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2009 United Way campaign takes flight

By Kathryn Kennedy
The Daily Reflector

Thursday, July 16, 2009

The mood was lighthearted but the intent was serious Thursday morning as the United Way of Pitt County kicked off its Pacesetter Campaign at Pitt Community College.

Approximately 50 business and education leaders from public and private sectors departed from the student center as part of the "Soaring to New Heights" campaign theme. Invitations resembled boarding passes, the programs looked like passports and United Way staff dressed as flight attendants and airline personnel.

The Pacesetters will take the first step in this year’s efforts to create lasting change and address root causes of negative community conditions, said James Wagner, the agency’s marketing director.

The large employee bases at University Health Systems, East Carolina University and the Greenville Utilities Commission, with others, offer an indicator of how successful fundraising will be for the rest of the year, Wagner said.

“You are Pitt County’s champions,” said Etsil Mason, keynote speaker and former president of United Way of North Carolina. “And the fuel for this journey is money.”

The local United Way has also re-oriented its fundraising scheme this year. In the past, the organization would take donations and then give out that money to its funded agencies.

Donors can select an agency to benefit or a wider-ranging “vision council” — health, income, education or neighbors in crisis. The shift occurred after a survey indicated areas of concern that were consistent across Pitt County.

"Where we're going has the potential to bring about changes," said Mason. “The possibilities are endless because we have hundreds of capable groups. The work is daunting and we need everyone.”

The task is even more daunting as individuals and businesses alike are hit by tough economic times.

"The needs are even greater in Pitt County," Wagner said. "If everyone gives whatever they can, we can still create a lasting impact.”

Wagner said United Way doesn’t have a dollar amount it hopes to raise, but noted the organization aids the basic needs of one in four people in Pitt County. The nonprofit would like to keep that presence.

Contact Kathryn Kennedy at kkennedy@coxnc.com or (252) 329-9566.
Watchdog wants Easley hearing

Group calls its findings on contributions 'troubling.'

BY J. ANDREW CURLISS, Staff Writer

RALEIGH - A campaign finance watchdog group is urging the State Board of Elections to conduct an open hearing about the campaign activities of former Gov. Mike Easley, saying that new research raises questions about the campaign's handling of contributions.

Bob Hall, executive director of Democracy North Carolina, said his organization has found "two troubling patterns" -- one that involves travel and other expenses of the Easley campaign and another that used the state Democratic Party as a conduit for contributions to the Easley campaign.

State campaign laws do not allow a campaign supporter to give to a candidate through a third party, and there are limits on how much can be given during an election period.

A hearing would "address the mysteries surrounding these activities and bring into sharp focus any violations of the state's elections laws," Hall wrote in a letter this week to elections Chairman Larry Leake of Mars Hill. Leake could not be reached Thursday.

A spokesman for Easley declined to address questions about election laws. The spokesman, political consultant Ace Smith, said hearings are not warranted because the issue is being fueled by inaccurate or innuendo-laden stories in The News & Observer.
State elections officials are formally investigating the Easley campaign but have not commented on where the probe stands. Gov. Beverly Perdue, a Democrat, recently made her appointments to the board, which is made up of three Democrats and two Republicans. Easley is a Democrat who left office in January.

The elections board is scheduled to meet next week. As part of the inquiry, elections officials could exonerate the Easley campaign, fine it, refer possible criminal acts to prosecutors, or open a hearing to gather more detailed information.

Hall's organization, which advocates alternatives to special-interest financed campaigns, filed a formal complaint several years ago that led to hearings about the campaign activities of former House Speaker Jim Black, who is now in prison. Hall's group has been involved in highlighting the role of campaign money in such issues as road-building, hog farming and U.S. Senate races.

In the letter, Hall wrote that he has found details not previously reported in the media.

Hall said Democracy North Carolina's research found instances where donations were made by Easley supporters to the state Democratic Party, which then made in-kind contributions in the same or similar amounts to the Easley campaign. An in-kind contribution is generally one where a service is provided or other items are given in lieu of money.

One example involves men who provided air travel for Easley, including former N.C. State University trustee McQueen Campbell.

Hall highlighted that Campbell gave an in-kind contribution of $3,800 to the party on Oct. 16, 2004, and the same day another man who provided a plane for Easley, Cameron McRae of Kinston, gave an in-kind donation to the party of $1,250. That totals $5,050.

The same day, the Easley campaign reports an in-kind expense to the party in the amount of $5,100 for "In-Kind Travel," according to Hall.

In a previous interview, Campbell said he was not giving to Easley through the party and noted that the amounts given that day are not an exact match.

Another example highlighted by Democracy North Carolina is a donation from Grace Ramsey of Raleigh in the amount of $3,119 on Dec. 31, 2003, to the state party for "In-Kind Holiday Gifts."

On the same day, according to Hall's letter, the Easley campaign lists an in-kind donation from the state party in that amount and an expenditure of $3,119 for "In-Kind Holiday Gifts."

Hall notes that, at the time, Ramsey was married to Steve Stroud, the developer who owned property in Carteret County in which Easley would later acquire a lot. Stroud could not be reached Thursday.

Ramsey said in an interview that she recalls only that she was asked by someone -- she doesn't remember who -- to write a check, possibly for party favors. Her notes reflect that she actually wrote it on Jan. 4, 2004, she said.

"I don't know much more, and I'm sorry," she said.

Hall also notes that the campaign reports and other records indicate that reported donations
and travel or other services provided appear to either exceed limits for each election period or constitute donations by a corporation, which are banned in North Carolina.

The N&O detailed some apparent instances in a May 9 report. The spokesman for Easley, Smith, said wording used in that report was inaccurate because it referred to a $4,000 limit in an "election cycle." Under legal rules, the phrase "election cycle" covers both the primary election and a general election, which each have that $4,000 limit.

The N&O used "election cycle" to refer to a primary or a general election season.

Easley campaign reports and flight records indicate that some of the Easley supporters exceeded the $4,000 limit for either the primary or general election periods when in-kind donations, money donations or travel services that were provided in each period are added together.

A lawyer for the Easley campaign has declined to comment.

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Former NCSU provost speaks to grand jury

BY J. ANDREW CURLISS, Staff writer

RALEIGH - Former N.C. State University Provost Larry Nielsen testified before a federal grand jury for 2-1/2 hours Thursday and will return another day to continue testifying in the probe into issues surrounding former Gov. Mike Easley.

Nielsen's attorney, Thomas Manning of Raleigh, said his client did not complete his testimony by the end of Thursday because there has been a lot of material to cover. He will return today, Manning said.

Nielsen resigned as provost in May amid questions about his role in the hiring of former first lady Mary Easley.

"I have chosen to resign because of the intense public attention and criticism from my hiring of Mrs. Mary Easley and now because of questions surrounding the way I was hired as provost," Nielsen said in a letter to the NCSU community.

A report in The News & Observer showed that Nielsen hired Mary Easley in May 2005 while he was interim provost -- and was about to be replaced. Nielsen waived a job search, created a new position and hired Mary Easley for it two weeks later. Nielsen has said the idea and the decision were his alone, but people involved in that search and university life say a temporary provost would not create a new position and fund it without consulting others.

Contract canceled

A year ago, Nielsen retooled Easley's job and gave her a five-year, $850,000 contract that touched off months of controversy. That contract was terminated last month by the NCSU board of trustees.

Earlier Thursday, four officials from the Office of the State Auditor appeared at the federal courthouse. Among the officials was Lawen Becote, a lead investigator for the office.

Federal authorities have requested and received hundreds of pages of documents relating to an audit of Mary Easley's salary at N.C. State University. But those documents have never been released to the public.

The audit on Easley's salary was conducted by former state Auditor Les Merritt, a Republican, who shared it with NCSU officials. But current state Auditor Beth Wood, who defeated Merritt in November, chose not to release the report.

Wood, a Democrat, has said that the salary audit alleged Easley's $170,000 wage was not justified, but that NCSU officials responded with detailed comparisons.
Documents show the job was orchestrated at the highest levels of state government and included the direct involvement of then-Gov. Mike Easley.

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Panel wants an end to military smoking

BY JAY PRICE AND NAUREEN KHAN, STAFF WRITER

FAYETTEVILLE - The U.S. military's long, storied love affair with tobacco may be doomed.

The Pentagon, which actively promoted smoking during the two world wars and still subsidizes tobacco at PXs and commissaries, is considering a ban.

That's one recommendation from a panel led by a former dean of the School of Medicine at UNC-Chapel Hill that was asked by the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs how to reduce tobacco use in the military.

If Secretary of Defense Robert Gates accepts the group's suggestions, it would be a historic about-face for the likes of Camp Lejeune and Fort Bragg, where tens of thousands of young men and women learned to smoke amid a culture that regarded cigarettes as much a part of being a soldier or Marine as carrying a rifle.

"It's all I see on the bases," said Staff Sgt. Maritza Hunt, a squad leader at Fort Bragg.

Hunt, although not a smoker, was skeptical of how successful efforts to curb tobacco use would be.

"You have colonels and generals and all kinds of people who smoke," she said.

The military could end tobacco use within 20 years by gradually refusing entry to users, said Stuart Bondurant, dean emeritus of the School of Medicine at UNC-Chapel Hill.

"If the services take the full 20 years, practically everyone now in the military would be retired," he said.

The panel that Bondurant led issued a report in June that found that 22 percent of VA patients and 33 percent of active-duty troops use tobacco, compared with 20 percent of the U.S. population. Use is even higher among deployed troops.

Tobacco-related health problems cut into combat readiness and cost the military $846 million annually in medical care and lost productivity, and cost the VA another $6 billion, the report said.

The military and VA have for years tried to reduce smoking among soldiers and veterans; the
Pentagon announced in 1999 that it planned to reduce smoking rates by 5 percent a year by 2001 but didn't make it.

The panel calls for a more aggressive approach. It recommends major boosts to programs to help smokers quit, and eventual bans on tobacco use and sales on military installations. It also recommends an incremental approach to bringing only non-smokers into the services, beginning with the service academies, and lengthening the current ban on smoking during basic training. Eventually, all recruits would be told that they couldn't smoke.

Butts and bullets

For decades, military leaders supported smoking because they believed it steadied nerves, helped overcome tedium and maybe even brought a jolt of courage.

During World War I, Gen. John J. "Blackjack" Pershing said troops needed cigarettes as much as bullets, and the War Department bought up Bull Durham's entire production in 1918. In World War II, Army manuals urged commanders to smoke and push their troops to smoke; so many cigarettes were shipped to GIs -- they were even included in C-rations -- that there was a shortage in the U.S.

Both wars turned out to be terrific marketing programs for tobacco companies. The pro-smoking culture in the combat zones sharply boosted postwar smoking rates, an effect that may be showing up again. The panel found that after years of decline, the smoking rate among troops started rising again in 2005 and is highest among those who have seen combat.

The effects of smoking go well beyond the state's bases: North Carolina is home to more than three-quarters of a million veterans. Scott Shofer is a pulmonologist at the Durham VA hospital, which sees a parade of patients with smoking-related diseases such as emphysema, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and lung cancer.

"So many diseases are related to smoking that the amount of misery it creates is huge," said Shofer, who also works at Duke Medical Center.

Some World War II veterans Shofer has treated for lung cancer told him they started using those cigarettes in their C-rations out of boredom. Even now that the effects of smoking are better known, it's easy for young troops to brush off the risks, Shofer said.

Make lawmakers quit, too?

Soldiers milling at Cross Creek Mall during their lunch hour on Tuesday afternoon in Fayetteville, minutes from Fort Bragg, had mixed feelings about the committee's recommendations.

Spc. Brett Hicks, who smokes occasionally, said a ban on military bases would most likely improve health and readiness. "People smoke because they can't do anything else," Hicks said. "They smoke just to smoke, that's all."

Others, however, were adamant about protecting smokers' rights in the military.

"Why don't we tell members of Congress to stop smoking then?" said Sgt. 1st Class Bernard Book, 47. "Since when has the government worried about our health?"
Book, who has served in Iraq, added that many of his soldiers need the mental relief of smoke breaks. "You need things to take away the stress," he said.

Bondurant, the UNC doctor, said that big changes in the military's culture are possible.

"Many members of the committee have intimate ties with the military, and their view is that cultural change is going on right now and that this can be done," Bondurant said.

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The 'Marlboro Marine'

His name was James Blake Miller, but after the photograph of the battle-shocked lance corporal smoking after 12 hours of fighting in the November 2004 Battle of Fallujah ran on the front pages of more than 150 newspapers, he got a new name: the Marlboro Marine.

And that's how yet another war got its iconic image of an American GI smoking between firefight.

Los Angeles Times photographer Luis Sinco captured Miller as he started his first cigarette of the day. He and his squad had been pinned down on a rooftop all night, and the whole story was there in his eyes.

Miller survived the deployment and returned to Camp Lejeune and got married. A year after the battle, he was honorably discharged and took the war home with him to Kentucky. He was diagnosed with a severe case of post traumatic stress disorder and is tortured still by the symptoms.

Sinco tracked him down and wrote a moving tale for the Times, which can be read online at tinyurl.com/2wmhqq.

Staff writer Jay Price

Recommendations

The Institute of Medicine Committee on Smoking Cessation in Military and Veteran Populations recommends that Pentagon and Veterans Affairs leaders consider the following:

- Ending subsidized prices for tobacco products in commissaries and exchanges.
- Eventually stop selling tobacco products entirely.
- Start treating tobacco use as the military now treats alcohol abuse and poor physical fitness.
- Eventually ban tobacco use on all military property.
- Provide "barrier-free" access to cessation services to the military and to all VA staff and patients.
- Start a tobacco-cessation program at every health-care facility.
• Ban smoking, first for cadets entering the service academies and college students signing up for ROTC, then for all new recruits.

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