the discretion given to building inspectors, ensuring a standardized process for approving the use of local lumber. This change will provide landowners with the confidence to utilize ungraded lumber from local sawmills or their own lumber while reducing unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles.

Advocate of the bill, and owner of the Efland-based Fireside Farm and Sawmill, Randall Williams, explained the current state of regulations on local sawmills as "A classic example of excessive regulation getting in the way of entrepreneurship and civic goals."

It is difficult for local sawmills to get inspectors out to begin with, and, when they do, it can be costly. According to Williams, having a state-certified lumber inspector come out can cost around \$1,000 a day. One of the costs included is having to pay an employee to flip the lumber over on all sides for the grader to inspect.

Fears of quality of wood sold may be a concern. However, allowing for the selling of ungraded local lumber would actually increase quality.

The current state of the U.S. lumber commodity chain is both destructive and inefficient. Large mills, often monopolizing the market, compromise quality standards

due to limited competition. As a result, the lumber available in big-box stores has witnessed a decline in quality.

"What used to be rejected Grade-3 lumber is now approved for construction," explained Williams.

This compromised quality not only affects the integrity of structures but also contributes to a culture of price gouging.

The recent surge in demand for housing, coupled with low interest rates and tariffs on imported lumber, has further exacerbated the problem, with lumber prices sometimes skyrocketing up to four times their previous levels over the last few years.

New Hampshire and Wisconsin have already implemented successful programs to support local sawmills without compromising safety. These programs include training sawyers in lumber grading, periodic certification, and the authorization to sell their lumber. North Carolina, the state which founded American forestry, could be next.

By passing the Support Local Sawmills Act, North Carolina has an opportunity to empower local communities and address the challenges facing homebuilders, young aspiring homeowners, and farmers. Enabling small sawyers to certify and sell their local, high-quality

lumber will provide affordable alternatives for construction while reducing the burden of imported lumber, which is already heavily tariffed. Moreover, this initiative can reinvigorate rural economies, support local businesses, and create job opportunities within the community.

Supporting the local lumber industry not only bolsters the economy but also contributes to environmental sustainability. As mentioned previously, an abundance of local, high-quality logs goes unused and ends up in landfills due to low log prices. By promoting the use of local lumber, we can reduce waste, discourage excessive clearcutting, and preserve valuable habitats.

There is far too much reliance on imported big-box lumber in the United States, while local lumber markets struggle and sometimes must shut down. By addressing the barriers hindering the use and sale of local lumber, we can foster a sustainable, resilient, and prosperous wood-based economy while making homebuilding more affordable.

Kelly Lester is a policy analyst at the John Locke Foundation's Center for Food, Power, and Life, primarily researching agriculture. Before joining Locke, Kelly was a research associate at the Cato Institute, focusing on poverty and welfare.

Taxpayers pay billions a year for NC universities. They deserve transparency.

JENNA ROBINSON
CONTRIBUTOR



Ever since 1789, when UNC-Chapel Hill was founded, North Carolina taxpayers have been very generous to public higher education. North Carolina's colleges and universities receive annual appropriations of more than \$4 billion. And on a per-student basis, UNC schools receive more public funding than almost any other schools in the nation. In return for their generous support, taxpayers deserve transparent and accountable university governance, including information about how, when, and why decisions are made.

But that isn't always the case. Back in 2015, I pointed out the difficulties of attending a UNC Board of Governors meeting:

"UNC Board of Governors meetings are hard to navigate for the uninitiated, such as a member of the public. The committee rooms are small, spread out, and poorly labeled. All the people who attend the meetings seem to know each other. Finding a place to sit in the boardroom often means arriving an hour before the meeting begins. And if you don't get a seat, you're out of luck."

We're in better shape now than we were then. The UNC Board of Governors live-streams all its meetings. But that's not true of college and university boards across the state. And finding additional board materials, like minutes or agendas, can still be difficult.



UNC.EDU

Currently, several of the boards of trustees in the UNC System lack essential transparency. For example, Appalachian State University's Board of Trustees website provides just one generic email address for the board. Very few boards allow time for public comment. And no boards in the UNC System take roll call votes at in-person meetings, making it difficult to hold members accountable for their actions.

The James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal released a policy brief on June 19 outlining how North Carolina can solve these transparency problems as well as providing model legislation on the issue.

Key recommendations presented in "Blueprint for Reform: University Governance" include:

Accessibility of contact information: Urging universities to make staff and board members' email addresses easily accessible online, facilitating transparent and open communication between stakeholders.

Public availability of mailing addresses: Encouraging the disclosure of board members' office or university mailing addresses, promoting accessibility and accountability to the broader university community.

Recording and posting of meetings: Advocating for the recording and online posting of all publicly held

meetings — including committee, subcommittee, and special meetings — to provide transparency and facilitate public scrutiny.

Advance public notices: Requiring universities to make meeting notices publicly available at least one week in advance, allowing stakeholders to prepare and participate effectively.

Timely availability of meeting minutes: Urging universities to make meeting minutes publicly available as soon as they are approved, ensuring transparency and accountability in board decisions.

Roll-call voting and online

publication: Recommending the adoption of roll-call voting during board meetings and providing these records online in the meeting minutes, fostering transparency and accountability.

Orientation and ongoing training: Promoting the provision of comprehensive orientation and ongoing training programs for board members, equipping them with the necessary skills and knowledge to fulfill their responsibilities effectively.

Public comment periods: Advocating for dedicated time during full board meetings to hear public comments, allowing diverse voices to be heard and considered in decision-making processes.

The Martin Center's model legislation, The Higher Education Governance Transparency Act, would codify those reforms. Establishing uniform standards for university governing boards would make their activities and decision-making processes more transparent.

It would also ensure that board members are held accountable to the public and to the General Assembly that appoints them.

Our colleges and universities serve thousands of North Carolina students every year, funded by billions in taxpayer dollars. It's time to ensure that board governance is transparent and accountable.

Jenna Robinson is president of the James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal.

NCInnovation is a bridge too far

JOHN HOOD
CONTRIBUTOR



NORTH CAROLINA has enjoyed more than a decade of conservative governance. It's brought our state impressive growth and widespread acclaim. The General Assembly has reformed and reduced state taxes, lightened the regulatory burden, invested in infrastructure, and promoted choice and competition in public services, among other accomplishments.

This year, lawmakers have an excellent opportunity to build on this record of success by enacting a 2023-25 state budget with a prudent mix of strategic investments and pro-growth tax reforms.

Unfortunately, the Senate version of the budget contains a nonconservative — indeed, a decidedly anti-conservative — provision to transfer \$1.4 billion in taxpayer money to a private entity, NCInnovation. Its stated intention is to bridge the gap between academic research and

successful commercialization.

Most new businesses fail. Indeed, many seemingly innovative ideas never become businesses in the first place. They fail to attract enough human and financial capital to sustain them as they move from the research-and-development phase to the revenue-producing phase. The business executives, consultants, and activists who created NCInnovation propose to solve the problem by making grants to university researchers and other interested parties to carry them across this gap, often described as the "valley of death."

There may well be university researchers and other North Carolinians with promising ideas who just need some bridge funding to launch trailblazing new businesses. Sounds like a fascinating opportunity for private investors to pursue, with the promise of significant returns as well as the risk of significant losses. It is not, however, the proper role of state government.

As NCInnovation itself recognizes, "North Carolina is a powerhouse when it comes to research and development funding." Our

colleges and universities attract a great deal of private and federal research funding. State taxpayers add to that with one of the highest levels of university subsidy in the nation. While opinions may differ, my view as a conservative is that it is appropriate to use state dollars to subsidize research on state campuses and to fund extension services to transfer research findings to private individuals and enterprises to implement.

As for the other cliff of the so-called valley of death, it's clearly not appropriate to force state taxpayers to become venture capitalists for private startups. Although the initial budget language for the NCInnovation transfer appeared to allow for equity stakes in recipient firms, that idea is no longer on the table as far as I know.

Rather, the proposal is to transfer \$1.4 billion from the state treasury to NCInnovation, a private entity with a board composed primarily of legislative appointees. Notice I didn't say "appropriate." I said transfer. The \$1.4 billion is not technically an expenditure, which means

it doesn't count against the General Assembly's annual spending cap of inflation plus population growth. For conservatives, that should already be a big red flag.

Exactly what range of grants NCInnovation might make from the proceeds of its \$1.4 billion corpus is not clearly spelled out in any of the documents I've seen. Nor would its activities be subject to open meetings and public records laws.

And why should we expect the board and staff of NCInnovation to make better decisions about which potential ventures to fund than private investors would make with their own money? This is the crux of the matter. The organization has attracted an impressive array of directors and well-wishers, many of whom are accomplished executives. I don't question their business savvy. I question why they deem it appropriate to risk not just their own money, or their friends' money, or their clients' money, but my money — and yours.

Conservatives believe that government's role is clearly defined and limited. We pay taxes to fund public services such as law



I don't question their business savvy. I question why they deem it appropriate to risk not just their own money, or their friends' money, or their clients' money, but my money — and yours.

enforcement, courts, education, and transportation assets that cannot or should not be funded through receipts or voluntary contributions. When the line between the public sector and the private sector gets blurry, we get concerned. When it disappears entirely, we get angry.

John Hood is a John Locke Foundation board member.

Justice Morgan's likely run is good news for NC Dems

DALLAS WOODHOUSE
CONTRIBUTOR



It has been a little quiet around Raleigh, as legislators try to finish up a marathon legislative session. Democrats have been beat down in the capital with Republican legislative supermajorities working their policy will over the objections of Democrats, including Gov. Roy Cooper.

Yet Democrats have reasons for hope because of a few recent developments.

One of the more interesting political developments in the last few weeks is that North Carolina Democrats may be getting an interesting primary in 2024 that could pay dividends for team blue.

Earlier this spring, Democrat North Carolina Supreme Court Justice Michael "Mike" Morgan announced he would not seek re-election to the state's highest court. Morgan will be 69 years of age on Election Day in 2024 and could serve only three years of an eight-year term due to the state's current mandatory retirement age of 72 for judges.

Morgan, one of two registered Democrats on the state's highest court, said recently that many Democrats are encouraging him to enter the Democratic primary for governor.

Democratic Attorney General Josh Stein entered the race he has long been planning to run in January.

Who is Justice Michael Morgan?

Michael Rivers Morgan was born in Cherry Point, to Barbara and the late Leander Morgan and is the eldest of five children. The family resided in Washington, D.C., until young Mike was 6, when the family relocated to his mother's hometown of New Bern. As an 8-year-old fifth-grader in 1964, Mike was the first black student to attend all-white Trent Park



Elementary School, becoming one of five black students that year to integrate the New Bern public school system citywide. In the 11th grade, he became the first black drum major of the marching band of New Bern Senior High School.

Morgan earned his bachelor of arts degree in both history and sociology from Duke University. He went on to obtain his law degree with honors from North Carolina Central University School of Law, where he served as the student body president during his final year of law school.

In 1994, Morgan was appointed as a Wake County District Court judge by Gov. Jim Hunt, and he was subsequently elected to the judgeship by the voters of Wake County in 1996 and again in 2000.

He was elected to the Superior Court bench in 2004 for an eight-year term and was re-elected to the post in 2012. In his first statewide quest for elective office, Morgan was elected in November 2016 to be an associate justice of the Supreme Court of North Carolina.

The benefit of Morgan's run for Democrats

Should Morgan pull the trigger on the governor's race, he will have an uphill battle against Stein, who is well-known and well-funded.

Stein would, of course, like to avoid a significant primary contest, but that may not be in the best interest of his party or his own candidacy.

Looking at a few key elections, 2008 for N.C. Democrats and 2016 for the NCGOP, exciting primary contests help lift the parties in the general election.

An exciting primary contest between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama attracted huge numbers of unaffiliated voters in the 2008 Democratic primary. Far fewer unaffiliated voters chose to vote in the GOP primary, where the selection of U.S. Sen. John McCain of Arizona was a foregone conclusion.

The situation flipped in 2016, when Clinton was coronated for Democrats by the time the Dem race hit North Carolina, but Don-

ald Trump, Ted Cruz, and others were battling it out in the state.

I was executive director of the North Carolina Republican Party in 2016. We found that 75% of unaffiliated voters who chose a GOP ballot voted for Trump in the general election, irrespective of who they voted for in the primary. Many unaffiliated primary voters cast ballots like loyal Democrats or loyal Republicans, but not all. Exciting primary contests draw in unaffiliated voters early, who then tend to stick with your team.

Assuming President Biden continues to seek re-election with no real primary threat, a competitive Democrat primary for governor is the only statewide race that can draw these critical swing unaffiliated voters to pull a Democrat ballot instead of opting for the GOP primary, which will certainly have high-profile contests for the GOP nominations for president and governor.

Even with Morgan entering the race, I would argue that Stein is the front-runner in the race for governor, in both the Democratic primary and the general election.

He is far better known than Morgan and is extremely well-funded. Should Stein advance, he would face a Republican Party that has only elected three Republican governors since 1972. When Roy Cooper finishes his term at the end of 2024, Democrats will have occupied the Executive Mansion 36 out of the last 52 years, with Republicans only serving 16. Republican Pat McCrory's single term (2013-2016) is the only time Republicans have controlled North Carolina's executive branch in the last 30 years.

There is a reason that in Raleigh they say A.G. stands for "almost governor."

Mike Easley and Roy Cooper both served as attorney general before becoming governors. They went 2-2 in the quest to become governor. Attorneys general can run on issues with broad bipartisan support: law and order, tackling drug addiction, and protecting seniors from scam artists.

Meanwhile, history shows that moving from the lieutenant governor's office to governor, as Republican Mark Robinson is attempting to do, is extremely difficult. Since the state constitution was changed in 1980 to allow governors to serve two consecutive terms, sitting lieutenant governors are 1-5: Jim Gardner (R-1992), Dennis Wickler (D-2000), Walter Dalton (D-2012), and Dan Forest (R-2020) all lost bids for governor.

Democrat Bev Perdue, elected to a single term in 2008, was the lone exception.

Should Stein compete against Robinson in the general election, he could very well meet North Carolina's first African American lieutenant governor.

Stein will have to contrast his positions and qualifications against Robinson without offending the sensibilities of people of color. Learning how to thread that needle in a primary could be valuable.

Dallas Woodhouse is the NC executive director for American Majority.

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THE CAROLINA JOURNAL

Know your enemies...

continued from PAGE 13

were the cause of his horrible conclusions (and the disastrous results when anyone tried to apply them).

In Roger Scruton's "How to Be a Conservative," he lays out the book with this in mind. Chapters have titles like, "The truth in socialism," "The truth in nationalism," and "The truth in environmentalism." He gives the devil his due, pulling in the nugget of truth from rival political movements, even if he is mostly in disagreement with them.

As ancient Chinese philosopher, Sun Tzu taught: If you are going to win a battle, you must know yourself and know your enemy. I never felt like I was in any danger of converting to radical Islam or starting a communist revolution because of picking up

those books.

Quoting dictators

Not everybody agrees with this, though. In fact, many on today's progressive left think if you read controversial books, or quote words from them, even if your reasoning is clearly to say, "This is bad," then that makes you by default a fan of the book and its author.

This dynamic has burst onto the stage of our state's gubernatorial race, as the presumptive Democrat nominee, Attorney General Josh Stein, posted a clip from a speech given by the likely Republican nominee, Lt. Gov. Mark Robinson.

In the clip, Robinson can be heard encouraging people to research more about "despots" like Hitler, Mao, Stalin, Pol Pot, and Castro. Stein insinuated Robinson did this nefariously so that teachers would "feed students quotes from dictators."

Even in the conveniently edited clip, it's clear Robinson is say-

ing that these are bad men who did bad things, and that students should learn from them to avoid repeating the mistakes of history. In a longer clip of the comments, that context is made even more explicit, as he said, "It's time for us to start teaching our children about the dirty, despicable, awful things that those communist and socialist despots did in our history."

Now, Robinson does have a habit of saying things in a bombastic way and has been accused of lacking tact or nuance in how he delivers messages. One should definitely be careful when quoting any evil dictator to make clear whose side you're on.

Notably, Robinson's remarks were in the context of defending the conservative grassroots group Moms for Liberty, as they had also found themselves receiving bad press for quoting Hitler.

For those arguing in good faith, even those who disagree with the moms, it is clear that they oppose what they see as indoctrination and propaganda

in government-run schools, and were using quotes from big-government authoritarians in a cautionary way. The fact that the left is calling them Nazis and not communists, despite them quoting dictators from both the far left and far right, gives away the disingenuous nature of the attacks.

Many Moms for Liberty chapters pushed back, saying they quote dictators to warn of their ideas, not support them. But for those who are looking for an excuse to view them as literal Nazis, these appeals likely won't make much of a difference.

Quoting Adolf Hitler as a regular practice is probably not a good idea, and should only be done when a very direct analogy can be made. One can be easily misunderstood (or more likely, like in this case, your political enemies will know exactly what you mean but choose to feign ignorance to score points). Your political rivals are also most likely not comparable to actual Nazis.

But to the greater point, both



Knowing your history helps you understand the world around you, including what kinds of ideas and movements need to be opposed at all costs.

students in school and adults seeking a full knowledge of the world should absolutely read about Sayyid Qutb, Osama Bin Laden, Adolf Hitler, Maximilien Robespierre, Joseph Stalin, and any other tyrannical historical figure who caused death and mayhem. Go ahead and quote them (carefully), too. Knowing your enemy and knowing your history helps you understand the world around you, including what kinds of ideas and movements need to be opposed at all costs.

THE CAROLINA JOURNAL

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Stand for something

continued from PAGE 2

highest number of failing schools spent on average less than 1% on tutoring, the proven method of remedial education.

For many North Carolinians, the lockdowns ushered in an era of flexible work schedules and online meetings from summer vacation spots. For many others, though, it meant shuttered family businesses, tremendous loss of lifetime income, and a shifted expectation of academic, social, and emotional development for their children.

Those for whom the lockdowns did not end their careers

or hamstringing their children for higher education should pause for a moment and recognize the loss their neighbors suffered. Cooper recently isolated due to a COVID diagnosis, something that has come to be viewed as little more than a bad cold.

We must acknowledge the losses kids suffered because of governmental policies stripping away their educational opportunities, constantly masking them, and forcing them to isolate.

But were the shutdowns the right call?

A major study published in the British journal *The Lancet* this March ranked Florida as having the 12th lowest COVID death rate in the country. North Carolina was 27th.

Researchers found that, when adjusted for age and comorbidities, Florida's COVID death rate from 2020 to mid-2022, with

fewer government-imposed closures, was lower, not higher, than North Carolina's.

The study revealed that states' stringency of pandemic regulations impacted infection rates to a degree, but it wasn't associated with death rates.

While hindsight of the shutdown decision in 2020 is ... well, 20/20 ... we can't pretend it didn't happen. Many of us saw billions of federal dollars in pandemic recovery flowing and assumed that someone was taking care of it. We moved on and expected students to do the same.

My own daughter started high school in August 2020. She did not have an in-person high school class until the fourth quarter of her sophomore year. For almost two years, she worked with teachers who struggled to convert their lessons to

online delivery, and assignments moved through a school server that was constantly overloaded. They were required to use school-issued laptops, but there were not enough to go around. She didn't get one until second semester. Sports disappeared; friends shifted overnight. Millions of North Carolina teens and their families faced their first encounter with widespread mental health difficulties. Those who could afford a therapist (online only, of course) faced eight-month waiting lists for an appointment. We were on our own.

In 2020, the personal liberties that many of us took for granted disappeared. For the high school classes of 2020 through 2024, that time will shape the rest of their lives. For those who don't have a teen in their lives, know that most of them don't have the "world is my

oyster" attitude of our generation. They recognize the holes in their education, and those with resources are trying to fill them. They view their futures very differently. On the plus side, they and their parents see more options ahead than just a four-year college. They are digital natives, so they will adapt to online work while appreciating the value of face-to-face. They also have an earned suspicion of government.

Left over from her online class days, my daughter has a hastily written note taped to the wall over her desk. On it, a quote attributed to Alexander Hamilton, co-author of the Federalist Papers and fierce advocate for limited federal government. "Those who stand for nothing fall for everything."

This perfectly embodies one lesson for this generation of students, as it should for all of us.

Freedom conservatism

continued from PAGE 2

conservatism in such a way that government power should be embraced to alter society.

And this redefining of conservatism, sometimes called national conservatism, forsakes America's distinctive creed.

This creed upholds the intrinsic value of individual liberty as indispensable to the nation's moral and physical strength.

Conserving individual freedoms is essential for preserving American greatness and virtue in the years ahead.

As John Adams wisely noted, "Because power corrupts, society's demands for moral authority and character increase as the importance of the position increases."

We foster an environment where diverse ideas can thrive and be debated openly by safe-

guarding individual freedoms, such as freedom of speech, religion, and assembly.

This encourages innovation, progress, and the pursuit of truth. It also prevents the concentration of power in the hands of a few, reducing the risk of corruption and abuse.

Protecting individual liberties ensures that moral authority and character remain at the forefront of leadership and decision-making.

When citizens can express their opinions and contribute to the democratic process, they become active participants in shaping their society's future.

Preserving individual freedoms is not just a legal or political matter; it is deeply tied to America's core values and principles — a commitment to liberty, justice, and the pursuit of happiness for all.

By upholding these principles, we ensure that America remains a beacon of hope, an inspiration to other nations, and a virtuous society for generations to come.

The ethos of freedom con-

servatism, as epitomized by the statement released in July, grows from the philosophy of John Locke.

Locke's ideas, rooted in the Age of Enlightenment, emphasize individuals' inherent rights and freedoms as the bedrock of a just and prosperous society.

The spirit of freedom conservatism echoes Locke's profound belief in the sanctity of individual liberty, limited government, and the principles of free-market economics.

It upholds the conviction that a society governed by these ideals is conducive to personal fulfillment, autonomy, economic prosperity, and societal harmony.

By conserving freedom, we are aligning ourselves with the essence of Locke's Enlightenment ideals and serving as torchbearers of a virtuous tradition that has shaped the very fabric of America.

In a time when the values that once unified us are under siege, conservatives must rally together to reaffirm the crucial importance of individual liberty in safeguard-

ing our great nation's moral integrity and physical strength.

The American blend of capitalism and republicanism has proven to be a remarkable force in combating poverty and advancing societal progress.

The capitalist system, emphasizing free markets, competition, and private property rights, has fostered economic growth and opportunity.

Capitalism has unleashed unparalleled levels of prosperity by allowing individuals to innovate, invest, and pursue their own economic interests.

The system has lifted countless people out of poverty. Simultaneously, this American blend created the environment for advancements in civil rights, voting rights, and educational innovation and defeated authoritarian regimes abroad.

As some seek to make conservatism more relevant in American politics, now is not the time to abandon its rich history of preserving freedom.

Now is the moment to embrace freedom as a policy con-



By conserving freedom, we are aligning ourselves with the essence of Locke's Enlightenment ideals and serving as torchbearers of a virtuous tradition that has shaped the very fabric of America.

cept, not leave it.

That is why I define myself as a FreeCon — a freedom conservative.

I cannot begin to convey my gratitude for your support and encouragement. North Carolina is a special place. But you already know that.

Donald Bryson is CEO of the John Locke Foundation.

20 CARTOONS

