

THE CARRBORO  
CITIZEN

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confirmation,  
not a surprise

CHRIS FITZSIMON

The inside-the-beltline Raleigh political world is still buzzing about the Republicans' midnight special legislative session last week in which they lashed out at teachers by ending the automatic dues check-off for the North Carolina Association of Educators.

Monday a Superior Court Judge temporarily blocked the law after the NCAE filed a suit questioning its constitutionality.

The unannounced special session, held at 12:45 a.m. with one Democrat in the hospital and two others absent for health reasons, prompted a firestorm of criticism from both liberal and conservative editorial pages across the state, many citing the Republicans' pledge to bring transparency to the legislative process.

Conventional political wisdom holds that legislative process controversies don't resonate much with most voters, who don't keep up with all the inside-baseball stories.

Republicans are clearly counting on that. State GOP spokesman Rob Lockwood said last week that the public doesn't care how things are done in the General Assembly, they just care about the results.

That may be the GOP's public line, but they are clearly worried, judging from the panicked and bitter reaction of House Speaker Thom Tillis, who recently announced on his Facebook page that he was canceling his longtime subscription to the *Charlotte Observer* for its coverage of the midnight session.

He compared the *Observer* to road kill in his online rant.

Tillis and the Republicans have reason to be concerned. The last-minute, middle-of-the-night session was a clear abuse of the legislative process and most likely unconstitutional.

A Public Policy Poll taken after last week's shenanigans shows that voters overwhelmingly do not think the General Assembly should be meeting and making decisions in the middle of the night.

This episode only adds to the growing sense that this legislature is out of control, extreme and obsessed with its partisan and far-right ideological agenda.

Tillis tries hard in his town hall meetings and other public appearances to put a moderate face on the General Assembly, but few people are buying it.

This isn't the first time legislative leaders have refused to disclose what they will be considering in an upcoming special session. That's par for the course for the frequent special sessions.

Then there's the actual legislation they have passed, most notably a budget that fired teachers, slashed popular and effective early-childhood programs and gutted environmental protections.

Lawmakers also passed the most extreme anti-choice law in the country, part of which has already been put on hold by a federal judge.

They passed the most extreme and punitive voter-suppression law too. That was vetoed by Gov. Beverly Perdue.

And they approved the most extreme and far-reaching marriage discrimination amendment in the country that will go before voters in May. The theme is hard to miss.

This is not the thoughtful, pro-business, conservative General Assembly that Tillis would have us believe he leads.

It's a radical, out-of-control crowd of ideologues that will do anything to ram their right-wing agenda through.

Last week's outrageous midnight session was merely the latest confirmation of that.

Chris Fitzsimon is the executive director of N.C. Policy Watch.



## The pursuit of petty politics

For a group of people who say they're trying to help out job creators, the leadership of the N.C. General Assembly sure missed the boat last week.

I can't think of any better set of job creators than this state's educators, and what the legislature did to them in the after-midnight session last Thursday was just plain mean.

If you weren't following exactly what happened and have been a little confused about whether it was extra-constitutional or not, don't feel bad. It was a pretty confusing end to an already strange day in the legislature.

Here's a quick synopsis: The General Assembly was called back into town last Wednesday by the governor to consider her veto of a bill passed in the last min-session that repeals the Racial Justice Act. Early on Wednesday, the GOP-dominated Senate quickly voted to override the veto sending it to the House, which is a little more evenly split.

As the day wore on, it became apparent that the votes weren't there for an override, and ultimately an agreement was made to send the bill back to committee, ending the chances for an override vote. The session should have ended then and there, but it didn't. A lull ensued. To kill time, members even watched the Orange Bowl on the big screen that usually displays the vote tallies.

As the House and Senate lingered, there was some suspicion that something was up, and in fact, there was. When the adjournment resolution was finally offered, it indicated that the General Assembly would adjourn and then reconvene in a new session at 12:45 a.m. When Democrats objected, debate was cut off. Over in the Senate, similar objections were raised. Unlike veto overrides, which require three-fifths of the members present, an adjournment resolution just needs a simple majority, and both chambers signed off on the abruptly scheduled session.

Most people paying attention at this point, namely a weary Capital Press Corps and approximately 29 people following #NCGA on Twitter, were convinced the session would be aimed at some of the remaining vetoes in the GOP's veto garage. The possible targets for override included vetoes of a bill that would allow for fracking and offshore drilling, voter ID legislation and a bill eliminating automatic payroll deductions by educators for the N.C. Association of Educators.

When the new session finally started up about 1 a.m., the GOP had an advantage in the House. Earlier in the day, after a barrage of complaints, Gov. Beverly Perdue agreed to sign off

on a midterm replacement to a vacant GOP seat. The Democrats were missing Rep. Larry Womble, who is still in the hospital after a near-fatal car crash, and Rep. William Wainwright, who took ill late on Wednesday evening and went home.

Whether the majority failed to muster the votes needed for an override of the fracking/offshore drilling or the voter ID bills or was simply beginning to get twitchy about passing such things in the dead of night, those two overrides never came up for consideration.

In a quick party-line vote, the House leadership meted out political payback to the educators' organization and went home.

The move against the NCAE wasn't much of a surprise. Last summer, in a closed-door meeting in a room with an open mic, House Speaker Thom Tillis said the dues legislation would show the NCAE, which had supported mostly Democrats, "a little taste of what's to come."

What is a surprise to almost anyone who's paid attention to the machinations of Raleigh in the past few decades is how that act of revenge went down.

It's hard to imagine a more blatant and costly way of dealing with one's political enemies. To hold the legislature open an extra day at a cost of around \$50,000, while trashing any last shred of trust, ushers in the era of ultra-partisanship many of us have been predicting.

Now it will be difficult for any kind of "gentlemen's agreement" on what might be considered in the remaining two sessions scheduled for early this year. And with the elections rapidly approaching, it's hard to imagine that the short session that convenes in May will be anything but similar hijinks to what we saw last week.

Meanwhile, the fallout to the after-midnight session continues. Roundly criticized on the editorial pages, Speaker Tillis and his backers have taken to attacking the messengers. (He even canceled his *Charlotte Observer* subscription. That'll teach 'em.)

And the NCAE went straight to court and won a temporary injunction because a Wake County judge said the bill itself – let alone the process of the override that made it law – was likely unconstitutional.

We're in a new era now, one of raw politics and greater distrust. In the pursuit of petty politics, the group that rode into Raleigh last January promising greater transparency has shed themselves of that goal for good.



## Shelton Station good for Carrboro

JAMES CARNAHAN

On Jan. 24, the Carrboro Board of Aldermen will be considering the siting of Shelton Station, a mixed-use project with important economic and environmental considerations for all Carrboro residents.

Regardless of where you live in Carrboro, close to downtown or far beyond, and even if you don't often come downtown, increased economic activity in the downtown directly affects how much you pay to live in Carrboro. Shelton Station would bring a big increase in economic activity, helping to keep our cost of living down so that Carrboro is affordable to more folks. Projects like Shelton Station are exactly what we need to achieve a sustainable community.

A key objective expressed in Carrboro's Vision 2020, our blueprint for how the town changes and grows, is doubling the commercial square footage in the downtown. Thirteen years after Vision 2020 was adopted, residents still foot the bill for about 90 percent of services. As things stand, our property taxes are bound to go higher – this at a time when personal incomes are stagnating. My own property taxes have doubled since I moved here in 2002; my income hasn't matched that, and, at age 65, I'm not likely to experience an increase in income.

Recognizing the project's consistency with Carrboro's vision for downtown, the aldermen last November approved a zoning change requested by the developer, but postponed until Jan. 24 a decision on whether the zone could actually be used at the proposed site.

There is some opposition from residents adjacent to the proposed project; yet, if it were built as proposed, it would have many benefits for everyone living in Carrboro. The LEED-certified project would benefit us environmentally by having fewer carbon emissions and less stormwater runoff per resident, and it would benefit us economically by increasing and diversifying our tax base and providing customers for downtown retailers. If you care about sustainability in Carrboro, it is critical to let the aldermen know you want this exciting and innovative project to happen.

Increasing Carrboro's commercial tax base is a laudable goal, and is absolutely necessary for those of us living close to the bone. Sadly, the recession of 2008 has stymied construction of several projects that have already been approved for the downtown.

Now comes Shelton Station, offering Carrboro 115 apartments and 24,000 square feet of retail/office space, and the devel-

opers have their financing arranged. The apartments would house about 200 people within a very short walk of downtown businesses, services and bus routes. Shelton Station would put people to work in construction, provide office and retail space, boost the income of downtown merchants and contribute around \$160,000 in property taxes each year, divided among town, county and city schools coffers. And remember, rental property is taxed as commercial activity.

Our commercially zoned land is the very limited resource on which we as a community can expand our economic base. A speaker at the November public hearing said Shelton Station was too urban for our downtown – but urban is exactly the sort of built environment we said we wanted in downtown. "Build up, not out" is the prescription in Vision 2020, and we spent considerable time and effort figuring out how to do this to obtain a vibrant and livable outcome. In 2001, we collaborated to produce the detailed "Downtown Carrboro: New Vision," and then worked several years to enact changes to our development rules to implement it.

We did all this because we recognized that putting housing, businesses and civic amenities in walkable proximity is the best way to conserve our ecosystems. Multi-family buildings like Shelton Station are more efficient to heat and cool than detached, single-family dwellings – and that's even before you add all the "green" features the project will incorporate.

In downtown, we already pay for infrastructure, services, transit and parking. We can leverage these investments to achieve meaningful reductions in per-capita emissions of greenhouse gases if we upgrade public transit by adding evening, weekend, holiday and regional services, thereby eliminating the need to own a car altogether. To do this without increasing taxes on current residents, we have to expand the tax base by adding homes and businesses with projects like Shelton Station. Seniors, low-income residents, those with a disability and teenagers especially would then enjoy greater mobility and economic opportunities.

Carrboro hasn't had something new on its horizon for quite some time, so it's exciting that we are finally on the threshold of resuming our quest to expand our community's vitality and ensure our economic health while taking a big step in our efforts to address climate change and local sustainability.

James Carnahan is a founder of The Village Project and former chair of the Carrboro Planning Board.

## LETTERS

Find an  
alternative to CI

I live on George King Road in Durham County and I am writing to comment on the Durham-CH-Carrboro Metropolitan Planning Organization.

Please find an alternative to the CI proposal for the future light-rail transit routes, or any route that cuts through Significant Natural Heritage Areas. The state game lands, the waterfowl impoundment and also undeveloped private lands contain some of the last refuges for wildlife. We see coyotes, bobcats, foxes, owls, herons, bald eagles and many other native creatures. Also, on the border of the game lands are two gigantic loblolly pine trees (probably original growth forest) that ought to be protected and preserved. Please protect our wetlands; many small creeks flow into Little Creek that then flows into Jordan Lake, which is of course a primary source of drinking water for the surrounding area.

Thank you for your consideration.

KIM NOWOSAD  
Durham

Fracking claims  
misleading

Ms. Glasser ("Fracking too risky," 12/28/11) makes a number of misleading claims about hydraulic fracturing in a recent letter, not the least of which is that the technology is "incredibly dangerous." But the truth is, fracturing has been used more than 1.2 million times in North America over the past 65 years, safely and efficiently. It's a safety record that has been confirmed by the EPA more than a dozen separate times over the past 16 months.

As for the charge that fracturing causes methane to seep into drinking water, a recent study by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania found the opposite to be true. Indeed, as one of the researchers noted, "we didn't see any clear evidence of any impacts from hydraulic fracturing" relating to methane in water. Private water wells often do have naturally occurring methane in them, a phenomenon that's been documented by state regulators going back more than 100 years.

Finally, it's interesting that Ms. Glasser would allege water contamination in a play, *An Enemy of the People*, was "very likely" caused by hydraulic fracturing. That play was written by a Norwegian playwright in 1882, or more than six decades before the first natural gas well was ever fractured, which occurred in Kansas in 1947.

Hydraulic fracturing is helping to create hundreds of thousands of jobs and boost local economies, but even this incredible technology is not able to travel through time. At least not yet.

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