

Linda Cooper-Suggs

Media Report

Draft

June 17, 2022

Part I Introduction

This report reviews electronically available news stories on Linda Cooper-Suggs, a member of the NC House.

The Table of Contents in **Part II** of the report is a useful guide to the entire report and can be used as a stand-alone summary. In one section, it surveys the bulk of the news file, through the headlines we have assigned to each item.

Part III, the **Greatest Hits** section, identifies key points taken from available media articles.

Parts IV, **The News File**, contains edited copies of the most relevant electronically available stories.

We hope you find this useful.

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Part III Cooper-Suggs: Greatest Hits from Media

Professional Background

- 1975-Magna Cum Laude graduate, North Carolina Agricultural Technical State University in Home Economics/Education. (1975 Yearbook)
- Teacher in Early Childhood Education at Hunt High School in Wilson, NC. Retired in 2008. Returned as temporary instructor in 2010. (Wilson Daily Times, 4/25/10; 9/11/10)
- Treasurer, then Branch Secretary of Wilson County NAACP. (Wilson Daily Times, 2/18/08; 11/4/10)
- 2011-Named to Wilson County Board of Elections. (WDT, 7/12/11)
- 2017-Elected head of Wilson County Democratic Party. (WDT, 4/10/17)
- 2020-Appointed to NC House to fill remaining term of Jean Farmer-Butterfield. (WDT, 7/25/20)
- 2020-Defeated Mick Rankin, 52 to 48% to win a full term to the House. (WDT, 11/4/20)

Political Statements and Positions

2nd Amendment

In March 2020, Wilson County Commissioners passed a resolution declaring the county a “sanctuary” for the 2nd Amendment against any laws aimed at undermining 2nd Amendment rights. Cooper-Suggs spoke at the meeting against the resolution.

- Wilson County Democratic Party Chairwoman Linda Cooper-Suggs spoke against the resolution. She said the Constitution already guarantees the right to bear arms and it’s not necessary for commissioners to declare the county as Second Amendment sanctuary. (WDT, 3/3/20)

As a member of the Legislature, she voted against three Second Amendment measures while pushing for “common sense gun control.”

- Three gun measures passed the House this week that I opposed:
 - House Bill 48 allows certain EMT personnel to carry concealed weapons.
 - House Bill 49 allows a concealed carry permittee whose permit lapses to not have to take another firearms safety and training course upon applying for renewal.

- House Bill 134 includes the language of HB 48 and 49, but almost makes it legal to carry a weapon onto school property when that property is used as a church.
- We need common-sense gun safety reforms, and the sponsors of these bills were unable to answer questions on how these bills, in the real world, keep people safe. They are, instead, asking our most vulnerable to arm themselves instead of actively protecting them. If you disagree with these bills, contact the speaker's office and the office of other elected officials to advocate for safe gun laws in North Carolina. (Wilson Times, 3/13/21)

Hilary Clinton

- "This is not just historic, this is a life-changing experience right now with this one election, and we know that Hillary is the person that we want to represent our children, our grandchildren when she sits in that White House," Cooper-Suggs said. "We want them to be able to watch television and see her on TV so our kids can see somebody who is a strong role model for them." (WDT, 10/26/16)

Joe Biden

On Biden as a candidate for President.

- Cooper-Suggs said Democratic candidate Joe Biden's eight years as a vice president and decades of experience in the Senate as well as foreign relations is critical for the nation's future. "We need a president who has the ability and fortitude to realize that this is 'one nation' and that all people must be viewed as valuable," she said. "We need a president who can forge relationships with other countries and act in the best interest of this United States and realize this world is connected. We need a president that all of us can be proud of." (WDT, 5/28/20)

In terms of Biden's Presidential policies, she praised his illegal attempt to extend the eviction moratorium in the Summer of 2021 (blocked by the Supreme Court ultimately).

- Some good news came out of the White House last week. President Biden has announced that the national eviction moratorium will continue until early October. This new moratorium covers areas where spread of the delta variant of COVID-19 is high to substantial and will cover over 90% of North Carolina counties, including Wilson. Visit my Facebook page if you would like to see my press release on the eviction moratorium and housing crisis in North Carolina. (Wilson Times, 8/7/21)

Trump Policies

In the 2018 election, when Farmer-Butterfield was running against an independent conservative candidate, Ken Fotenot, Cooper-Suggs signed her name to a letter challenging Fontenot on where he stood on Trump policies.

- Do you support the direction that Donald Trump and the Republicans are taking our country? Do you support or oppose the \$1.8 trillion tax cut that Republicans gave to the rich and super-rich while claiming that the \$380 per year tax cut to \$60,000 wage earners justifies the enormous increase in the national debt? Do you care that thousands of Wilson County residents do not have health insurance and that insurance premiums are escalating every day under the Republican administration? (WDT, 10/21/18)

Medical Marijuana

- The North Carolina Compassionate Care Act, a bill currently being considered in the General Assembly, would “prioritize the protection of public health and safety in the creation of a system for the cultivation, processing and selling of medical cannabis.”.....
- ”We can relieve citizens by passing this bill,” Cooper-Suggs said. “Medical marijuana can bring needed pain relief to some patients if prescribed and used properly, and it has to be regulated.”
- Cooper-Suggs said access to medical marijuana will help patients escape dependency on opioids. ”We know that the opioids are easily abused and we have a major societal problem with opioid abuse,” she said. Cooper-Suggs said North Carolina should learn from the 36 states that have already found ways to legalize medical marijuana.
- ”We must guard against cannabis grown outside of a legal framework,” Cooper Suggs said. “As we see with Mr. Langley, everything is controlled. It is a controlled environment. We should carefully regulate it, and we should also prevent underage use once it is passed. And we should fund strong programs to educate potential users.”
- Cooper-Suggs said “we in the South should be the gold standard for implementing a framework that allows North Carolinians to benefit from raising, producing and selling cannabis.”
- The representative said safeguards should be put in place for medical marijuana that are even stronger than the state’s Alcohol Beverage Control system for liquor. ”Also, we should use the revenue to support a robust public health advocacy campaign,” Cooper Suggs said. The bill calls for some 10% of revenue from medical marijuana suppliers to be given to the state.
- ”I look forward to this bill, Senate Bill 711, coming to the House as we enter this short session so that we can relieve and also bring industry into North Carolina,” Cooper-Suggs said. “I am very positive about it. I hope that it can be a bipartisan bill, because it would benefit our state. It would benefit persons who are in pain, from small children with these grand mal seizures and how medical marijuana can help them and their families. I look forward to us working together to be able to pass this bill, so I am very positive.” (Wilson Times, 5/9/22)

Related to this she is for reducing marijuana penalties.

- Two local lawmakers have signed onto a bill to reduce the punishment for possession of small amounts of marijuana. State Rep. Linda Cooper-Suggs, D-Wilson, and Rep. James Gailliard, D-Nash, say their decision to support the legislation is about freeing up court officials and promoting equity in arrests and prosecution for marijuana use.
- "I'm not in favor of drug use by anyone," Cooper-Suggs said. "This is about state resources." Cooper-Suggs said if the legislation becomes law, court officials like public defenders and probation officers could turn their attention to higher priorities.
- "This is about taking down misdemeanors to infractions," Cooper-Suggs said. Cooper-Suggs and Gailliard are cosponsors of Rep. Kelly Alexander's House Bill 290, titled Make Certain Drug Offenses Infractions. (Wilson Times, 3/27/21)

Critical Race Theory

She voted against a ban on Critical Race Theory.

- House Bill 324: This bill tries to erase the history of all ethnic groups, races and genders. Instead of recognizing that we, our laws and our systems have blind spots, it pretends that oppression has not existed. We need to teach children to celebrate diversity, equity and inclusion so that they are prepared to be open and kind citizens of the world. That is why I voted against this bill. (WT, 5/15/21)

Enforcing Immigration Laws

- House Bill 62: I voted against this bill, which would null county policies and ordinances that limit or restrict enforcement of federal immigration laws. I believe that the federal government has the financial resources and manpower necessary to process its immigration laws, and there is no need to pull from local resources. (WT, 3/13/21)

Parental Bill of Rights

She voted against an identical bill to the one passed in Florida.

- Unfortunately, last week, my Senate colleagues also passed House Bill 755, which they are calling the "Parental Bill of Rights." It is unconscionable to have created and passed this bill on the first day of Pride Month. North Carolina's educators have the tough job of preparing our children for the future and helping them build the critical thinking skills they need to succeed. I believe that curriculum should be set by educators, not by partisan politicians with political agendas. (Wilson Times, 6/4/22)

COVID Policy

As a candidate in 2020, Cooper-Suggs was against curbing executive branch power (in this case Cooper) regarding emergency situations.

- The legislature's role is to fund the priorities that are most important: health care, public schools, broadband expansion, unemployment compensation and helping businesses forced to shut down. The governor and his public health team need to respond to changing data and advice quickly, not wait for the often slow legislative process. During this pandemic, this is a whole state approach, not district. We must continue to work across the aisle in a bipartisan way. (WT, 10/1/20)

She was opposed to the halting of accepting Federal unemployment money.

- Unfortunately, the House voted to stop accepting unemployment benefits from the Federal government in Senate Bill 116. This means that residents of North Carolina will only receive state unemployment benefits, of which the average weekly payout is \$216, effective 30 days after the bill would become law.
- I find this unconscionable. I know that there are still many people in Wilson County and North Carolina who are still struggling to make ends meet. The past year has caused all of our circumstances to change.
- We need to look at the real problems with employment numbers, low minimum wages and lack of child care, among other factors, instead of putting the blame on those who are already hurting. (Wilson Times, 6/5/21)

Minimum Wage

- For every North Carolinian, a livable wage is essential. We need to up the minimum wage in stages over the next few years to increase pay for hourly workers. Our state minimum wage has been stuck at \$7.25 since 2009, while the cost of housing and other essential goods and services continue to rise. For working families, \$7.25 an hour is not even close to what is needed to get by. If you are working full-time, you should not live in poverty and you should not need to rely on government assistance. (WT, 9/4/21)
- House Bill 705, which would set the minimum wage for our first responders to \$15 an hour. Our first responders put their lives in danger every day to keep us safe. Let's pay them a living wage. (WT, 5/1/21)

Police Video Disclosure

- State Reps. James Gailliard, D-Nash, and Linda Cooper-Suggs, D-Wilson, cosponsored House Bill 698, which would subject police video to public disclosure 48 hours after footage is recorded. (WT, 4/29/21)

Medicaid Expansion

- “It’s a no-brainer. Expansion brings federal money into North Carolina. That money will expand health coverage, create health care jobs, shore up rural hospitals and lower costs for everyone by reducing uncompensated care. Positive results in COVID and health care are being experienced in the 39 states that have Medicaid expansion. When denying health care, you are denying life, which is guaranteed by the Constitution.” (WT, 10/1/20)

Investing in Schools

- As many of you know, I taught in Wilson County Schools and Wake County Schools for more than 30 years. In that time, I have seen the General Assembly treat teachers with dignity, and I have the General Assembly treat teachers poorly. In the past decade, more than 8,000 teacher assistant positions were eliminated. We no longer invest in our educators’ careers by paying for their master’s degrees. Our classrooms are overcrowded and our teachers are underpaid. In 2021, North Carolina ranked 33rd in the country for teacher pay, according to the National Education Association rankings. For starting salaries, we’re ranked 43rd.
- Most importantly, North Carolina is 39th in how much we invest per student. The state that we all love is falling behind, our students are falling behind, and it is because the General Assembly is not doing what we need to ensure a quality public education for our children.....
- The best way to lift up our students and teachers as they make their way through our public education system is to make public education a bigger priority than cutting taxes for corporations and the wealthy. State investment in public schools helps all students, no matter where they live. That is why I am working for a state budget that will help close the urban-rural gap in education, provide a recurring 2% cost-of-living adjustment for retirees and provide a meaningful increase in pay for teachers and school staff that will make a real difference in their lives.
- Investments in our public schools make our area more attractive for job creators because all employers want a trained workforce. Investments in teacher and public employee pay will make its way to our small businesses in Wilson. That money will be spent by workers and teachers locally at restaurants, stores and other businesses. Education investments will help our area a lot more than tax cuts for higher-income people and corporations, especially because many of those are out-of-state or concentrated in cities.
- The urban-rural gap in education is real, and we must address it. A good first step to take would be to pass a state budget that will help Wilson County Schools, students, teachers and our community. (Wilson Times, 6/25/21)

School Nurse Bill

- The National Association of School Nurses would rather see one school nurse for every 750 students. Wilson County Schools' six nurses each have four schools. A bill in the N.C. General Assembly would drastically improve the ratio. House Bill 347, cosponsored by Rep. Linda Cooper-Suggs, D-Wilson, aims to place one nurse in each school in districts across the state.
- Cooper-Suggs said she chose to join the legislation filed by Rep. Cynthia Ball, D-Wake, because she "truly believes in my heart (in) one school, one nurse."
- One nurse covering several schools may not be able to respond quickly to medical emergencies, Cooper-Suggs said. "We know that emergencies are not scheduled, especially for our children or even for the adults who may be there," she said. "Schools, for many of our children, are like a walk-in clinic, which means that many children who suffer from (health conditions), whether it is going to be obesity, asthma, autism, eating disorders, food allergies or ADHD or other illnesses.
- "Nurses are there not only to help from a medical standpoint, but also just counseling our children as to the importance of these medications or other things that they could do to improve their quality of life at a very young age."
- Cooper-Suggs said "children do not leave their health care needs at the door. Sometimes even the adults need to go in to be seen by the nurse as they begin their day," she said. "I support the bill and we need resources to help pay to have enough nurses for every school in Wilson County for our Wilson County children." (WT, 4/26/21)

Part IV Cooper-Suggs: The News File, 2008-22

2008

FEB 2008 Installed as Treasurer of Wilson County NAACP

THE WILSON COUNTY Chapter of the NAACP installed the following officers at its meeting Sunday night: President: the Rev. Alonzo Braggs First Vice President: the Rev. Theodore Woolridge Second Vice President: Ada R. Harris Secretary: Earline Copeland Assistant Secretary: Linda Cooper-Suggs Treasurer: Brenda Avery Assistant Treasurer: the Rev. Patricia Simmons Parliamentarian: George Leach. (Wilson Daily Times, 2/18/08)

NOV 2008 Planning to Attend Inauguration

Although President-elect Barack Obama has only just won the election, planning has been in the works by many in Wilson to go to his inauguration in January.

The Wilson branch of the NAACP began planning its trip a couple of weeks ago, and the staff at the Sallie B. Howard School for the Arts and Education has been planning to go since September.

"Everybody, everywhere I go is asking about going up to Washington," said Linda Cooper-Suggs, one of the organizers of the NAACP trip. "It is wild. People are so happy and don't want to miss out on this historic inauguration,"

U.S. Rep. G.K. Butterfield of Wilson said his phone has been ringing off the hook with questions about the inauguration.

The NAACP has booked one bus so far, which is almost full. They said they will add buses as more people request to go. The NAACP said the package it is offering for the trip to D.C. includes tickets to the swearing in, which are very difficult to get, as well as going to the inaugural parade and a "From the Dream to the Promise" reception.

The NAACP trip is an overnight stay, and the hotel room is also included in the cost.

Cooper-Suggs said those who want to go have to make their request in a hurry because demand is high.

"The thing everyone must remember is that hotel rooms up there are running out already," she said. "We are guaranteed rooms for the bus we have now. We will make sure we can accommodate everyone with the whole package before we start adding buses." (Wilson Daily Times, 11/6/08)

2009**SEP 2009 Hired, Hunt High School as Temporary Day Care Teacher**

Each month the Wilson County Board of Education releases its personnel list, which shows employees who have been hired or resigned from the system during the past month. Because school administrators and teachers touch the lives of so many people, The Wilson Times publishes the list each month to help the community keep up with the comings and goings in the school system.

Hirings

Linda Cooper-Suggs, temporary day care teacher, Hunt High (Wilson Daily Times, 9/22/09)

2010

APR 2010 Hired, Hunt High School as Temporary Teacher

Each month the Wilson County Board of Education releases its personnel list, which shows employees who have been hired or resigned from the system during the past month. Because school administrators and teachers touch the lives of so many people, The Wilson Times publishes the list each month to help the community keep up with the comings and goings in the school system.

Hirings

Linda Cooper-Suggs, temporary family and consumer science teacher, Hunt High (Wilson Daily Times, 4/25/10)

SEP 2010 Former Full-Time Hunt Instructor

Most seniors don't dream of graduating from high school just so they can return four years later as a teacher. But this is precisely what Melody Parker aspired to do when she graduated from Hunt High School in 2006.

"This is just a great school," she said. "I love the relationship everyone has with one another."

After graduation from high school, Parker attended East Carolina University's teaching fellows program. Now, she's an early childhood education instructor at Hunt.

"It's called a high school laboratory center and it's designed to prepare high school students for a career in the early childcare profession," she said.

The two-year program is available to students at Hunt and Beddingfield high schools. Upon completing the program, students will have earned credentials to go toward acquiring a degree in early childhood education.

"It's a five-star program," she said.

While Parker wasn't involved in the program during her time at Hunt, she credits former ECE instructor, Linda Cooper Suggs, with inspiring her to pursue a career in the field.

"She taught some of the teen leadership, parenting and child development, and food and nutrition classes I was in," she said. "And she is actually the person who inspired me to go into family and consumer sciences education, so it's kind of crazy that I was brought in to take over for her."

Parker was hired to take Suggs' place when she retired from the school's vocational education department last year. "She was my inspiration," she said. (Wilson Daily Times, 9/11/10)

NOV 2010 Branch Secretary, County NAACP

The Wilson branch of the NAACP will elect a new slate of officers today. Polls are open from 3 to 8 p.m. at the Charles Branford Center. The meeting will start at 7 p.m. and election results should be announced by 8:30 p.m.

To vote, NAACP members must be 30-days current. To find out their status, members can call Linda Cooper Suggs, branch secretary, at 290-0905. (WDT, 11/4/10)

2011

JUL 2011 Named to Wilson County Board of Elections

The Wilson County Board of Elections will have all new members. Linda Cooper-Suggs, Chip Futrell and Bob Brown will replace former board chair Donna Simms, secretary Russ Britt and Edward A. Wyatt.

Simms and Wyatt are Democrats. Britt is a Republican.

Cooper-Suggs, Futrell and Brown are expected to be sworn in July 19 by Wilson County Clerk of Court Andrew J. Whitley at the Board of Elections office, 112 E. Douglas St.

Cooper-Suggs and Futrell are both Democrats. Brown is a Republican.

The process is that whichever party the governor is gets the majority on the board of elections.

The executive committees of both Democrat and Republican parties take nominations and send the names of those with the most votes to the state chair of their party. The state chair then makes a recommendation to the county.

The new board usually will elect a chair and secretary at their first meeting after members have been sworn in.

Although they represent two parties, they all have a lot in common. Each has worked at the polls and volunteered during elections for years. And they each said it is an honor to serve the community on the board.

Futrell said he told the head of the Democratic party he was ready to do committee work, but didn't expect to be asked about the board of elections.

"It's an exciting opportunity," Futrell said. "I believe in giving back to the community, and here is a chance for me to do that."

Brown said when he got word he was nominated he thought right away it was a good thing to do.

"I've been involved with the election process in different ways," Brown said. "My wife served on the board many years ago so I have an idea of what is in store."

Brown has even gone to some of the training sessions with his wife and has been reading the manual. He said he is looking forward to attending the classes again.

Brown said he hasn't had many conversations with people who don't vote.

"I guess if a person doesn't vote there is no reason for them to believe in the process," Brown said. "I have talked to some people occasionally when making phone calls that say they don't vote."

But Brown said the part of the process most neglected is the primary elections.

”Often people won’t vote in the primary and vote in the general election,” Brown said. “It’s their right to help select the candidate of their party. So participate in the primaries as well as the general elections.”

Cooper-Suggs said she wishes everyone who is eligible to vote would register and vote.

”The only way we can change the lives of people is to vote,” Cooper-Suggs said. “It is the only way we can let those in power know what our wishes are. The beautiful thing is that it doesn’t matter what you look like, what your party affiliation, make your voice heard and vote.”

Cooper-Suggs said she learned the importance of making her voice heard while she was a student at N.C. A&T.

”We were told the names of the HBCUs were going to be changed,” Cooper-Suggs remembered. “Well, we went to Raleigh to stand together to let those who were going to change the names of the school (know) we didn’t want that. We let our voices be heard and our wishes were granted. That made a great impact on me.”

Cooper-Suggs said from that moment on she has urged people from every political party to vote to have their voice heard.

”From the beginning of this country, people of all races fought and died for the privilege of voting,” Cooper-Suggs said. “No matter who you are, no matter what your race, somebody fought for your right to vote. Everyone should vote.” (WDT, 7/12/11)

2012

MAY 2012 Concerned About How Early Voting Worked

Now that the election is over and unofficial winners have been declared, some voters complained exercising their right to vote wasn't as smooth as it could have been.

In one case, Linda Cooper-Suggs, secretary to the board, followed two senior citizens to their polling place to make sure they had the opportunity to vote in Tuesday's primary election.

Cooper-Suggs said an elderly couple came to the board of elections around 9 a.m. to find out where they should vote and were told to go to the Wilson County Health Department.

"They returned here around noon and they had this expression on their faces and I knew something was wrong," Cooper-Suggs said. "I asked them what had happened and was everything alright? They were told at the health department that they could not vote there because they needed a transfer."

So, Cooper-Suggs said they came back to the board of elections where they had been hours earlier to get transfer papers.

Transfer papers are only needed when a person has moved 30 days before an election, according to Rena' Morris, board of elections director.

"If a voter has been moved more than 30 days, they can go to their old precinct and get a transfer form, and go to their new precinct and then vote on the machine," Morris said.

But Cooper-Suggs said what troubled her is that the elderly man was asked to get a transfer form and was at the correct precinct.

"What bothered me was the man, who is in his 80s, was registered to vote at the health department. I looked his information up personally," Cooper-Suggs said. "The lady was the person who had the difficulty because she had moved from another address. But both of them were sent away."

Cooper-Suggs said she decided to follow them to the health department while some of the board of elections staff figured out the issues for the elderly woman.

Cooper-Suggs said a staff member called ahead and explained the uses for a transfer form that would allow the woman to vote so there would be a better experience that time.

"When we went back to health department, a person there still was asking what precinct was the elderly man coming from -- still not understanding that he had voted there in previous elections and was eligible to vote there right then," Cooper-Suggs said. "Eventually they both voted, which was a good thing."

Cooper-Suggs is concerned that in the upcoming general election the same thing could happen.

”What I don’t want to happen is for someone who is eligible to vote get discouraged and not vote,” Cooper-Suggs said.

She and Morris said anyone who has moved needs to come to the board of elections right away to report that they have moved.

If a person has moved and comes to a precinct to vote, they don’t have to leave if they don’t want to, Morris said.

”If they don’t want to get a transfer form, they don’t have to,” Morris said. “They can be given a provisional ballot and it is just as good.”

Morris said many people came to the board of elections Tuesday thinking there was still one-stop voting, but it ended Saturday.

She said many ended up registering to vote, and that was all they could do at this point. In Wilson County, voter turnout was almost 37 percent. (WDT, 5/9/12)

2016

OCT 2016 Calls Hilary Clinton a Role Model

When Jakiera Dupree starts kindergarten, her aunt hopes she'll know former President Bill Clinton by a different title -- the first gentleman.

Mary Ellis handed her 3-year-old niece to Clinton during a Tuesday campaign stop in downtown Wilson. The two-term president and husband of Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton flashed a wide smile as he hoisted Jakiera and greeted her warmly.

"It was very exciting," said Ellis, a Wilson County Democratic Party volunteer. "My niece, she made history."

Two prominent Wilson politicians -- U.S. Rep. G.K. Butterfield and former Gov. Jim Hunt -- welcomed Clinton to the city and escorted him on a stroll down Nash Street, where he shook hands and posed for pictures with supporters.

Clinton was between scheduled stops in Rocky Mount and Goldsboro on the "Stronger Together" bus tour and made the unannounced visit to Wilson shortly after 12:30 p.m. Wilson police blocked off downtown streets and two N.C. Highway Patrol cars led the jet-black tour bus to the Imagination Station, where the former president disembarked.

"It was very important for him to come through at a time like this, because right now we want everybody to get out and vote," said Linda Cooper-Suggs, a retired teacher and office manager of the Wilson County Democratic Party's headquarters. "We want everybody to be excited about it. I think this just brought more and more excitement to people here in Wilson because we understand what's taking place."

Hillary Clinton and running mate Tim Kaine, a U.S. senator from Virginia, have a 5-point polling lead over Republican opponents Donald J. Trump and Mike Pence, according to RealClearPolitics' average of recent national polls.

Clinton supporters said 2016 will go down in the history books as the year the United States elected its first female president.

"This is not just historic, this is a life-changing experience right now with this one election, and we know that Hillary is the person that we want to represent our children, our grandchildren when she sits in that White House," Cooper-Suggs said. "We want them to be able to watch television and see her on TV so our kids can see somebody who is a strong role model for them." (WDT, 10/26/16)

2017**APR 2017 Elected Head of Wilson County Democrats**

Tireless trailblazer Betty McCain passed the torch of leadership during the Wilson County Democratic Party's annual convention Saturday.

Linda Cooper-Suggs, who's served as party headquarters manager and is a former Hunt High School teacher, was unanimously elected chairwoman during the meeting at the Wilson County Courthouse.

"I know she'll do a wonderful job," said McCain, a longtime Democratic stalwart who was elected to chair the party in May 2015. "We have a wonderful team now that is very diverse. I think they're going to do a wonderful job."

In announcing Cooper-Suggs' nomination, the 86-year-old McCain joked about her age and alluded to a need for fresh leadership.

"Now, y'all know I am 100 years old," she exaggerated with a wry grin. "I am not running again."

Cooper-Suggs said she'll work with her fellow officers to form coalitions and advocate for Wilson County residents' needs while boosting voter turnout in an effort to paint purple-state North Carolina a bright shade of blue.

"It's about helping all of our people," she said, "whether it's about family issues, issues of human rights, environmental issues, economic development, even the immigration issue."

Joining Cooper-Suggs on Wilson County Democrats' executive committee are Jim Hawley, first vice chair; Beth Punte, second vice chair; Erick Jenkins, third vice chair; Travis Patterson, secretary; and Tom Sallenger, treasurer.

Party members elected five of the six candidates recommended by the nominating committee. Willie Lucas withdrew his nomination as third vice chairman when Jenkins threw his hat in the ring. (WDT, 4/10/17)

2018

MAR 2018 County Convention Planned

Elected officials, community leaders and residents will gather Saturday for the annual Wilson County Democratic Convention.

"The purpose of the convention is to educate and energize the people in Wilson County," said Wilson Democratic Party Chairwoman Linda Cooper-Suggs.

The convention will kick off at 10 a.m. at the Wilson County Courthouse. Anita Earls, a candidate for the N.C. Supreme Court, will talk about her background and her campaign. Earls was a key litigator fighting restrictions on voting rights and gerrymandered redistricts, and Cooper-Suggs said the Durham lawyer has a proven reputation that would lead her to enforce the laws fairly if elected.

Several Democratic candidates are slated to attend the event, but Cooper-Suggs said the convention is a chance to take a broad look at the future for Wilson and beyond.

"We're going to give updates in terms of how the county is looking politically and what our goals are," she said. "We're also going to discuss the redistricting with District 4 in the Senate and organizing Democrats in all 24 precincts."

The free event is open to Democrats, unaffiliated voters and residents interested in joining the Democratic Party.

"There is a lot at stake and people need to hear about why it is important to get involved in the party," Cooper-Suggs said. "Our party is designed to help all people, whether Hispanic, elderly or our schoolchildren. We're focused on improving everyone's lives and improving day-to-day lives with regard to minimum wage and jobs.

"People need to hear about this, so they can understand what is at stake and why every vote counts."

For more information about the event or the local party, visit www.WilsonNCDems.com.

"I'm just excited because there are so many things going on in America, in the state of North Carolina and in Wilson County," Cooper-Suggs said. (WDT, 3/12/18)

MAR 2018 Predicts "Blue Tsunami"

All three Democrats running for Wilson County sheriff -- incumbent Calvin Woodard and challengers Chris Boykin and Dinise Williams -- were in attendance and gave brief remarks at the convention. The top Democrat will face Republican sheriff hopeful Kevin Raper in November.

George Leach, the Wilson NAACP political action committee chairman, spoke on behalf of state Rep. Jean Farmer-Butterfield, D-Wilson, who is seeking a ninth term and could not attend due to illness.

County party Chairwoman Linda Cooper-Suggs called on Democrats to support Farmer-Butterfield, who could face a challenge from unaffiliated conservative candidate Ken Fontenot if Fontenot gathers enough petition signatures to secure his spot on the ballot. She noted that the state and local Republican Party had endorsed Fontenot, who is a middle school teacher and pastor.

"I think they really feel that because he's African-American, somehow they're going to pull us in, but we know we're much smarter than that," Cooper-Suggs said. "We know what we have to do. We have to keep one person in that seat for District 24, and that is Rep. Jean Farmer-Butterfield."

Campaign manager Marc O'Hara gave brief remarks on behalf of Ken Romley, a Raleigh Democrat challenging Republican U.S. Rep. George Holding in the 2nd Congressional District.

RIDING A BLUE WAVE?

Saturday's convention served as more than a parliamentary meeting for the election of delegates to state and district conventions. It also gave party officials and candidates the opportunity to fire up Wilson Democrats as state and local campaigns get underway.

Cooper-Suggs predicted dissatisfaction with President Donald Trump, the Republican-controlled Congress and the GOP-led General Assembly would lead to decisive Democratic wins.

"There's not only a blue wave, we will call it a blue tsunami," she said. "It's coming, and we're part of it." (WDT, 3/26/18)

OCT 2018 Interviewed on Election

With early voting starting on Oct. 17, leaders in the local Democratic and Republican parties are hard at work to ensure their respective candidates prevail at the polls.

The Wilson Times picked the brains of the Wilson County Democratic Party's chairwoman, Linda Cooper-Suggs, and the Wilson County GOP's chairwoman, Christy Fyle, to compare the party strategies heading into the Nov. 6 Election Day. Each was given the same questions and 100 words to answer. Here are the responses:

When did you start developing the Wilson County strategy for the general election? What are the most important components?

COOPER-SUGGS: The Wilson County strategy for this general election began with the formation of the Democratic Party. These strategies have evolved throughout all of the past elections from the sheriff's race, board of education, commissioners, city councilmen, state and national elections. We have learned the importance of inclusion.

Fusion politics (inclusion) is the most important component. Accepting one another and realizing that all of us are concerned about some of the same issues.

FYLE: Our strategy has been developing over the last several years. The strategy is not based on individual elections but on a continuous improvement that never ends. The strategy is simple. Be everywhere talking to everyone about our candidates and the achievements Republicans have made in the last several years. Specifically, achievements in individual freedom, economic growth, less regulation and being pro-America. We welcome people to get involved.

What do you feel are the most important races to your party in Wilson? What is the party doing to secure those seats?

COOPER-SUGGS: All of the races are important. Whether at the national, state or local level, decisions are being made that affect the quality of life and the growth of our community. We must not forget that through our local races, policies are established concerning the direction and future growth of our county.

- Working together - being inclusive of all coalitions and entities who share our platform.
- Energizing our base and communicating to the public that the Democratic Party has “heart for the people.”
- Continuing to be progressive in our efforts and forward thinkers, not being mean-spirited.

FYLE: The Wilson County Republican Party views each race as important in its own right. Each one of the constituents in this county has their own priorities for which race is important. It is the Wilson County Republican Party’s job to ensure every citizen has the information to make informed decisions at the polls. That is why we are using many strategies to get information to the voter. Go vote conservative.

How will securing party victories in Wilson affect the General Assembly? How would that affect decisions in Washington?

COOPER-SUGGS: A victory in the General Assembly will affect Wilson by putting a progressive team in place who understands the plight of all people. That is why it is important to get out to vote in this election. When the people of Wilson vote, they need to realize that they are affecting change in our educational system, health care, environment and that the future of this county, state and nation is also being affected. When Wilson wins, it gives us a unified front so that when we go to Washington concerning an issue, we know that our voices will be heard.

FYLE: GOP victories in Raleigh will help keep the gains made for the North Carolina economy. When Republicans won both chambers of the General Assembly, our state had the seventh-worst climate for business. Today, we’re in the top 10 with the best business climate. Before 2010, our state reserves were depleted. The U.S. economy is seeing its best economic growth in decades, despite the protestations from an immediate past president that 1 to 2 percent growth was as good as it was going to get.

Do you feel this election is a referendum on the president’s performance? How does your party plan to address that?

COOPER-SUGGS: Absolutely not. This election is a referendum on democracy in America, the Democratic Party system and party-style politics. “Do we help those in need or do we help those who seek

greed at the expense of the masses?” By showing people that the Democratic Party has the concerns of individual people at heart and continuing to get our community involved in all elections.

FYLE: Elections are always referendums on the performance of our elected institutions. Republicans are proud of the fact we have a far better regulatory and tax climate that we did just two years ago, as evidenced by the recent 4.1 percent growth in GDP, the best in decades. For further evidence, we’ve seen a dramatic drop in unemployment in the African-American and Hispanic communities - a fact that members of the other party refused to applaud when the president announced this in the State of the Union speech.

What do you feel is the largest threat to the party right now? What do you think is the party’s greatest asset?

COOPER-SUGGS: The largest threat to the Democratic Party right now is apathy - non-participation in the political process combined with the feeling of indifference and helplessness. People who are not voting is also a great threat. Democrats must remember: If we vote, we win. Our party’s greatest asset, as stated in previous questions, is inclusion. We pride ourselves on working together while following our ideals to create a better life for all people.

FYLE: The largest threat to the Republican Party is the inaccurate, misleading and false information provided to the public about the Republican Party’s policy direction. Since the Republicans have established pro-growth policies, the economy and individual American lives have improved. Our greatest asset would be highlighting these economic facts and the prosperity it has brought to the American people.

If someone is unsure about political affiliation, why should he or she vote for your party?

COOPER-SUGGS: Voters must first decide what is important to them. They need to ask themselves this question, “What are you looking for and what are you looking to do?” We win by influencing the hearts and minds that we come in contact with. We realize that voting is a numbers game. Our elections are about the popular vote but the real game is about the electoral college, and to make a difference, you must decide what your moral standard will be. Once that decision is made, then you will see the direction in which you must travel.

FYLE: Republicans have a long history of providing individual freedom, economic prosperity, lower taxes and less regulation. Our core values are conservative in nature, and we pride ourself on being diverse within our party. We value the Constitution and the rule of law applied impartially to everyone. We feel these values represent the majority of voters whether they are registered as Republicans, unaffiliated or Democrat. We encourage anyone with questions to stop by our headquarters at 2000 Nash St., Unit B. (WDT, 10/1/18)

OCT 2018 Signs Letter Ripping Butterfield Opponent

We read your recent letter critical of your Democratic opponent, incumbent Rep. Jean Farmer-Butterfield. As friends who have known Jean for many years, we write to set the record straight with respect to her character, integrity and residence.

Your background reveals that you are a teacher, husband, father and a believer in Almighty God. From all appearances, you are a fine young man who has been influenced by the Republican Party to oppose a longstanding, effective legislator; one who has deep roots in Wilson County. The Republican Party declined to nominate a Republican candidate to oppose Farmer-Butterfield. You and the Republican chairman have both acknowledged that the Republican Party recruited you to do what they are unwilling to do.

In The Wilson Times, you called it “comical” for Rep. Farmer-Butterfield to have a second residence. You mentioned that Jean is not seen at Walmart or Harris Teeter. We suppose some in Wilson could say they have never met you or heard of you prior to this campaign. The fact of the matter is that you have lived in Wilson for four years; your home is in West Wilson (your cellphone area code is 708) and Farmer-Butterfield’s home is in eastern Wilson County. You should be ashamed to suggest that because a person doesn’t frequent the places you frequent that a conclusion can be made they live in the county.

Perhaps you don’t know the facts about your opponent. We will share some of those with you so that you will see that your opponent has devoted her life to her faith, family and community.

When Jean Farmer was born, there were no public schools for African-American children in rural Wilson County. The Wilson County Board of Education didn’t want to provide educational opportunities for black children. The only available education consisted of Rosenwald Schools financed by a wealthy white man named Julius Rosenwald.

Jean’s parents were some of the best human beings you would ever want to meet. They produced eight children and wanted the very best education for their children. Realizing there were no public schools in rural Wilson County, they joined with another family member who also had eight children (Mark Sharpe) and used the federal courts to force Wilson County to build public schools for African-American children. That’s when Speight and Springfield high schools were constructed. This enabled the Farmer and Sharpe children and thousands of black children to receive a high school education.

After Jean Farmer graduated from high school, she received her college degree and master’s degree and returned to her beloved Wilson County. She was a wife, mother and community leader long before you were born.

Throughout her adult life, Jean Farmer-Butterfield has worked a full-time job in Raleigh and serves as senior director of a major statewide nonprofit. Prior to that assignment, she was developmental disabilities coordinator and manager with the Wilson-Greene Mental Health Center.

What you and your supporters must know is that Rep. Farmer-Butterfield continues to work a full-time job in Raleigh. Her duties as a state representative are part-time but demanding. Because of her very demanding schedule, Jean finds herself driving to Gardners Township late at night, which is unsettling to her family.

Consequently, Jean decided to invest in real estate some 20 minutes from her two jobs and overnight during the week at that location. It is commonly known in the legislative community that many legislators own and occupy second homes for their convenience and safety. Why would you make a political issue

out of the decision of this great woman to invest in real estate and reside near her workplace during the week?

You suggest that Rep. Farmer-Butterfield lives in a “high tower.” What do you mean when you make that statement? The price that Jean paid for her second home should be of no concern to you. She deserves a nice home after working so hard for more than 40 years. She makes a good salary and has preserved her resources to purchase real estate or any other asset she desires. That’s the American dream.

You must know that not only has your opponent been a full-time mental health professional and state representative. She was the primary caregiver for her wonderful parents until their recent deaths. Perhaps you have never experienced a demanding schedule of commuting 60 miles to work important jobs, and returning home to care for two aged parents.

Please know that your political campaign has taken an unfortunate turn by recklessly denigrating the character and integrity of one who has given (and continues to give) so much to her family and community. You should campaign on the issues that face the hardworking people of Wilson County.

Where are you on the issues? Do you support the direction that Donald Trump and the Republicans are taking our country? Do you support or oppose the \$1.8 trillion tax cut that Republicans gave to the rich and super-rich while claiming that the \$380 per year tax cut to \$60,000 wage earners justifies the enormous increase in the national debt? Do you care that thousands of Wilson County residents do not have health insurance and that insurance premiums are escalating every day under the Republican administration?

We call on you, Mr. Fontenot, to campaign on the issues and refrain from carelessly and recklessly denigrating the character and reputation of one who has used her legislative position to improve the quality of life for all Wilson County residents. Please don’t embarrass your wonderful family and allow your children to see their father defaming a woman of enormous character and integrity.

Linda Cooper-Suggs etc. (WDT, 10/21/18)

OCT 2018 Fontenot Responds

Re: “Fontenot should campaign on issues instead of denigrating Farmer-Butterfield’s character,” by Linda Cooper-Suggs, et. al., Monday:

Let me begin this letter by saying that I love Wilson, North Carolina. I love the people throughout our whole county. I love my country. I believe in standing up for what is right and calling out injustice. I refuse to stand idly by and let my children walk into a future haphazardly pieced together by political elitists who will never have to deal with the ramifications of their votes or be restrained by the loss of our prosperity, liberties and freedoms.

As stated in a letter penned by Linda Cooper-Suggs and signed by Jean’s friends and ex-husband, I agree, Jean grew up in a rough time in American history. She is an educated woman. She was elected to the legislature. She does work full-time. This is honorable.

However, that is not the issue at hand. The issue at hand is that Jean Farmer-Butterfield swore on a legal document, punishable by fine or imprisonment, that her home in Garner was her primary residence. Therefore, either Jean Farmer-Butterfield committed mortgage fraud and the home is not her primary residence or she is committing voter fraud and Wilson is not her primary residence. It's one or the other and she needs to come clean.

Somehow, I believe the example of Andrew McCabe, Hilary Clinton and a whole host of others have convinced many that if you are in political office that it is OK to lie under oath. When did elected officials start getting a pass on honesty? That's right, they didn't. Therefore, Ms. Farmer-Butterfield shouldn't get a pass either.

Furthermore, I notice that Jean's friends did not take kindly to my letter on her voting record. However, they did not refute my claims concerning her voting against life, voting against faith-based initiatives, voting against our agricultural community and voting against our businesses. Way to avoid the issue.

Also Jean's friends seem to believe that I have built a platform attacking Jean and not a platform built on the issues. I guess they haven't read The Wilson Times from February to now. During that time I've penned a letter almost every other week on education, economy, national and state-level issues. To date I've written two letters about Jean Farmer-Butterfield's voting records - neither of which she responded to - and none attacking her character. Additionally, I've been falsely attributed as focusing on a real estate issue? That's strange, I'm not the one who swore that a home in Garner would be my primary residence. Jean did. On top of that, I didn't bring these issues to the paper. They are a matter of public record.

I find it unfortunate that Jean's supporters have not been able to refute my claims concerning her voting record and that all they've been able to do it attack my age. Was Jean Farmer-Butterfield ever 35, or was she born in her 50s?

Lastly, concerning Donald Trump, don't try to get this race off the issues. Donald Trump isn't running for N.C. House District 24, Jean is. Stay focused on the issues and treat the voters of Wilson like people who can think for themselves and actually talk local issues with some substance, instead of race- and party-baiting, please.

I end by saying I am not personally against Jean Farmer-Butterfield. However, I am against dishonesty and duplicity. Jean has served eight terms in the House of Representatives and has probably done some good things. However, it is time for her to pass the baton and go home to Garner.

Ken Fontenot (WDT, 10/22/18)

2019**DEC 2019 Praising Butterfield Running Again**

Linda Cooper-Suggs, Wilson County Democratic Party chairwoman. “But she has been with us and she has represented Wilson County whether it is educational issues, whether it has been with School for the Deaf issues, and we know that this person, this candidate, has truly been a strong voice for us and whoever gets in that seat, we want them to continue to move Wilson County forward.” (WDT, 12/10/19)

2020

JAN 2020 Wants Additional Early Voting

While the state mandated 13 days of early voting in the March primary, Wilson County officials debated additional days and places Wednesday morning.

Board of Elections Chairman Chip Futrell said that the N.C. Legislature requires all early voting sites be open from 8 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. on weekdays starting on Feb. 13 as well as voting hours from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Saturday, Feb. 29. In the past, counties could have additional early voting sites with modified hours, but now all polling locations within individual counties must be open the same hours.

"In the past, we've had more flexibility, but basically the weekday hours have been set for us as a minimum," he said. "We can go beyond that if we want to, and it is up to us to include any additional Saturdays or any Sundays."

Linda Cooper-Suggs, chairman of the Wilson County Democratic Party, made the case for adding additional days on the weekends, especially a Sunday, to allow as many voters as possible to cast a ballot.

Futrell shared early voting numbers from the presidential primary in 2016 to provide some context for potential turnout. On the final Saturday before Election Day, 617 people cast a ballot in the March 2016 primary from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m., so he was optimistic an additional two hours would help. When polls were open for eight hours a previous Saturday, 25 people an hour cast a ballot, and from 1 to 5 p.m. on the Sunday, 156 votes were cast.

"So the community has demonstrated they have the desire to vote in presidential elections on weekends," he concluded.

More than 20 people from the public showed up at the Wednesday morning meeting with a handful voicing their opinions to the board. Rep. Jean Farmer-Butterfield was among those in attendance, voicing her support for officials as they worked through the mandates.

"I think the bottom line is it doesn't matter what party you're from, it is about having the right to vote, and I appreciate those who are making sacrifices to make sure voting rights are being exercised," she said.

In the past, the county has had a secondary early voting site at the health department as well as a tertiary location.

"My question to the public is do you know that we've had other places or is this where you come to vote?" asked board member Doug Inscoc.

Cooper-Suggs said she recommended allowing residents to vote early at the health department to alleviate long lines.

"I think we're moving toward an election that is going to electrify voters regardless of their reasoning or standing. ... For about 10 years, we have been almost hit with a barrage of things that seem to inhibit our

right to vote,” said board member George Leach. “And I know I’m supposed to be objective on this board, but I did not lose my free speech when I took this position, so I want to say to inhibit voting in any way legally is against our democratic principles and values.”

After several audience members applauded, he made the case for Sunday early voting and was echoed by board member Wanda Davis.

”I move to establish one-stop early voting scheduled for Wilson County to be the state mandated minimum hours plus Saturday the 22nd from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the county board of election office,” Robert D. Brown said in a motion made over the phone.

”Does your motion include Sunday?” Futrell asked.

Brown replied, “Did you hear it? Then that is a ‘no.’”

”I just wanted to make sure,” said Futrell, who restated the motion and asked for a member to second it. After no one seconded the motion, it died before Leach pitched another motion. Leach suggested 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. on March 22, 23 and 29 at the Board of Elections and the health department. While Davis seconded the motion, Brown and Inscoe voted against the motion.

Futrell requested another motion, noting it has to be a unanimous vote to send the early voting schedule to the state for approval. Brown recommended sending the motion as a non-unanimous vote instead.

”It could, but I’d like to exhaust our ideas to see if we can reach a compromise because I don’t want to see the state board make the decision for us,” Futrell said.

Futrell then posed a motion for early voting at the board of elections and the health department from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. on both Saturdays and from 1 to 5 p.m. on the Sunday. The motion was defeated again as Brown voted against it.

Inscoe made a motion for the same hours and days but only at the Board of Elections. Brown attempted to amend the motion to 1 to 4 p.m. on Sunday instead, but no one seconded it, and Inscoe’s original motion went to a vote and passed unanimously.

After nearly an hour of discussion, the board supported early voting on weekdays from 8 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. from Feb. 13 to 28 along with 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Feb. 22 and 29 and 1 to 5 p.m. on Feb. 23 at the Wilson County Board of Elections. The recommendation must receive state approval. (WDT, 1/9/20)

FEB 2020 On Upcoming Presidential Primary

The Iowa caucus on Monday kicked off the initial wave of the November election, and while President Donald Trump captured 97% of the Republican votes, issues with an app delayed the results on the Democratic side. According to the 75% of votes that had been reported by 5 p.m. Wednesday, Pete Buttigieg was in the lead with 26.9%, followed by Bernie Sanders at 25.2%, Elizabeth Warren with 18.2% and Joe Biden with 15.6%.

"Technology can be excellent, but for them to use the app after everything that happened with the 2016 election makes me happy we use paper ballots in Wilson," said Linda Cooper-Suggs, chairman of the Wilson County Democratic Party. "The coding issues on the app are going to be corrected for the states or municipalities that decide to use electronics, but if it is not perfected, they'll have to go back to another way."

Fyle said she believes the confusion surrounding the Democratic caucus paired with the behavior of Democrats during Trump's State of the Union address on Tuesday will sway voters.

"I think North Carolina voters are keeping up with what is going on, but I think it just proves how disorganized and disruptive the Democratic Party is within itself," she said. "I think that makes more question what is happening even more."

While Trump does face Joe Walsh and Bill Weld during the primary, Fyle said she only gets asked about the president.

"I think it is going to be a landslide, and he is not going to have to worry about the primary at all," she added.

Cooper-Suggs said she's frustrated the North Carolina Democratic ballots for the primary has four candidates -- Marianne Williamson, Cory Booker, Julian Castro and John K. Delaney -- who have ended their campaigns.

"People who are not keeping up with all this may walk in and be confused when they see all these names," she said. "I question how many ballots will be wasted on someone who is not even running, so I think we have to work on our balloting system in North Carolina."

'Every vote counts'

While Fyle said she believes Trump's actions regarding immigration, trade agreements and the economy will remove any doubt on who to vote for, Cooper-Suggs said the Democratic candidates will serve all people, not just a subset of society.

"Our candidates are concerned about all of us, including the dreamers, immigrants, people of different races, ethnicities, religion and the LGBTQ community," Cooper-Suggs said. "They are concerned about all of us, and that is what we need now in America."

There are 16 Libertarian candidates on the ballot and unaffiliated or independent voters can choose whether they want to cast a Republican, Democratic or Libertarian ballot.

"I think people look at a third party because they are tired of the regular politics," Fyle said. "I think they have seen Trump do what is best for the country, but people should make up their own minds, and that may give a Libertarian a chance to get into office."

Cooper-Suggs said she has seen the divisiveness between the parties grow, but she believes the actions taken by Trump will sway some to the Democratic Party.

”We have two strong parties, but in the years to come, we have to look at how we can work well together,” she said. “We must come together to do the best for America. That is at a stand-still at this point.”

Regardless of which candidates voters choose, both parties urge Wilsonians to head to the polls.

”Too many people have sacrificed and fought for your right to press a button or darken a circle, so don’t become complacent because sitting at home is not the answer,” Cooper-Suggs said. “Every vote counts, and 100 votes can make a big difference in the results.” (WDT, 2/6/20)

MAR 2020 Optimistic About Biden

Voters across Wilson and the state agreed Tuesday that former Vice President Joe Biden was the best representative among the five Democratic presidential hopefuls still in the race.

Biden captured more than 52% of votes in Wilson while Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders received nearly 20% of the local ballots cast. New York billionaire Mike Bloomberg came in third with nearly 16% of votes while Sen. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts received 4% of votes. With 0.63% of the local votes, Hawaiian Rep. Tulsi Gabbard trailed ballots for “no preference,” as well as Amy Klobuchar, Pete Buttigieg and Tom Steyer - all who have dropped out of the race. Totals from the state reflected Wilson voters with Biden coming in first place followed by Sanders, Bloomberg and Warren.

”I think the results from South Carolina may have helped people who had not yet decided who to vote for,” said Wilson County Democratic Party Chairwoman Linda Cooper-Suggs.

When early voting began, candidates Pete Buttigieg and Tom Steyer were still in the race, but both dropped out in the days leading up to Tuesday. For that reason, Buttigieg garnered nearly 4% of statewide votes while less than 1% of ballots were cast for Steyer in North Carolina.

On the Republican side, candidate Joe Walsh dropped out on Feb. 7, yet his name remained on the ballot. President Donald J. Trump received 93% of the Republican votes in the state while hopeful Bill Weld garnered less than 2% of North Carolina ballots.

”Everyone is enthusiastic about what Trump has done in the last four years and excited about what he can do with another four years,” said Christy Fyle, chairwoman of the Wilson County Republican Party. “Everyone at the polls wanted to vote to give him that opportunity.”

Cooper-Suggs said she’s optimistic Biden has what it will take to unseat Trump in November.

”I want Democrats to support whoever the candidate is for all of the positions and get behind them,” she said. “That is not only important at the presidential level, but in every race. That is what is best for Wilson County and what we must do.” (WDT, 3/3/20)

MAR 2020 Speaks Against 2nd Amendment Resolution

Wilson County commissioners adopted a resolution affirming their support of the Second Amendment on Monday. The move came after several residents attended the meeting, speaking out for and against designating Wilson County as a Second Amendment sanctuary county.

Part of the resolution states that commissioners wished to express opposition to any law that would unconstitutionally restrict Wilson County residents' Second Amendment rights. Commissioner Bill Blackman made the motion to adopt a Second Amendment resolution, which passed on a 5-2 vote. Blackman, Chairman Rob Boyette, Vice Chairman Leslie Atkinson and Commissioners Chris Hill and Roger Lucas voted in favor of the motion, while Commissioners JoAnne Daniels and Sherry Lucas voted in opposition.

RESIDENTS SPEAK OUT

Several residents spoke during the public comment section of Monday night's Board of Commissioners meeting.

The county's board chamber was packed as rows of people filled seats while others stood. Supporters urged commissioners to join more than 60 other counties across the state who have passed some form of resolutions showing support for the right to bear arms.

Michael McCroskey, who has spearheaded the Second Amendment sanctuary movement in Wilson, told commissioners he started the push after watching what happened in Virginia.

"It's not about gun violence, it's about slowly taking our rights away," McCroskey said.

He said as of Monday, there were 66 counties across the state who have passed some form of the resolution.

McCroskey has said he realizes the resolution wouldn't interfere with enforcement of any federal or state gun control laws, but he believes the resolution would send a message to state and federal legislators that Wilson County residents don't want tax dollars, time and energy spent on laws that limit Second Amendment rights.

McCroskey began a Facebook page supporting the designation in Wilson County. The page has more than 2,100 members. McCroskey also told commissioners he has garnered nearly 800 signatures for a petition in support of the resolution.

"It's time we stand together for the Second Amendment," he said.

David Finnegan-Hosey, a Barton College chaplain and Wilson County resident, spoke out against the resolution.

”Unfortunately, in our ministry we have seen the effects of gun violence in our communities,” he told commissioners. “We have to have a courageous conversation in this country about how gun violence tears away our communities.”

Finnegan-Hosey urged commissioners to not take any action.

Wilson resident Tim Petway, a supporter, said the group was asking for a declaration status.

”We stand with the other 66 counties who have taken a stand,” Petway told commissioners, asking them to do the right thing.

Wilson County Democratic Party Chairwoman Linda Cooper-Suggs spoke against the resolution. She said the Constitution already guarantees the right to bear arms and it’s not necessary for commissioners to declare the county as Second Amendment sanctuary.

Commissioners went into a closed session after the regular meeting and public comments. Following the closed session, the board voted on its version of the resolution.

Wilson joins neighboring Pitt, Johnston and Wayne counties in adopting Second Amendment support resolutions. (WDT, 3/3/20)

MAY 2020 Praising Biden

VIRTUAL CONVENTIONS

The Wilson County Republican Party held its annual convention virtually on March 28, while the Wilson County Democratic Party held a virtual convention on April 25.

”Yes, it was different, but we fully understood our focus and accomplished our goals,” said Democratic Chairwoman Linda Cooper-Suggs.

She and Wilson County GOP Chairwoman Christy Fyle said the pandemic hasn’t slowed preparations for upcoming campaigns with ongoing communication and training with the national parties.

”The age of technology makes it possible to touch far more individuals, especially in this time of isolation,” Cooper-Suggs said.

Fyle said President Donald Trump has lived up to his 2016 campaign promises and has even greater things in store for the next four years.

”Under President Trump, our economy reached dizzying heights, and he will rebuild the economy to help Americans recover from this unprecedented crisis,” she said. “President Trump’s leadership during trying times will ensure that we come out of this stronger than ever.”

Meanwhile, Cooper-Suggs said Democratic candidate Joe Biden's eight years as a vice president and decades of experience in the Senate as well as foreign relations is critical for the nation's future.

"We need a president who has the ability and fortitude to realize that this is 'one nation' and that all people must be viewed as valuable," she said. "We need a president who can forge relationships with other countries and act in the best interest of this United States and realize this world is connected. We need a president that all of us can be proud of."

Fyle adamantly opposed plans to increase accessibility to mail-in ballots for the November election.

"Democrats are attempting to use the COVID-19 outbreak to make nationwide election changes to fit their far-left agenda and give them a political edge," she said. "The (Republican National Committee) is fighting this unethical effort."

Cooper-Suggs said she's concerned with ensuring everyone receives a ballot, but is unsure about the push for mail-in voting.

"There are too many unanswered questions and too many inequities in our geographical regions in North Carolina for me to believe this would be the most effective method for Wilson County and other parts of our state," Cooper-Suggs said. "If the State Board of Elections mandates this form of voting, we as a party will use all our resources to get out the vote. There is too much to lose in this November election."

Fyle said she's leery of any changes planned with less than six months before the election.

"The Republican Party supports free and fair elections and is open to being flexible on voting changes in light of the coronavirus, but we must also ensure the integrity of our elections," Fyle concluded. (WDT, 5/28/20)

JUN 2020 Voter Registration During Protest

Attending a march for racial justice is just the first step toward change, pastors said repeatedly Sunday at an interfaith protest in Wilson.

"If you want to facilitate any type of change, you must vote," said Wilson County Democratic Party Chairwoman Linda Cooper-Suggs. "You have to get out and vote, but first you must register to vote."

Democrats and Republicans each had tables at the Sunday event in hopes of registering residents and educating voters. A handful of residents did register or update voter information.

"Some people will say voting doesn't matter or your vote doesn't count. The bottom line is it does count, and it counts the most right here in Wilson," said Addul Ali, the state field director for the Frederick Douglass Foundation. "Water, fire, sewer, police, schools, roads and parks and recreation all happens at a local level, and that is where your vote truly counts."

The Republican drove from Cabarrus County near Charlotte to participate in the march and register voters.

”It was a three-hour drive, but I tell folks I’ve driven a lot further for a lot less,” he said. “People need to understand that the black experience isn’t just one thing, and not all black people feel like we are oppressed in America in 2020.”

Wilson County GOP Chairwoman Christy Fyle said she felt it was important to bring Ali in to represent the Frederick Douglass Foundation as well as Clayton resident Antoine Thomas, who serves as the state director for Blexit -- an effort to organize minorities to exit the left side of politics.

”We registered just a few, but the conversations between the Frederick Douglass Foundation, Blexit and voters was very positive,” Fyle said. “We found we all agree on some issues and can work toward common goals on other issues.”

Cooper-Suggs agreed that everyone has more in common than differences, but now is the time for unity toward change.

”Voting is the only way we can make a difference,” she said. “We must elect individuals who will speak out for not just one part of our society, but for everyone. The Democratic Party is about being inclusive, making a difference and making things better, not just for me, but for generations to come.”

Ali and Thomas took issue with the idea that “You’re not black if you don’t vote Democrat.”

”This is one of the higher African American populations in the state, and our folks need to not be told constantly that we are oppressed, that the police are running around hunting down black men, because that is just not what the reality on the ground is,” Thomas said. “As a Republican, a black man and an American, I want people to know that 99% of officers go out there every day and do their job the right way. Just like how we never hear about the 110,000 planes a day that land safely, we can’t keep controlling the narrative about how safe flight is by only talking about the ones that crash.

”One bad incident shouldn’t poison the relationship between the citizens and the police department, regardless of color,” Thomas concluded.

Cooper-Suggs said Wilson County Democrats attended Sunday’s event to talk with voters and register those who want their voice heard.

”It is time for change. It is time for our nation to come together, and Wilson County has a role in making a difference,” she said. “We are a battleground state and we have been targeted, so there is a lot of work we as Democrats must do, and it will take all of us working together to do it.” (WDT, 6/11/20)

JUL 2020 Hopes to Be Nominated to Vacant House Seat

State lawmakers on Wednesday confirmed Rep. Jean Farmer-Butterfield’s appointment to North Carolina’s appeals board for unemployment benefits, resulting in her resignation from the N.C. House after representing Wilson County for nearly 18 years.

Farmer-Butterfield said the journey to the three-member North Carolina Employment Security Board of Review started June 27 with Gov. Roy Cooper's nomination.

"I plan to write an open letter to the public and share it through social media and The Wilson Times to thank the public for their confidence and trust in me through the years," she said. "I've been inundated with calls from all across North Carolina since this all started on June 27 and it has been running ever since. It has been a sprint, not a marathon, but I think Wilson is going to be in good hands."

The 72-year-old Wilson County resident garnered 67% of the Democratic vote in March to represent Wilson County for a 10th term.

Former Gov. Jim Hunt said Farmer-Butterfield distinguished herself as a tireless advocate for public education.

"Jean has been an outstanding leader for our county and for our state," Hunt said. "She has been particularly strong in pushing for early childhood education and excellent public schools. She has always been diligent about pursuing economic opportunities for Wilson County and eastern North Carolina. I am proud of her leadership, excited about her future in state government and grateful for all she's done for all our people in Wilson County."

U.S. Rep. G.K. Butterfield, D-Wilson, congratulated Farmer-Butterfield on the employment review board appointment.

"Rep. Farmer-Butterfield has represented Wilson County for the past 18 years in the North Carolina House. During that time, she has distinguished herself as a committed public servant and advocate for the people of Wilson County. Now, she will continue her long career of service on the Board of Review where her intellect and worth ethic will benefit many across the state," Butterfield said in a prepared statement. "I commend Gov. Cooper for his nomination of Rep. Farmer-Butterfield and the General Assembly for confirming her appointment."

Butterfield and Farmer-Butterfield were married for 20 years and have three children together.

"On behalf of the residents of the 1st Congressional District and especially those in Wilson County, I thank Rep. Farmer-Butterfield for her many years of dedicated service in the North Carolina House and wish her continued success on the North Carolina Employment Security Board of Review. Congratulations, Jean."

N.C. House Speaker Tim Moore noted Farmer-Butterfield's willingness to work across the aisle. She took office under Democratic leadership, but Republicans have controlled both chambers of the General Assembly since 2011.

"Rep. Farmer-Butterfield and I came into the General Assembly together in 2002, and I can't say enough about the powerful impact of her bipartisan service to North Carolinians on behalf of Wilson County over the last two decades," Moore said. "I appreciate Rep. Farmer-Butterfield's willingness to continue serving our state on the Board of Review and join all of my colleagues wishing her the best in this new role."

The annual salary for the board's two non-chair positions is \$130,230. Farmer-Butterfield said she plans to live in her Wilson County home once she starts work July 15. The panel considers high-level unemployment benefit appeals from workers and employers.

"There were so many members who stood and spoke in regard to all she has done, the way she has served as a leader in the General Assembly, not only from a professional standpoint, but also in being able to communicate on a personal level," Wilson County Democratic Party Chairwoman Linda Cooper-Suggs said after witnessing the Wednesday confirmation vote. "I was so happy about the appointment because I know she has worked tirelessly to represent Wilson County and she will serve the state of North Carolina well."

The local Democratic Party will nominate someone to serve the remainder of Farmer-Butterfield's term, which ends Dec. 31, and to take her place on the November ballot beside Mick Rankin, the Republican candidate for House District 24. Candidates must be registered Democrats who live in Wilson County.

Those wishing to be considered can email a letter of interest to Angela Toney, the party's secretary, at ahoney@bulldogs.barton.edu. The executive committee will review the letters and send its nomination to Cooper within 30 days. By state law, the vacancy is filled by governor appointment.

Wilson County Democrats plan to meet virtually on July 18 to review letters of interest.

While Farmer-Butterfield said she's not endorsing any candidates, she believes Cooper-Suggs or Charlie Pat Farris would serve the community well. Cooper-Suggs said she hopes to be nominated to the post. Farris ran against former Rep. Susan Martin in 2016 and nearly upset the Republican incumbent, taking the close contest to a recount.

"Ideally I'd like to see a woman do it," Farmer-Butterfield said. "We don't have enough women in the General Assembly, but they are strongly represented in the population and they are consistent voters."

The veteran politician added she'll support whomever is nominated and wants to help ensure the appointee's success.

"We are truly excited because Jean has committed her life to Wilson County and we're happy for her, but we are saddened at the same time," Cooper-Suggs said. "We know that in choosing her replacement, we must select someone who will continue to work as hard or harder to carry on the ideals of our party." (WDT, 7/9/20)

JUL 2020 Six Names for House Slot

--Jean Farmer-Butterfield served in the N.C. House of Representatives for two decades, but her recent gubernatorial appointment leaves county Democrats searching for her replacement.

Six locals have submitted letters of interest to the party. On Saturday, the Wilson County Democratic Party Executive Committee will decide who it will recommend to Gov. Roy Cooper to fill Farmer-Butterfield's seat and take on Republican challenger Mick Rankin in the general election.

LINDA COOPER-SUGGS

Retired educator Linda Cooper-Suggs has served as chairwoman for the county Democratic Party since 2017, but she's turned the reins over to others in the search for Farmer-Butterfield's replacement since the 67-year-old woman is hoping to be selected to head to the General Assembly.

"I want to carry on Jean's legacy of hard work for Wilson County," she said.

The mother and grandmother said she plans to fight for Medicaid expansion, veterans benefits and support for senior citizens as well as address education and environmental issues.

"My interest is in moving Wilson County forward, and no matter how this race comes out, my love is for people and I will continue to work to better the lives of people in Wilson County," Cooper-Suggs said. "It doesn't matter who you are or where you're from, I want to help improve the quality of life in Wilson and give people the opportunity to better themselves."

CHARLIE PAT FARRIS

Practicing attorney Charlie Pat Farris unsuccessfully campaigned to join the legislature in 2016, but the 72-year-old said he believes now is his time.

"What sets me apart? I have a burning desire to serve Wilson County," Farris said. "I am always thrilled when I join a board or commission, but I don't think those quite fulfill what I could be doing to serve my county."

Farris said he garnered support in 2016 from Democrats, Republicans and unaffiliated voters. He said if he's appointed, he will continue rallying bipartisan support to serve Wilson County.

"I want to help Wilson and Wilson County," he said. "If I get to the legislature, I plan to form a coalition of Democrats and Republicans from eastern and western North Carolina. If we stick together, our voice will be heard and we can have a collective influence to help residents beyond the state's large cities."

ERICK JENKINS

Since returning to his hometown, Erick Jenkins has worked as a community advocate to improve Wilson's career opportunities for young professionals like himself. The 30-year-old man has worked alongside Wilson City Councilman Derrick Creech and served as an intern for U.S. Rep. G.K. Butterfield.

"Wilson has a high poverty rate around 21% based on the census data our campaign has, so I think we need to work to get that number down," he said. "One way we can do that is by connecting Wilson with other municipalities through the railroad and bringing the supply chain to Wilson. Our campaign is pushing for nuanced solutions that help every Wilsonian."

Jenkins was supposed to finish his master's degree in the spring, but the pandemic pushed back his timeline.

”I wanted to run because I feel like Wilson County needs to be more unified and have equitable opportunities for both working-class and younger people,” he said. “I’m 30 and working on my master’s degree, so I’m looking for a career, but opportunities are hard to find in Wilson. A lot of young people are moving away because of the lack of options, but I think that can change by taking our issues to Raleigh and finding a solution with state resources.”

JOHN MCNEIL

John McNeil was dismayed he was not the party nominee by default given his spring campaign against Farmer-Butterfield to represent House District 24.

”I think if something like this happens again but only one person ran in the primary, it should be that person to get the seat going into the general election,” McNeil said. “Everyone who didn’t run in the primary should have to wait until the next election for a chance to represent Wilson.”

After growing up in Wilson, McNeil was a businessman in Georgia. In 2005, McNeil fatally shot a trespasser and was sentenced to life in prison. He won his freedom in 2013 and promised his late wife, Anita, to direct his energy toward helping others.

If appointed, the 52-year-old man wants to fight against disparities in the school system, which is in the same vein as his full-time work as the director of programs at Daniels Learning Center.

”Being born and raised in Wilson, I have a stronger connection, a stronger love, a stronger will to help people in Wilson,” McNeil said. “I know pretty much everybody in Wilson and they know me.”

DANTE PITTMAN

At 24, Dante Pittman is the youngest candidate vying for the party nomination, but he believes that can work to his advantage.

”During the COVID crisis, we have to nominate someone who is able to connect with folks digitally, because traditional campaigning with events and door-to-door efforts won’t work,” he said. “I’ve already shown our campaign has the ability to connect with folks over social media and the web as well as over the phone.”

The University of North Carolina graduate said his three platform priorities include improving education, expanding Medicaid and ensuring a fair redrawing of district maps in 2021.

”What I hear from Wilson’s older leaders is that we need new leadership to bring us into the next chapter, and I think I am someone who can bridge the divide and move us forward together,” Pittman said.

PATRICIA UZZELL

As a town commissioner, Patricia Uzzell fought for better water in Lucama. Now the 53-year-old mother and grandmother hopes she can do more by serving on a state level.

”There is work to be done and I will work elbow-to-elbow, knee-to-knee with everyone to make it happen,” she said. “People are so tired of politicians making promises and not delivering, but I believe in keeping your word.”

The pastor’s wife said health care is an ever-present concern that residents raise.

”With COVID, I don’t think there is a better time to focus on health care,” she said. “I don’t want it to sound cliché, but I want to find better, more affordable health care solutions. It is a federal issue, but there are ways to negotiate on a state level that benefit everyone.” (WDT, 7/21/20)

JUL 2020 Picked For House Seat

From an initial pool of nine candidates, Linda Cooper-Suggs was selected Saturday to represent District 24 in the N.C. House and to face off against Republican Mick Rankin to retain the seat.

”I thank everyone for putting their trust in me and for their vote,” Cooper-Suggs said. “I thank everyone for their hard work. We are in this together.”

Jean Farmer-Butterfield represented Wilson County in the House of Representatives since 2003, but the 72-year-old woman recently took a gubernatorial appointment to the three-member N.C Employment Security Board of Review. Farmer-Butterfield beat John McNeil in the primary to serve as the Democratic nominee in the general election, but her appointment left members of the Wilson County Democratic Party Executive Committee to pick someone to finish her term and face Rankin at the polls.

Committee co-chair Jim Hawley and state Sen. Don Davis hosted a hybrid meeting Saturday with Zoom and socially distanced cars in a church parking lot to determine who the party would recommend for Gov. Roy Cooper’s appointment.

”This is absolutely a historic occasion,” Hawley said before members were given the opportunity to nominate candidates.

Prior to the Saturday morning meeting, Ricardo Dew and Reginald Pope withdrew their letters of interest in the position. In the five minutes executive committee members were given to nominate candidates from the remaining pool, all but Mark M. Johnson were put up for a vote. The remaining six - Cooper-Suggs, Charlie Pat Farris, Erick Jenkins, John McNeil, Dante Pittman and Patricia Uzzell - were given three minutes to sway members before voting started.

”A change is coming to House District 24, and with your help, I will make that change,” Farris said. “Campaigning will be different this year due to COVID-19, and we’ll have to adapt as we’re doing today.”

The 44 members who attended the meeting at St. Paul Church of Christ honked their horns liberally to support various candidates and Democrats retaining the seat in the General Assembly.

”This is a historic day and a historic vacancy that we’re moving forward to fill,” Davis said. “This seat may determine whether Democrats have a majority in the North Carolina House of Representatives. If you believe, then honk your horn as we unite and fight hard to retain this seat.”

After recording the votes of those calling into the meeting, Davis asked committee members to put on face masks as he went car to car to collect paper ballots.

”Once in a while, a small group of people have the chance to do something extraordinary, and you have that chance today,” Pittman said.

For the chance to replace Farmer-Butterfield on the November ballot, the winner needed 50% plus one of the 66 votes cast, and Cooper-Suggs claimed 38 ballots. According to official results, Farris came in second with 15 ballots and Uzzell claimed third with five votes. Jenkins earned four votes, and Pittman received three. McNeil garnered one ballot. The winner needed 34 votes.

The committee voted by acclamation for Cooper-Suggs to fill Farmer-Butterfield’s unexpired term in a separate vote.

”I’m excited,” she said during a pandemic-style parade after the event. “I am really excited. I’m excited to represent Wilson County.” (WDT, 7/25/20)



A retired educator and county Democratic Party chairwoman will serve out the term of former North Carolina state Rep. Jean Farmer-Butterfield and seek her own two-year term in the fall.

Democratic activists in Wilson County meeting on Saturday selected Linda Cooper-Suggs to fill the vacancy created when Farmer-Butterfield resigned from her 24th House District seat, The Wilson Times reported.

Farmer-Butterfield stepped down last week after the legislature confirmed her as Gov. Roy Cooper’s nominee to join the North Carolina Employment Security Board of Review. The governor is now obligated by law to formally appoint Cooper-Suggs.

Nine candidates were initially seeking the seat. Local party officials ultimately voted from a list of six hopefuls.

Cooper-Suggs, the Wilson Democratic Party leader since 2017, also was picked as the candidate to take on Republican Mick Rankin in November. Farmer-Butterfield, a House member since 2003, had already won the Democratic primary in March.

”I thank everyone for putting their trust in me and for their vote,” Cooper-Suggs said Saturday. “I thank everyone for their hard work. We are in this together.”

In light of social distancing due to COVID-19, Saturday’s meeting was a combination of video conferencing and motorists sitting in their cars in a church parking lot. (AP, 7/25/20)

AUG 2020 Sworn In

Wilson County has new representation in the General Assembly following Rep. Linda Cooper-Suggs' Wednesday oath of office.

"It is my pleasure to be here today to represent Wilson County, the Board of Commissioners and all our citizens," said county commissioners' Chairman Rob Boyette. "From Johnston to Greene, from Wayne to Nash County, all the citizens of Wilson County will be represented by Linda Cooper-Suggs."

Jean Farmer-Butterfield represented District 24 for nearly two decades, but in July, Gov. Roy Cooper appointed her to the N.C. Employment Security Board of Review. The Wilson County Democratic Party Executive Committee met on July 25 and voted for Cooper-Suggs to fulfill the remainder of Farmer-Butterfield's term in the General Assembly and face off against Republican Mick Rankin at the polls in November.

"Linda says her upbringing on the farm in Sampson County played a major role in her becoming the person she is today," said Randolph Sessoms, the first Black superintendent for Wilson County Schools. "There she learned the value of hard work. She learned that she must do the very best job that she can do at any task before her."

Sessoms worked with Cooper-Suggs at Hunt High School, and the two have been friends for more than four decades. Boyette said as a teacher, Cooper-Suggs positively affected the lives of hundreds, if not thousands, of Wilson County students.

"I truly believe our legislators in Raleigh would benefit from the instruction provided by a teacher," Boyette said. "And I have no doubt in my mind that Ms. Linda Cooper-Suggs will encourage them, remind them who they represent and show them how they can do things better."

Cooper-Suggs said she plans to focus on improving educational opportunities for children across the state, improving the health care system, helping seniors and people with disabilities and promoting economic development in downtown Wilson.

"I'm ready to roll up my sleeves and go to work," she said. "To the Wilson community, remember that we are in this together, and I thank you." (Wilson Times, 8/12/20)

SEP 2020 Candidates Forum Set

Sep. 21--Candidates for Wilson County's state House seat will share their vision for public service and field questions from the press and public during The Wilson Times' virtual candidate forum Wednesday.

Rep. Linda Cooper-Suggs, D-Wilson, and Republican candidate Mick Rankin of Stantonsburg are scheduled to participate in the 7 p.m. forum, which will be livestreamed on WilsonTimes.com and the newspaper's Facebook page. Times Editor Corey Friedman will serve as moderator.

Cooper-Suggs was appointed July 27 to fill the remainder of Jean Farmer-Butterfield's term. After representing Wilson County for nearly 18 years, Farmer-Butterfield retired to accept Gov. Roy Cooper's appointment to the N.C. Division of Employment Security Board of Review.

Rankin is a Navy veteran mounting his first bid for elected office. A self-described conservative, he cited agriculture, Second Amendment rights and military and veterans' issues as focuses of his campaign when he filed for office on Dec. 2. He's a frequent contributor to the Times' letters to the editor.

A retired teacher, Cooper-Suggs said improving children's educational opportunities is a key issue, along with health care improvements, helping senior citizens and people with disabilities and promoting economic development. She was elected Wilson County Democratic Party chairwoman in April 2017 and stepped down after the governor appointed her to Farmer-Butterfield's seat.

Wilson has one representative and one state senator after 2017 legislative redistricting. The House District 24 seat encompasses all of Wilson County and no longer includes portions of any surrounding counties.

Due to COVID-19 social distancing guidelines, the forum will be held via videoconference. Members of the public are invited to submit questions for the candidates before the forum by emailing editor@wilsontimes.com with "Candidate forum" in the subject line or commenting on the live video stream. (Wilson Times, 9/21/20)

SEP 2020 Candidates Forum

Linda Cooper-Suggs and Mick Rankin have each set their course for the same destination - a healthy, prosperous and well-educated North Carolina. They're just following vastly different road maps.

Wilson County will choose the driver for this journey on Nov. 3, when either Cooper-Suggs or Rankin will be elected to the N.C. House in District 24. The candidates shared their visions for the state during a Wednesday evening virtual candidate forum livestreamed on The Wilson Times' Facebook page.

Where Tar Heels' health is concerned, Cooper-Suggs expressed confidence in Gov. Roy Cooper's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"The economy and the virus are connected; we know that," she said. "We know that businesses want to open. But we know the economy will not fully recover until the virus is controlled."

Rankin questioned the seemingly arbitrary distinctions between businesses allowed to operate, like brewpubs and restaurant bars, and those forbidden from reopening, like freestanding bars.

"Overall, we kept talking about essential and non-essential businesses," he said. "From my standpoint, nobody is non-essential. Everybody is essential, and to me, that was a poor use of that term."

Cooper-Suggs said expanding Medicaid eligibility through the Affordable Care Act is the path to improving health care access, while Rankin is wary of the government program and favors market-based reforms like eliminating North Carolina's certificate of need law to increase competition and lower costs.

A viewer question about increasing North Carolina's \$7.25 per hour minimum wage drew a sharp contrast.

Cooper-Suggs voiced support for a "livable wage" of \$12 or \$15 per hour for North Carolina workers "so they will be able to have a home, an apartment, to be able to purchase the things that they need that are part of this American dream."

Rankin said workers and employers should be free to negotiate pay without interference, noting that businesses have reduced full-time employees' hours to part-time or implemented layoffs in some cities with \$15 minimum wages.

"When the government decides that this is what your living wage is, at some point, they're going to decide not just that's what you have to make, but that's all you can make," he said.

Cooper-Suggs says she'd want to study the video sweepstakes industry before deciding whether to tax and regulate the electronic games that now exist in a legal gray area and are widely available despite the General Assembly's past efforts to outlaw them. She seemed to weigh the pros and cons in real time, expressing concern about consumers and noting that additional tax revenue could be beneficial.

"I would have to do some research on this one, because right now I'm not in favor of video sweepstakes," she said.

It took the Republican candidate to point out the elephant in the room: It's hypocritical to maintain a government monopoly on vice.

"North Carolina has the education lottery, which is gambling," Rankin said. "We cannot say that we're opposed to gambling on a private business level and say that we're OK with it on a government level. I think we either need to outlaw all forms of gambling or find a way to tax and regulate all forms of gambling."

Cooper-Suggs and Rankin agreed that "defunding" law enforcement is the wrong way to reform the criminal justice system, and both hopefuls expressed broad support for investing in public education, though the devil's in the details and their plans for school improvements differ.

The Times doesn't endorse candidates for public office. We encourage all eligible voters to study the issues and choose the candidate who best aligns with their vision and views. After more than an hour of discussion, we hope viewers are better acquainted with Linda Cooper-Suggs and Mick Rankin and feel more confident making their decision. (Wilson Times, 9/24/20)

OCT 2020 Wilson Times Questions on Issues

Two political newcomers are working to woo voters for the opportunity to represent House District 24 in the General Assembly.

Linda Cooper-Suggs was appointed this summer to fulfill the remainder of former Rep. Jean Farmer-Butterfield's term, while challenger Mick Rankin hopes to turn the seat red for the Republican Party.

The Wilson Times sent five questions to both candidates and limited their answers to 75 words per response. Responses are always published in alphabetical order by candidates' last names.

The newspaper's questions and candidates' answers are as follows:

What efforts should the legislature take to provide assistance to North Carolinians in the wake of the pandemic?

Cooper-Suggs: We need to do all we can to make sure every school employee and front-line worker has the PPE they need. We should provide financial assistance to small businesses forced to close by the virus, allowing them the opportunity to rebuild and reopen. Support and provide broadband to our children, allowing them to thrive academically. And lastly, follow the science and recommendations of those who are the experts in the field of infectious disease control.

Rankin: The legislature should review the unemployment rules and adjust to ensure those receiving benefits continue without interruption. This could be in the form of a temporary measure or long-term changes in the law that allows flexibility during times of crisis. If there is a change in law, it needs to be specific and time-constrained. The same applies to health-related issues so the public is provided the necessary testing and treatment for pandemic-related illness.

What role should the legislature have in an extended state of emergency? Should some executive branch power be shifted to the General Assembly in light of the pandemic?

Cooper-Suggs: No. The legislature's role is to fund the priorities that are most important: health care, public schools, broadband expansion, unemployment compensation and helping businesses forced to shut down. The governor and his public health team need to respond to changing data and advice quickly, not wait for the often slow legislative process. During this pandemic, this is a whole state approach, not district. We must continue to work across the aisle in a bipartisan way.

Rankin: Each executive order should be considered by the Council of State at inception, before enactment. Once issued, the governor should provide regular reports to the General Assembly for actions of extended periods. That would allow consideration for legislative action so the subject of the executive order could become codified by law or rejected by the people's representatives. In cases where funding is required, the action should be shifted to the legislature, which has budgetary responsibility.

Job retainment and recruitment are especially important in the COVID-19 recession. What efforts would you support to reduce unemployment rates?

Cooper-Suggs: Medicaid expansion would immediately generate more than 40,000 jobs statewide and more than 300 health care jobs in Wilson County and inject millions in federal dollars into our local economy. The governor has a program called Rebuild NC to make sure everyone has broadband and

internet, allowing them to work remotely from home. We also could benefit locally from a statewide bond for school construction, which would help build and renovate local schools and create local jobs.

Rankin: Creating economic growth is a top priority. Providing incentives to bring career-type jobs into Wilson, especially promoting the Economic Opportunity Zones. Offering additional incentives for companies that provide apprenticeship and training programs to allow unskilled workers to attain skills and grow in the company. We do not need to just reduce unemployment, we need to create career-type opportunities that provide benefits and retirement options.

How do we ensure that no kids get left behind in the COVID-19 and educational adaptations?

Linda-Cooper Suggs: Some of these answers run across the total spectrum such as education -- which leads to good jobs, bringing industry to the area due to a well-trained workforce to do these jobs. We must do all we can to follow the law and not the "pocketbook." When the COVID-19 crisis passes, we must be willing to do far more for public education than we have in the past, helping our students catch up.

Rankin: We should expand school choice options so that children who perform well online can take that path, other children who need more in-person/structure have that option, and special needs children have the right environment to succeed. Traditional education has a place, but we need our education system to adapt to students' needs, parents have a choice in their children's education and we reward teachers who can provide the adaptive educational environment. There is no one-size-fits-all anymore.

Should North Carolina expand Medicaid? Why or why not?

Cooper-Suggs: Yes, it's a no-brainer. Expansion brings federal money into North Carolina. That money will expand health coverage, create health care jobs, shore up rural hospitals and lower costs for everyone by reducing uncompensated care. Positive results in COVID and health care are being experienced in the 39 states that have Medicaid expansion. When denying health care, you are denying life, which is guaranteed by the Constitution.

Rankin: No. Expanding Medicaid would raise eligibility to 138% of poverty level, adding about 500,000 people, 78% who are childless adults. This would create longer wait times and less access to those needing health care most -- low-income parents, pregnant women, children and disabled adults. This would cause greater hardship in rural areas that already have limited health care providers. Expanded health insurance options would create competition, lower cost plans and better serve the public.

Meet the Candidates

Linda Cooper-Suggs

Age: 67

Education: Master's degree in home economics

Professional background: Incumbent (Wilson Times, 10/1/20)

NOV 2020 Wins Narrowly

Retired teacher Linda Cooper-Suggs has been a member of the General Assembly since late July, and voters have selected the 67-year-old to serve for the next two years, according to unofficial election results.*

"I want to say thank you to my community for their confidence in me," Cooper-Suggs said. "I am proud that voters responded to our campaign's vision of what North Carolina can be."

According to early voting, Election Day ballots and the mail-in ballots processed so far, Cooper-Suggs garnered 52.57% of the votes while Republican challenger Mick Rankin received 47.43% of the tally to represent District 24 in the N.C. House of Representatives.

Executives in the local Democratic Party appointed Cooper-Suggs to finish the remainder of former Rep. Jean Farmer Butterfield's term as well as replace her on the ticket. She said she appreciated Rankin's candidacy and his contributions to the discussion around issues important to voters.

"Well, I appreciate all the hard work everybody has done. It certainly has not gone unnoticed," Rankin said at a Republican watch party at the Wilson Elks Lodge. "I know it is bittersweet, but it is what it is. Elections are about the will of the people, not the will of the candidate."

Rankin served for four decades in the U.S. Navy and now has a ranch on 35 acres in Wilson County.

"I've got to decide whether I'll make another run at this, but tonight is not the night to make that decision," he said. "But for the 18,724 people that voted for me, I owe them the commitment that I'm not going to give up."

Cooper-Suggs watched the results come in with loved ones rather than having a gathering due to COVID-19 concerns. She said her priorities when the General Assembly reconvenes will be schools, health care and COVID-19 relief.

"This was a historic election for House District 24 with a record number of voters making their voices heard," she concluded in a prepared statement. "The voters of Wilson County have shown that they are ready to join together and address the many issues facing our community, and I am ready to be a voice that represents all of us in the 24th House District."

There are nearly 2,500 Wilson County mail-in ballots yet to be counted. All voters opting to vote by mail had to have ballots postmarked by Election Day, but ballots can be received and counted until Nov. 12. (Wilson Times, 11/4/20)

DEC 2020 First Weekly Column

During this past holiday, we all counted our blessings and remembered the things for which we are all thankful. We may have been separated from those we love due to social distancing, yet we know they were

in our hearts as we celebrated Thanksgiving. Among the things I gave thanks for was my family, my friends and my church.

I also add to that list the people of Wilson County who had faith in me and elected me to serve my first full term as a House representative for 2021-22. I am truly humbled that the voters bestowed upon me this sacred honor.

My journey with the N.C. House of Representatives began in July when I was appointed to this seat to serve the unexpired term of our longtime legislator Rep. Jean Farmer-Butterfield, who resigned to serve on the Division of Employment Security Appeals Board.

Since that time, I have striven to build a bond with my constituents. I may be a Democrat, but now I proudly represent every resident of Wilson County. If you ever have the need to contact my office for assistance, it doesn't matter what your affiliation is, because my staff and I are here to serve you.

Certainly, COVID-19 issues are at the forefront of calls we are currently receiving each day. We have assisted people with obtaining unemployment and kept many of you updated on restrictions and testing sites through my weekly e-newsletter. The newsletter also provided information on rental and utility assistance for those hit hard by the pandemic as well as new executive orders from Gov. Roy Cooper.

I welcome your input about the needs in the community and your stance on topical issues. We are, after all, in this together. In order for me to serve as your voice in the N.C. General Assembly, I need your voice in my ear. So please don't hesitate to call or email.

My goal is to have all my constituents on my newsletter contact list. Due to space restrictions, my columns in The Wilson Times will be abbreviated versions of my full e-newsletter that I send out from the office.

The newsletter is there for you to learn about how your state government works, what bills have passed the House, what committees I serve on, etc. It's my way of keeping you informed and abreast of legislation and events that could affect your life.

If you would like to receive my weekly newsletter, please send a message to linda.cooper-suggs@ncleg.gov with the subject line "newsletter contact list." Please include your name and address (optional, not required).

Again, thank you for your confidence in me. I promise I will faithfully serve Wilson County and the state to the best of my ability with the goal of improving the lives of its residents through legislative action and personal advocacy.

My staff and I are here to serve you, the residents of Wilson County. If you need our assistance, don't hesitate to call my office at 919-733-5898 or email me. If you happen to be in Raleigh, stop by for a visit. My office is located at 1220 Legislative Building, 16 W. Jones St.

Linda Cooper-Suggs represents Wilson County in the N.C. House. This is the first installment of her column, which will appear weekly in The Wilson Times and is adapted from her constituent e-newsletter. (Wilson Times, 12/4/20)

DEC 2020 Weekly Column

North Carolina residents are facing many obstacles as we head into the holiday season and new year. Businesses are suffering because of COVID-19 restrictions while the number of cases in our community and across the state rises at alarming rates. But we are weary of social distancing and taking precautions. We want to be with family and celebrate.

This has unfortunately resulted in many of us letting our guards down. Over Thanksgiving, we gathered with our extended family because we were tired of social distancing. We just wanted a big hug from Grandma and a chance to forget the pressure of life in quarantine.

I am writing today to encourage you to look at alternative ways to spend time with family over the holidays to reduce the possibility of transmitting COVID-19 within your family and the community. It only takes one asymptomatic person infected with the virus attending a family gathering to produce an outbreak that could affect the oldest and most vulnerable members of that family. The outbreak could reach coworkers, friends and other family members.

Remember, the vaccine is within reach of us all. Now is the time to remain vigilant so that next year, we can gather together without the fear of spreading suffering within our family or the community. We want to open businesses back up to 100% capacity, but to do that, we have to control the virus.....

HEALTH INSURANCE CRISIS

Prior to COVID-19, North Carolina had one of the highest uninsured rates in the country. We were sixth-worst in the country in 2019. While we do not know the exact number of uninsured people during the pandemic, experts estimate that 1 in 5 North Carolinians may be uninsured.

Who are the uninsured? They are more likely to be unemployed or have jobs that typically do not provide insurance. Uninsured workers tend to work in restaurants, hotels, grocery stores, child care centers, hair salons and home health or nursing homes.

The uninsured crisis affects all states, but it really hammers states like North Carolina that stubbornly refuse to draw down federal funds to expand Medicaid. Lives, health care jobs and the welfare of our communities are at stake.

This information comes from presentations from the first meeting of the North Carolina Council on Health Care Coverage. You can read them for yourself by visiting the shortened link <https://bit.ly/2W9eMb9>.

Linda Cooper-Suggs represents Wilson County in the N.C. House. This weekly column is adapted from her constituent e-newsletter. For more information, email Linda.Cooper-Suggs@ncleg.gov. (Wilson Times, 12/13/20)

DEC 2020 Weekly Column

As we contemplate upon this joyous time of year of celebration and reflection, I wish all my constituents a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year. We have been through much during 2020, and my hope for all of you is love, happiness and, above all, good health. For this year has been like no other.

We have been tested. We have had to forgo family gatherings and our normal social behavior, but through it all, we have been resilient. We have sacrificed, yes, but for the greater good: to curtail a pandemic that has hit every social strata in our county and our nation. The pandemic yet rages, but we are hopeful as a new vaccine has been developed. The new year offers promise that life will get back to normal.

And what is Christmas and the New Year about if not promise? Christ promised the hope of redemption and salvation. And the New Year offers promise that the winter days will wane slowly and give way to spring and summer.

I want to thank my constituents for making sacrifices this year for their family, their neighbors and their community. And I wish you to remain vigilant yet again through these upcoming holidays.

I appreciated that each of you wish to celebrate with family and friends. After all, this is what the holiday is all about. But please consider finding ways to celebrate with them that do not include unsafe practices that could endanger your health or that of people around you. One more significant sacrifice with the hopes that next year we will all be together again.

Blessings to you all this holiday season.

CELEBRATE SAFELY

Gov. Roy Cooper and N.C. Health and Human Services Secretary Dr. Mandy Cohen on Tuesday shared updates on the COVID-19 county alert system, warning that more than 90% of North Carolina counties are now designated as red or orange.

”North Carolina needs to drive down our numbers. To do that, we all need to change our holiday plans if you haven’t already,” Cooper said. “The best and safest option is to connect virtually or by phone. But if you gather in person, keep it small and do it outside. Get a COVID-19 test before you go. Spread out the tables and chairs. Follow the modified stay-at-home order and be home by 10 p.m. And, always, always wear a mask.”

The county alert system uses COVID-19 case rates, the percentage of tests that are positive and hospital impact within the county to categorize counties as yellow for significant community spread, orange for substantial community spread and red for critical community spread.

Wilson County is considered a red zone county, or one with a critical level of spread. There are currently 65 red counties, 27 orange counties and only eight yellow counties.

Cooper and Cohen also highlighted updates on North Carolina’s distribution of two COVID-19 vaccines. The state expects to receive about 60,000 doses of the Pfizer vaccine and 176,000 doses of the Moderna

vaccine. The Moderna vaccine does not require ultra-cold storage and is slated to go to 59 hospitals and 97 local health department sites.

Wilson County received 975 doses of the Pfizer vaccine as of last week. DHHS reported Tuesday that 24,500 people across the state had received their first vaccination.

The statewide mask mandate and modified stay-at-home order requiring people to be home between 10 p.m. and 5 a.m. will be in effect through the holidays and at least until Jan. 8.

RACIAL EQUITY IN CRIMINAL JUSTICE

The N.C. Task Force for Racial Equity in Criminal Justice delivered its report to Gov. Cooper last week. In its report, the task force recommends solutions to stop discriminatory and biased practices, achieve racially fair outcomes and increase accountability in the law enforcement and criminal justice systems.

For an overview of the recommendations, visit the shortened link <https://bit.ly/3phZtJT>.

The task force is composed of a diverse group of North Carolinians, including advocates for criminal justice reform, victims' rights and disability rights, people with firsthand experience in the justice system, law enforcement officers, police chiefs, sheriffs, prosecutors, public defenders, judges and elected officials. Task force members heard from academics, experts, the general public and local community leaders as they formed their recommendations.

The task force's racial equity recommendations fall into two primary categories: law enforcement and the courts. Law enforcement recommendations include solutions to reimagine public safety, improve policing practices, enhance accountability and strengthen recruitment, training and the law enforcement profession. Court recommendations include solutions to eliminate racial disparities in the courts and promote racial equity post-conviction.

These recommendations are only the task force's first step. Over the next two years, the task force will work with policymakers and partners to implement these solutions.

Linda Cooper-Suggs represents Wilson County in the N.C. House. This weekly column is adapted from her constituent e-newsletter. For more information, email Linda.Cooper-Suggs@ncleg.gov. (Wilson Times, 12/22/20)

2021

FEB 2021 Sponsors ECU Medical School Rebuild

U.S. Rep. G.K. Butterfield has signaled his support for state legislation that seeks to build a new Brody School of Medicine at East Carolina University.

Butterfield, D-Wilson, and congressional colleague Dr. Greg Murphy, R-Greenville, endorsed efforts to expand the ECU medical school in a Monday letter to N.C. House Speaker Tim Moore and Senate President Pro-tem Phil Berger, touting the need for investment in health care education.

”As the country continues to battle the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for robust investment to help close the health care gap has become clearer than ever, especially in rural districts like the ones Congressman Murphy and I represent,” Butterfield said in a Wednesday news release. “I’m glad to join Congressman Murphy in supporting the funding of a new Brody School of Medicine. A new Brody School would help expand its reach across eastern North Carolina, producing more local doctors and providing career opportunities for support staff. Most of all, these investments in a new Brody School will help to provide much-needed health care services to some of our most vulnerable populations in eastern North Carolina.”

State Sen. Don Davis, D-Pitt, filed Senate Bill 18 to fund the new medical school on Jan. 27. Sen. Milton F. “Toby” Fitch Jr., D-Wilson, signed on as a cosponsor. Rep. John Bell, R-Wayne, crossfiled the legislation as House Bill 6 the following day with Rep. Linda Cooper-Suggs, D-Wilson, among 23 cosponsors.

While the Brody rebuild is a state issue, support from the two congressmen could help the project secure federal funding. Murphy, a urologic surgeon, practices at Vidant Medical Center, the Greenville hospital affiliated with ECU’s medical school. (Wilson Times, 2/11/21)

MAR 2021 Rankin Seeks Rematch

Mick Rankin wants a rematch for Wilson County’s state House seat.

The Stantonsburg farmer and Navy veteran announced his candidacy for N.C. House District 24 during the Wilson County Republican Party’s annual convention Thursday afternoon at the Wilson Elks Lodge, noting that he ran a competitive race last fall despite being significantly outspent.

”I didn’t win, but I had almost 19,000 people in Wilson County vote for me,” Rankin said. “That’s a significant number of people. So I feel like I can’t let them down by just fading away into the sunset.”

Rep. Linda Cooper-Suggs, D-Wilson, won her first full two-year term in the General Assembly on Nov. 3, receiving 20,928 votes to Rankin’s 18,856.

Gov. Roy Cooper appointed her to the seat last August when Rep. Jean Farmer-Butterfield resigned to accept a paid position on the N.C. Employment Security Board of Review.

”I think it was a fairly close race, and I’m willing to get back out there to give a voice to those people who came out to vote,” Rankin said.

Cooper-Suggs raised \$72,522.82 and spent \$42,952.45 during the 2020 election cycle, according to campaign finance reports filed with the N.C. State Board of Elections. Rankin raised \$29,223.53 and spent \$29,022.97.

In 2018, Ken Fontenot came within 1.6 percentage points of unseating Farmer-Butterfield, then an eight-term incumbent. Fontenot ran as a Republican-backed unaffiliated candidate but has since joined the GOP.

Democrats’ margin of victory grew to 5.2% with Cooper-Suggs’ win last year, though court-ordered redistricting changed the District 24 boundaries between elections.

The N.C. Republican House Caucus distributed a Feb. 11 news release criticizing Cooper-Suggs for voting against a school reopening bill. The broadside suggests state GOP leaders have Wilson County in their sights for 2022.

While Cooper-Suggs wants North Carolina to expand Medicaid eligibility under the Affordable Care Act, Rankin said he would focus on reducing taxes and recruiting jobs.

”I want everybody to have good economic opportunity,” he said. “You don’t do that by expanding social programs such as Medicaid and things like that. We do that by bringing in jobs that give people long-term careers. We do that by improving our education system.” (Wilson Times, 3/5/21)

MAR 2021 Weekly Column (COVID Relief)

This week, the General Assembly passed additional COVID-19 relief in House Bill 196. Here are some highlights of what this bill allocates:

- \$100 million for K-12 public schools.
- \$40 million for summer learning.
- \$20 million for small businesses.
- \$8 million for broadband grants.

Yet, there is still more that our government can and should do. North Carolina has more than \$4 billion in unreserved cash sitting in its accounts. Why wait to spend it when so many workers and small businesses are hurting? That is why I am a proud cosponsor of House Bill 192, which will invest \$700 million in these priorities:

- \$37 million in small business assistance focused on hospitality, tourism and historically underutilized businesses.
- \$50 million for front-line worker hazard pay.
- One-time bonuses for education employees left out of last year's pay raises:
 - \$2,500 for K-12 teachers and principals.
 - \$1,500 for other school workers.
 - \$2,000 for community college and UNC System employees.
- Use our Unemployment Trust Fund to:
 - Extend the maximum duration of unemployment benefits to 26 weeks.
 - Increase the maximum weekly benefit from \$350 to \$500.

On the floor of the House, we ran amendments to pass these priorities in HB 192. The Republican majority voted down these amendments, but I will keep working to make these happen. Let's get HB 192 out of committee and on the House floor so North Carolinians can get the support they deserve from their government.

SAFE REOPENING

In other news, the Senate failed to override Gov. Roy Cooper's veto of Senate Bill 37. As the governor said in his veto statement, it is imperative that we open schools safely.

Senate Bill 37 does not require schools to follow Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and N.C. Department of Health and Human Services safety guidelines and does not allow for schools to transition back to online learning in case of emergency.

The County Alert System indicates that all North Carolina counties are at significant to critical risk of community spread. We need to keep the safety of our teachers, staff and students at the forefront of this conversation. It is possible that the Senate will reconsider the motion to override the governor's veto this week.

As the pandemic continues, it is critical that everyone who is able gets the vaccine. The only way to defeat COVID-19 is for all of us to work together and we achieve herd immunity. That is when everyone is vaccinated or has developed immunity from getting sick and the virus has nowhere else to spread.

With the authorization of the Johnson & Johnson one-shot vaccine, North Carolina will receive more than 80,000 doses this week. If you are in vaccine groups 1, 2, or 3, make an appointment to get your shot online at <https://myspot.nc.gov>. Vaccine group 4 is eligible starting March 24. (Wilson Times, 3/6/21)

MAR 2021 Weekly Column (Anti-Gun Votes)

The House voted on a number of important bills last week, and I wanted to take the time to explain some of my votes to you:

- Senate Bill 220: I am proud that we were able to pass this bill in cooperation with the governor's office. As I've stated earlier, it is important that we give students and parents the option of having school in person, but we need to ensure that doing so is safe for everyone. The governor signed this bill into law on Thursday.
- House Bill 62: I voted against this bill, which would null county policies and ordinances that limit or restrict enforcement of federal immigration laws. I believe that the federal government has the financial resources and manpower necessary to process its immigration laws, and there is no need to pull from local resources.

Three gun measures passed the House this week that I opposed:

- House Bill 48 allows certain EMT personnel to carry concealed weapons.
- House Bill 49 allows a concealed carry permittee whose permit lapses to not have to take another firearms safety and training course upon applying for renewal.
- House Bill 134 includes the language of HB 48 and 49, but almost makes it legal to carry a weapon onto school property when that property is used as a church.

We need common-sense gun safety reforms, and the sponsors of these bills were unable to answer questions on how these bills, in the real world, keep people safe. They are, instead, asking our most vulnerable to arm themselves instead of actively protecting them. If you disagree with these bills, contact the speaker's office and the office of other elected officials to advocate for safe gun laws in North Carolina. (Wilson Times, 3/13/21)

MAR 2021 Weekly Column

On March 16, there was a mass shooting in Atlanta that targeted our Asian American community. I stand with my brothers and sisters of the AAPI community in this time of mourning and solidarity.

I would like to take a moment to remember the eight people who lost their lives in this senseless violence. It is time to #StopAsianHate. We need to come together to celebrate and love every part of our neighbors' identities, no matter their race, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation.

Wilson County Schools will transition to Plan A in the next two weeks. While I am excited for our students to go back to in-person learning, I urge all students, staff and teachers to follow Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and N.C. Department of Health and Human Services guidelines to stay safe.

As the pandemic continues, it is critical that everyone who is able gets the vaccine. The only way to defeat COVID-19 is for all of us to work together and we achieve herd immunity. That is when everyone is vaccinated or has developed immunity from getting sick and the virus has nowhere else to spread to. With the authorization of the Johnson & Johnson one-shot vaccine, North Carolina has been able to increase its capacity to vaccinate residents. (Wilson Times, 3/22/21)

MAR 2021 Praising Biden “Rescue Plan”

This month marks a year since COVID-19 took hold in North Carolina. Over the past year, many of us have had to struggle just to make ends meet. Our businesses closed, going to school meant sitting at a computer instead of sitting with friends and teachers and the end of this pandemic was hard to see.

But now, things are starting to look up. The number of North Carolinians getting vaccinated increases every day; 1 in 5 have received at least one dose. Restrictions are being eased and life is looking more normal, but there are still people hurting.

That’s why the American Rescue Plan, signed into law by President Biden, is so important. It will continue bringing necessary relief to North Carolinians who are out of work, out of money and out of hope. It will get better, and this bill is a great step forward. It brings billions of dollars to North Carolina, including Wilson County.

Many people, including dependents, have already received their \$1,400 stimulus check, but a typical family of four will receive \$5,600 total. There is plenty of money going not just to the state, but also local governments.

Wilson County will receive \$15.86 million. The city of Wilson will receive \$14.47 million. Additionally, Black Creek will receive \$230,000; Elm City will receive \$380,000; Kenly will receive \$460,000; Lucama will receive \$340,000; Saratoga will receive \$120,000; and Sims will receive \$80,000.

North Carolina schools are starting to open their doors again, taking pressure off parents and ensuring our students learn as much as they can during the rest of this school year. The American Rescue Plan allocates billions for education in our state, investing millions of dollars in funding summer enrichment and after-school programs, with direct funding coming mostly to local school districts.

A new monthly benefit for parents will help ease the burden of raising children while balancing work and other responsibilities. Families with children under 5 years old will begin receiving a monthly check for \$300 per child; the amount drops to \$250 monthly for every child older than 5 and younger than 17. The money will have a dramatic effect on childhood poverty in North Carolina, where advocacy group N.C. Child estimates 40% of children live in poor or low-income households.

This list barely scratches the surface of the help that is coming to North Carolinians. In Raleigh, I will continue advocating for working families and for our state government to give you the support that you deserve. We can and will come out of this pandemic better than we were before. This legislation is a start.

Linda Cooper-Suggs represents Wilson County in the N.C. House. (Wilson Times, 3/24/21)

MAR 2021 Bills Filed (Weekly Column)

This week, I happily filed two bills in the House with some of my colleagues:

- House Bill 347 requires every school to employ one nurse to support the emotional and physical health of our students.
- House Bill 420 would ensure that every K-2 classroom in public elementary schools has a teacher assistant and that there will be at least one teacher assistant for every three third grade classrooms. To watch our press conference on this bill, visit the shortened link <https://bit.ly/31nKzrz>.

The health and success of our students is incredibly important to me. As our students get back to school after so many months of online learning, they are going to need extra support now more than ever. (Wilson Times, 3/27/21)

MAR 2021 For Reducing Marijuana Penalties

Two local lawmakers have signed onto a bill to reduce the punishment for possession of small amounts of marijuana.

State Rep. Linda Cooper-Suggs, D-Wilson, and Rep. James Gailliard, D-Nash, say their decision to support the legislation is about freeing up court officials and promoting equity in arrests and prosecution for marijuana use.

”I’m not in favor of drug use by anyone,” Cooper-Suggs said. “This is about state resources.”

Cooper-Suggs said if the legislation becomes law, court officials like public defenders and probation officers could turn their attention to higher priorities.

”This is about taking down misdemeanors to infractions,” Cooper-Suggs said.

Cooper-Suggs and Gailliard are cosponsors of Rep. Kelly Alexander’s House Bill 290, titled Make Certain Drug Offenses Infractions.

Alexander, of Mecklenburg County, and the other 27 House members who signed onto the bill are all Democrats.

The bill calls for possession of up to 1 ½ ounces of marijuana to be an infraction instead of a Class 3 misdemeanor. Under the proposed law, it would be a felony to possess more than 1 ½ ounces of marijuana; more than three-twentieths of an ounce of marijuana resin, commonly known as hash; or any amount of synthetic marijuana.

If enacted, the change would be effective Dec. 1.

HB 290 passed its first reading on March 15 and has been referred to the House Committee on Rules, Calendar and Operations.

”I see this as an equity issue,” Gailliard said. “Black and white Americans have comparable marijuana usage rates, yet people of color are much more likely to be charged and convicted for possession.”

The change from misdemeanors to infractions is also an economic issue as courts get clogged with such cases, Gailliard said.

In 2019, more than 31,000 people were charged with possession of up to a half-ounce of marijuana and 30,000 people were charged with possession of marijuana paraphernalia, according to Jessica Smith, a professor of public law and government at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

”These individuals are more a danger to themselves than to society, so we can address this with civil fines and not as a crime,” Gailliard said. “This would eliminate the racial disparity and improve how we allocate our court resources.”

Gailliard is the pastor of Word Tabernacle Church in Rocky Mount. He said he doesn’t see any conflict between the bill and biblical principles.

”From the pastor perspective, ultimately salvation is a matter of justice,” Gailliard said. “I don’t see any conflict with advocating for justice in our legislation, nor with giving people a chance to fully recover from their mistakes and problems.” (Wilson Times, 3/27/21)

APR 2021 Weekly Column (Bills Filed)

Last week was spring break for the North Carolina General Assembly. It allows legislators to spend an uninterrupted week in their communities before heading back to Raleigh to continue our work for North Carolinians!

During our break, I have filed a few bills that I would like to highlight for you all:

- House Bill 499, Recovery Rebate for Working Families: This bill provides an earned income tax credit to working families, giving them extra income for health and educational expenses. During the course of this pandemic, we have seen the detrimental economic impact this had on working North Carolinians. The Recovery Rebate will help ease some of those financial burdens.
- House Bill 505, N.C. Healthy Pregnancy Act: This bill will ensure that pregnant people are protected in the workplace and given reasonable accommodations so that they may continue working and have a safe pregnancy. North Carolina is one of four states that does not currently include these protections during pregnancy. Let’s change that. (Wilson Times, 4/10/21)

APR 2021 Weekly Column (Bills Filed)

Last week, we recognized Black Maternal Health Week. Black women are three to four times more likely to die from pregnancy-related complications than white women. We must protect Black mothers, listen to them and address the implicit bias that is so pervasive throughout our health care system.

My colleagues and I honored Black Maternal Health Week by filing a number of bills:

- House Bill 505, the N.C. Healthy Pregnancy Act: I am a primary sponsor of this bill, which ensures that pregnant people are protected in the workplace and given reasonable accommodations so that they may continue working and have a safe pregnancy. Our state is one of only four that does not protect these workers.
- House Bill 507, the Momnibus Bill: I am a cosponsor of this bill, which supports community-based organizations and moms who serve in our military and addresses the implicit bias in our health care system.

On April 13, I had the pleasure of joining Protect Our Care North Carolina on a panel to discuss the importance of expanding Medicaid. Medicaid is extremely important to rural North Carolina, including Wilson. It is what allows our local hospitals and community centers to stay open and care for those who are uninsured. When we expand Medicaid, it wouldn't only provide health insurance; it would create thousands of jobs and increase tax revenue.

In Wilson, Medicaid expansion would create more than 260 jobs and bring nearly \$59 million in additional growth to our county. Medicaid expansion would bolster our economy, and the American Rescue Plan would give our state \$1.7 billion for the expansion.

I look forward to working with my colleagues to pass Medicaid expansion in North Carolina. If you want to hear my full remarks from the panel, visit my Facebook page at www.facebook.com/lcooper.suggs.

Our weekly video is posted on Facebook and Twitter to break down what's happening in the General Assembly. Remember, if you want me to cover a topic in next week's video, fill out the Google form via the shortened link <https://bit.ly/320JRAG>.

On Thursday, May 27, we will host our first virtual town hall for Wilson County! More details will be released as we get closer to the date, but I look forward to seeing you there. (Wilson Times, 4/17/21)

APR 2021 HB 46

- H.B. 46, strengthening whistleblower protections in the state's Human Resources Act passed the House 117-2 on March 31. The two "no" votes come from Reps. Linda Cooper-Suggs, D-24, and Carolyn Logan, D-101. (Salisbury Post, 4/19/21)

APR 2021 School Nurse Bill

As one of six Wilson County Schools nurses, Ginger Phillips has a high student-to-nurse ratio.

"I am responsible for the health of over 2,300 students," said Phillips, the nurse for Rock Ridge and Lee Woodard elementary schools, Springfield Middle School and Hunt High School.

"That's a lot of responsibility for one person when the prevalence of chronic health conditions such as diabetes, epilepsy, asthma and food allergies is increasing every year," Phillips said. "For every student with a chronic condition, school nurses create individualized health plans and emergency action plans. We act as health advocates in 504 and IEP meetings, conduct health screenings and referrals and educate and train teachers and staff on student health, safety and emergency plans."

The National Association of School Nurses would rather see one school nurse for every 750 students. Wilson County Schools' six nurses each have four schools.

A bill in the N.C. General Assembly would drastically improve the ratio. House Bill 347, cosponsored by Rep. Linda Cooper-Suggs, D-Wilson, aims to place one nurse in each school in districts across the state.

Cooper-Suggs said she chose to join the legislation filed by Rep. Cynthia Ball, D-Wake, because she "truly believes in my heart (in) one school, one nurse."

One nurse covering several schools may not be able to respond quickly to medical emergencies, Cooper-Suggs said.

"We know that emergencies are not scheduled, especially for our children or even for the adults who may be there," she said. "Schools, for many of our children, are like a walk-in clinic, which means that many children who suffer from (health conditions), whether it is going to be obesity, asthma, autism, eating disorders, food allergies or ADHD or other illnesses.

"Nurses are there not only to help from a medical standpoint, but also just counseling our children as to the importance of these medications or other things that they could do to improve their quality of life at a very young age."

Cooper-Suggs said "children do not leave their health care needs at the door."

"Sometimes even the adults need to go in to be seen by the nurse as they begin their day," she said. "I support the bill and we need resources to help pay to have enough nurses for every school in Wilson County for our Wilson County children." (Wilson Times, 4/26/21)

APR 2021 Body Camera Footage Bill

U.S. Rep. G.K. Butterfield is echoing state officials' call to release body camera footage that shows sheriff's deputies shooting and killing a Black man in Elizabeth City.

Butterfield, D-Wilson, said Superior Court Judge Jeffery Foster was wrong to deny a coalition of media outlets' petition to release the video. Foster refused to make the recording publicly available on Wednesday, but he did order authorities to allow Andrew Brown's family to privately view five videos from body cameras and one from a dashboard camera within 10 days, with some portions blurred or redacted.

Family members had previously been allowed to view only a 20-second clip from a single body camera.

"I'm disappointed that Judge Jeff Foster declined to immediately release the video footage of the police shooting of Andrew Brown Jr.," Butterfield said in a Wednesday afternoon statement released by his congressional office. "This footage is a public record and there does not appear to be legal justification for withholding it from the public."

State legislators voted in 2016 to exempt body camera and dashboard camera video from the N.C. Public Records Act. The footage was previously considered public record. Current law allows people to petition a Superior Court judge to order a video's release.

Pasquotank County deputies shot Brown on April 21 while serving drug-related search and arrest warrants at his Elizabeth City home. On Tuesday, Brown's family released an independent autopsy showing he was shot five times, including in the back of the head. The state's autopsy has not been released yet.

"Police shootings in America are now an epidemic," Butterfield said. "The public is losing confidence in our law enforcement and criminal justice system. That's why Gov. (Roy) Cooper, Attorney General Josh Stein and the Pasquotank County sheriff have all called for immediate release of the video footage. Further, the State Bureau of Investigation does not object to its release."

During court proceedings, Foster said he believed the videos contained information that could harm the ongoing investigation or threaten the safety of people seen in the footage. He said the video must remain out of public view for at least 30 days, but he would consider releasing it after that point if investigations are complete.

"The release at this time would create a serious threat to the fair, impartial and orderly administration of justice," Foster said.

Butterfield, who served as a Superior Court judge and N.C. Supreme Court justice before his election to Congress, said Foster erred in his ruling on the petition.

"I call on Judge Foster to reconsider his decision to withhold this important information from the public," Butterfield said. "Withholding the video from public inspection while the investigation is ongoing only leads to suspicion and further erosion of the public's confidence in our justice system."

The decision came shortly after a prosecutor said Brown had struck law enforcement officers with his car before they opened fire.

District Attorney Andrew Womble, who viewed the body camera videos, told the judge that he disagreed with a characterization by an attorney for Brown's family that Brown did not try to drive away until

deputies opened fire. Womble said the video shows that Brown's car made "contact" with law enforcement twice before shots could be heard on the video.

"As it backs up, it does make contact with law enforcement officers," Womble said, adding that the car stops again. "The next movement of the car is forward. It is in the direction of law enforcement and makes contact with law enforcement. It is then and only then that you hear shots."

Womble said officers shouted commands and tried to open a car door before any shots were fired.

None of the deputies were injured, according to previous statements by the Pasquotank County sheriff, Tommy Wooten II.

Womble argued that video of the shooting should be kept from the public while state investigators pursue their probe. He said the video should not be released until a trial in the shooting or, alternatively, if a completed investigation results in no charges.

Brown's killing brought renewed scrutiny to North Carolina's 2016 body camera law, with some legislators seeking increased transparency. State Reps. James Gailliard, D-Nash, and Linda Cooper-Suggs, D-Wilson, cosponsored House Bill 698, which would subject police video to public disclosure 48 hours after footage is recorded.

"This is not a blue lives vs. Black lives (matter) conversation," Gailliard said in a news release. "Accountability and transparency is good for everybody. Any areas in our systems that lack accountability is an area already out of control." (Wilson Times, 4/29/21)

MAY 2021 Weekly Column (Four Bills Filed)

Gov. Roy Cooper gave his State of the State Address to the General Assembly on April 26. In his speech, the governor emphasized that now is the time to expand Medicaid, raise our teacher pay and face the racism in our system head-on.

It is time for us to overcome the partisan divide in Raleigh and enact policy that the research shows is good for all North Carolinians. You can watch the governor's speech at the shortened link <https://bit.ly/3eFQ37g>.

I filed four bills in the House:

- House Bill 655 to ensure state employees receive parental leave. Private companies often offer this to their employees, but our government does not. This would include our teachers.
- House Bill 699, which further protects our elderly and disabled population from abuse and exploitation.
- House Bill 705, which would set the minimum wage for our first responders to \$15 an hour. Our first responders put their lives in danger every day to keep us safe. Let's pay them a living wage.

- Last but not least, House Bill 714. This bill creates a grant program for volunteer emergency service providers. They supplement essential care, and we need to ensure they keep their doors open.

Our weekly video is posted on Facebook and Twitter to break down what's happening in the General Assembly. This week, I discussed the American Jobs Plan and addressed the killing of Andrew Brown Jr. in Elizabeth City. Remember, if you want me to cover a topic in next week's video, fill out the Google form at <https://bit.ly/3ulOvFW>.

On Thursday, May 27, we will host our first virtual town hall for Wilson County! More details will be released as we get closer to the date, but I look forward to seeing you there. (Wilson Times, 5/1/21)

MAY 2021 Teacher Assistant Bill

Educators say teacher assistants are “critical” in setting elementary-age students off on the right foot when it comes to reading.

Wilson County Schools has 75 teacher assistants assigned to 14 elementary schools, but that's not enough to have a full-time teacher assistant in every K-2 classroom.

A bill cosponsored by state Rep. Linda Cooper-Suggs, D-Wilson, could change that.

House Bill 420, the K-3 Reading and Literacy Improvement Act, would appropriate funds for local school districts to provide a full-time teacher assistant in every kindergarten through second grade classroom.

'A TRULY CRITICAL POINT'

Cooper-Suggs, a board-certified teacher who retired from Wilson County Schools in 2007, spent another 13 years substituting at all grade levels.

“I have a heart and compassion for teaching,” Cooper-Suggs said. “What I have seen is that one-on-one and small groups helps students in their math and reading assignments. That is critical. Teacher assistants are just so important.”

Teacher assistants make learning more accessible, she said.

“Policy is an important tool to combat low literacy rates, which especially impacts our low-income children,” Cooper-Suggs said. “Providing that additional one-on-one support in the classroom can bolster a child's engagement and help their literacy levels.”

Cooper-Suggs said the state must improve its public school systems.

“Teacher assistants are a vital part of that, especially those that are trained,” she said. “Students who don't read proficiently by the end of third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school compared to their peers who are proficient readers. And that is the reason why we need those teacher assistants to help our children.”

Cooper-Suggs said she was appalled in 2013 when the Republican-controlled state legislature removed roughly 8,000 teacher assistants across the state.

”Some 88% of students who fail to earn a high school diploma were struggling readers in third grade,” she said. “So between kindergarten and third grade is a truly critical point. Students who aren’t proficient readers when they begin fourth grade, as much as half the curriculum they will be taught will be incomprehensible.”

Teacher assistants are allocated to school districts based on K-3 classroom enrollment, according to Amber Lynch, director of public relations for Wilson County Schools.

”Schools that receive Title I funds may elect to provide more teacher assistants than the state allotment,” Lynch said. “Information about teacher assistants varies by school because principals have the ultimate decision on where teacher assistants are assigned.” (Wilson Times, 5/31/21)

MAY 2021 Weekly Column (Explaining Votes, Including CRT Bill)

It’s been another busy week in the General Assembly! We have just passed the crossover deadline, which means that the House will now focus on bills that have passed the Senate, the governor’s budget and redistricting.

I am a member of both the appropriations and redistricting committees, so I am especially looking forward to the months to come.

Below are a few bills the House considered last week that I would like to highlight for you all:

- House Bill 324: This bill tries to erase the history of all ethnic groups, races and genders. Instead of recognizing that we, our laws and our systems have blind spots, it pretends that oppression has not existed. We need to teach children to celebrate diversity, equity and inclusion so that they are prepared to be open and kind citizens of the world. That is why I voted against this bill.
- House Bill 805: I voted for this bill, which would increase the punishment for rioting, destroying property and causing bodily harm to others. I believe that everyone has the right to assemble, but I think that it is important to separate those who assemble peacefully and those who assemble with the intent to destroy property. That said, I believe Senate Bill 300 does a much better job of addressing criminal justice reform and the harm that can be caused during riots. I look forward to supporting that bill as we make changes to Sections 15 and 21.
- House Bill 436: I am proud that this bill passed the House, as it will ensure that our law enforcement officers receive the mental health care they need in their line of work. It will ensure that our officers are in the best condition to offer protection to our communities. (Wilson Times, 5/15/21)

JUN 2021 Rips Halting Of Accepting Federal Unemployment

The N.C. House picked back up last week. We had committee meetings to discuss a possible budget and pass bills.

Unfortunately, the House voted to stop accepting unemployment benefits from the federal government in Senate Bill 116. This means that residents of North Carolina will only receive state unemployment benefits, of which the average weekly payout is \$216, effective 30 days after the bill would become law.

I find this unconscionable. I know that there are still many people in Wilson County and North Carolina who are still struggling to make ends meet. The past year has caused all of our circumstances to change.

We need to look at the real problems with employment numbers, low minimum wages and lack of child care, among other factors, instead of putting the blame on those who are already hurting. (Wilson Times, 6/5/21)

JUN 2021 Guest Column on Investing in Schools

The most important thing to get all students to thrive in school is to have great teachers. A great teacher transforms lives and sets students on paths to success.

I know we all can remember our favorite teachers from high school and think about how much they changed our lives. We became excited about a subject, felt believed in and maybe decided to follow in their footsteps. Every student deserves that sort of inspiration, and the only way to ensure we give that to every student is to have the best and most passionate teachers.

As many of you know, I taught in Wilson County Schools and Wake County Schools for more than 30 years. In that time, I have seen the General Assembly treat teachers with dignity, and I have the General Assembly treat teachers poorly.

In the past decade, more than 8,000 teacher assistant positions were eliminated. We no longer invest in our educators' careers by paying for their master's degrees. Our classrooms are overcrowded and our teachers are underpaid. In 2021, North Carolina ranked 33rd in the country for teacher pay, according to the National Education Association rankings. For starting salaries, we're ranked 43rd.

Most importantly, North Carolina is 39th in how much we invest per student. The state that we all love is falling behind, our students are falling behind, and it is because the General Assembly is not doing what we need to ensure a quality public education for our children.

Let's be clear, that this lack of quality education and teacher pay is not spread equally across the state. There is a significant divide in how much a teacher makes between urban and rural school districts. Wealthier, more urban districts can afford to supplement what teachers are getting paid by the state. In school districts like Raleigh and Charlotte, teachers receive substantial supplemental wages upward of \$8,900. But the same cannot be said for most rural districts.

In Wilson, for example, the average supplemental pay for teachers is \$3,829 - not even half that of the state's large districts.

Like any job, potential employees are attracted to places that pay them well and continue to offer benefits after they retire. If we want to ensure quality education across all of North Carolina, we must not allow geography to get in the way of recruiting good teachers, and we must adjust our retirement benefits for the changes in cost of living.

The best way to lift up our students and teachers as they make their way through our public education system is to make public education a bigger priority than cutting taxes for corporations and the wealthy. State investment in public schools helps all students, no matter where they live. That is why I am working for a state budget that will help close the urban-rural gap in education, provide a recurring 2% cost-of-living adjustment for retirees and provide a meaningful increase in pay for teachers and school staff that will make a real difference in their lives.

Investments in our public schools make our area more attractive for job creators because all employers want a trained workforce. Investments in teacher and public employee pay will make its way to our small businesses in Wilson. That money will be spent by workers and teachers locally at restaurants, stores and other businesses. Education investments will help our area a lot more than tax cuts for higher-income people and corporations, especially because many of those are out-of-state or concentrated in cities.

The urban-rural gap in education is real, and we must address it. A good first step to take would be to pass a state budget that will help Wilson County Schools, students, teachers and our community. (Wilson Times, 6/25/21)

JUL 2021 Rankin Criticizes Cooper-Suggs on Energy Bill

I am writing in response to Rep. Linda Cooper-Suggs' July 20 column, "House bill would raise electricity costs."

She made the claim that House Bill 951 was debated in secret meetings and rammed through on a close vote. She also noted it would raise electric bills for North Carolinians and ignores the threat of climate crisis. The bill, available at the shortened link <https://bit.ly/3hYHXtp>, was initially introduced on May 12 and passed its third reading on July 15. It has been available online since the first reading.

As for the claim of ignoring the climate crisis, the bill retires five coal-fired power plants, pursues an early site permit for an advanced nuclear power plant, submits the six existing nuclear power plants for license renewal and expands the use of solar and renewable power systems. It also establishes a multi-year rate plan that restricts any rate increases to 4% per year maximum to recover costs of building or expanding the electrical grid.

Part of the rate plan is that earnings are monitored, and any excess must be returned to customers. In Part II, it specifically ensures customer fairness in the following ways:

A. “Assures that no customer or class of customers is unreasonably harmed and that the rates are fair both to the electric public utility and to the customer.”

B. Reasonably assures the continuation of safe and reliable electric service.

C. Will not unreasonably prejudice any class of electric customers and result in sudden substantial rate increases or “rate shock” to customers.

Part III covers the Green Source Advantage for military installations, universities and large-use customers. The shared solar and community solar garden section provides for other business and residential customer solar use. Both encourage providers to expand renewable energy sources to customers. It also ensures solar power generated more than used and added to the grid is reimbursed to the owner of the solar system, whether a residential or third-party provider.

This House bill makes an effort to reduce carbon emissions, increase renewable energy sources and provide for long-term stability of our electric utilities. As our community grows, we need our electric resources to expand to meet a growing demand.

Cost increases are part of that growth, and this bill restricts how much our cost will increase, protects the individual customer and ensures any excess revenue is returned to the customers.

Mick Rankin (Wilson Times, 7/23/21)

AUG 2021 Praises Biden’s Illegal Extension of Eviction Moratorium

Last week, the House Republicans released parts of the House budget. The parts released are those directly related to the appropriations subcommittees, such as Health and Human Services, Education, Justice and Public Safety and more. Unfortunately, these documents have not been compiled into a single budget.

This week, we will continue the budget process and learn more about each section. I will update you all on my social media pages (https://twitter.com/cooper_suggs and www.facebook.com/lcooper.suggs). I promise you, Wilson County, that I will stand up for you and the working and retired people of North Carolina.

Some good news came out of the White House last week. President Biden has announced that the national eviction moratorium will continue until early October. This new moratorium covers areas where spread of the delta variant of COVID-19 is high to substantial and will cover over 90% of North Carolina counties, including Wilson. Visit my Facebook page if you would like to see my press release on the eviction moratorium and housing crisis in North Carolina. (Wilson Times, 8/7/21)

AUG 2021 Denounces GOP Budget

Last week, the House Republicans released their 600-plus-page budget, pushed it through committee and called for a vote on the House floor within the span of three days.

Unfortunately, my Democratic colleagues and I did not have the opportunity to have any meaningful input on this budget. There are some great things in this budget:

- Restoring master's pay for teachers.
- Increasing the minimum wage for non-certified school staff to \$15 per hour.
- Giving eight weeks of parental leave to teachers who have just given birth.

Unfortunately, those are just a few of the necessary steps the General Assembly needs to take to ensure the continued prosperity of North Carolinians. The majority of this budget is filled with partisan power grabs and:

- Strips the governor of executive power.
- Prevents the attorney general from settling disputes around the state constitution.
- Limits the authority of the State Board of Elections.
- Increases co-pays for Medicaid patients.
- Puts billions of dollars into block grants, but does not ensure that there will be a competitive process to see who will receive these grants.
- Underfunds pre-k and our community college system.

The House Democrats put forth a 110-page amendment to stop these power grabs and include all other priorities. This amendment was ruled out of order and was not considered by the House. The amendment included:

- Expanding Medicaid to almost 600,000 North Carolinians.
- 5% cost-of-living adjustments for our retired state employees.
- 10% salary increase to teachers over the next two years; and so much more. (Wilson Times, 8/14/21)

SEP 2021 Minimum Wage Hike

Labor Day is an opportunity for many folks to celebrate the end of summer, bring out the grill and take the long weekend to relax. But like many of our holidays, it can be easy to lose sight of what this day represents - recognizing the working people who keep our state moving.

Established as an official federal holiday in 1894, Labor Day continues to carry the important message of honoring our workforce.

But even more important than recognition is passing policies that help working families. That is why I have joined with other N.C. House Democrats to introduce legislation that would level the playing field for working North Carolinians.

We've introduced policies to promote equal pay for equal work, provide paid family leave and boost the minimum wage so workers can live in their communities without government assistance.

Equal pay for equal work is about fairness and rewarding hard work. It should not be controversial, but due to Republican opposition, it still is not law in North Carolina. I am a big proponent of the North Carolina Equal Pay Act so that a difference in gender should not mean a difference in paycheck.

And while work is important, family is our foundation, which is why I introduced the N.C. Healthy Family Act to ensure that workers have paid sick time to take care of sick family members. Nobody should have to choose between work and the well-being of a family member, particularly during a pandemic.

For every North Carolinian, a livable wage is essential. We need to up the minimum wage in stages over the next few years to increase pay for hourly workers. Our state minimum wage has been stuck at \$7.25 since 2009, while the cost of housing and other essential goods and services continue to rise.

For working families, \$7.25 an hour is not even close to what is needed to get by. If you are working full-time, you should not live in poverty and you should not need to rely on government assistance.

So, while we all enjoy the Labor Day weekend, please remember that there is much more we need to do for North Carolina workers and their families. My Democratic colleagues and I will continue to fight for bills to increase wages, promote healthy families and ensure all workers are treated with dignity, no matter their race, gender, or ZIP code. (Wilson Times, 9/4/21)

SEP 2021 Rankin Rips Cooper-Suggs On ERA

Re: "NC passes on chance to ratify Equal Rights Amendment," by Linda Cooper-Suggs, Sept. 3:

The Raleigh Report column from our state legislator noting Women's Equality Day was disappointing. She wrote that the 19th Amendment "granted white women the right to vote," which is a misleading statement.

The U.S. Constitution's 19th Amendment says "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex. Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation." It does not specify race.

There were state and local Jim Crow laws that restricted voting by race that were finally abolished with the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Including race in her statement is disingenuous to all women and only serves to create division. We deserve better from our representatives.

The Equal Rights Amendment has been ratified by 38 states. Since then, five states have rescinded their ratification, making the actual number 33, and 34 is needed to change the Constitution. Another issue is that the deadline to ratify the amendment was 1979, so ratifying it now is essentially symbolic.

Since its inception in 1923, there have been many advances in women's rights, treatment in the labor force, pay and equality in society. It is not perfect, and we can do better. The fact that our current vice president, as well as our state representative, is a woman of color shows how far we have come since 1923.

There are apprehensions on both sides of the ERA ratification issue. Creating equality in pay, job positions and fair treatment are real concerns. So are fears of losing parental rights, having forced military service and considerations for non-workforce women.

Complete equality may ignore the unique and special qualities that women have in society. Rather than trying to create new laws, we should continue to work toward shifting societal norms that protect women in all situations and expand opportunity.

For the state legislature to spend time on a symbolic resolution for an expired amendment action is wasteful. We elected them to focus on current legislation to benefit the people of North Carolina.

Mick Rankin (Wilson Times, 9/6/21)

SEP 2021 Votes Against HB 91

We are still waiting for House and Senate leadership to come out with the final draft of the state budget. After the budget is finished, we will move onto the redistricting process.

Public hearings around North Carolina will come to an end next week. That said, I will continue to use my voice on the House Redistricting Committee to ensure that this process is transparent and accessible to every person in North Carolina.

A bill that I would like to highlight this week is House Bill 91, which is titled Accountability and Fair Play in Athletics. This bill essentially replaces the North Carolina High School Athletic Association with a state commission filled with elected officials.

Our office has received a lot of concerns about this bill because the elected officials on this commission all are in partisan positions with political goals. Most people don't want politics injected into high school sports, and I am inclined to agree, which is why I voted against the bill. I have the mindset that if it isn't broken, we don't need to fix it.

Athletics are an important role in many of our kids' lives. As our children go back to school and begin fall sports, we have to do what we can to protect them. That means getting the vaccine if you're eligible (all of those 12 and up are eligible) and wearing your mask in public spaces.

Our younger kids cannot get vaccinated. They must rely on the community to keep them safe. We are One Wilson. Please sign up to get your shot today.

Earlier this week, the Food and Drug Administration and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention updated their guidance for booster shots. Now the two agencies are recommending boosters for people over the age of 65 and those in high-risk occupations. We expect to receive more guidance on how these boosters will be distributed in the next few days. (Wilson Times, 9/25/21)

OCT 2021 On Redistricting

Recently, the news has included a lot of things about redistricting. As you might know, every 10 years, state legislatures around the country use the new census numbers to reconfigure election districts for Congress, the state House and the state Senate.

Redistricting determines the health of our democracy, whether every North Carolinians' vote is equal and more.

North Carolina is a competitive state that deserves districts that are also competitive, not a gerrymandered state that tries to eliminate one party. The redistricting process should serve the people, who should decide elections. Fair redistricting allows the people to elect politicians and does not let politicians pick and choose their voters.

This state has a long history of finding itself in lawsuits after redistricting. We spent millions of taxpayer dollars to fight about a map we knew was illegal for the past 10 years. I believe that the best way to ensure that we do not spend any more taxpayer money on these lawsuits is for the North Carolina General Assembly to create an independent commission to redraw all election districts.

Independent commissions can come in various forms, but what makes them "independent" is that they are not made up by elected officials.

We open ourselves up to lawsuits and gerrymandering when elected officials who want to keep themselves in office oversee the redrawing of legislative and congressional districts. We need a group of experts whose jobs do not depend on district lines to create maps that are fair to every North Carolinian.

There are currently 14 states that use independent commissions to draw their election districts. I believe North Carolina should be the 15th.

When we create maps with logic and numbers, we can create fair maps for everyone in North Carolina, we can have the elected officials of North Carolina reflect our population and we can create a stronger democracy for future generations.

Linda Cooper-Suggs represents Wilson County in the N.C. House. (Wilson Times, 10/1/21)

OCT 2021 On Leandro Case

North Carolina used to be a leader in the South for public education. In the past decade, we have become content to lose that status. We are not doing enough to serve our students, and we are not providing them with the sound, basic education that our state constitution requires.

The good news is that the resources needed to give our students the education that they deserve are available to us. We have a road map of where to make these long-overdue investments in the Leandro Comprehensive Remedial Plan.

The Leandro plan is the product of a decades-long court case that originated because some families believed the state was underfunding education. Article 1, Section 15 of the N.C. Constitution states, “The people have a right to the privilege of education, and it is the duty of the state to guard and maintain that right.”

As lawmakers, it is our duty to step up and make this right meaningful for students in all schools in North Carolina.

We should invest in universal pre-K to make a high-quality education available to all children before they enter kindergarten. The sooner that we begin investing in our children, the better off they will be. To fully invest in pre-K, we need to ensure better training and pay for early childhood staff and educators. Pre-K should be available to every 4-year-old in our state. North Carolina has a history of smart, early investments like this with programs such as Smart Start. We can do it again.

There cannot be a robust, world-class public school system in North Carolina without well-funded educators and staff. Teachers need to be paid well for the difficult jobs they do, jobs that have been particularly difficult over the past two years. Our hardworking school support staff, like cafeteria workers and bus drivers, should all have wages that are \$15 an hour, no matter what district they work in. We cannot expect to attract new employees or to retain the best when they feel underpaid and unappreciated.

We need to invest in all aspects of our schools, including our infrastructure. There needs to be a concerted effort to build better schools across North Carolina, especially in ZIP codes that have been far too often left behind. The median income of an area should not determine the quality of the education provided its children.

Children across the state deserve to go to school in a building where they can feel comfortable learning. Every classroom should have heat, air conditioning and ceilings without asbestos. Unfortunately, some schools and school districts cannot afford to do these things on their own. The General Assembly needs to step in and support these schools, our school districts and the children of North Carolina.

By implementing the road map provided to us in the Leandro plan, we can get North Carolina schools back on track. As budget negotiations come to a close, fully funding the Leandro plan needs to be top of mind.

The future of education in North Carolina can be bright, but it will not happen without a deliberate investment in children, schools and educators across this state.

Linda Cooper-Suggs represents Wilson County in the N.C. House. (Wilson Times, 10/28/21)

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In reference to Rep. Linda Cooper-Suggs' Oct. 29 column, "The importance of the Leandro case," I agree with her basic premise. The Leandro case was a lawsuit in 1994 where a group of low-income counties complained that budget for education did not provide for adequate education in their counties.

These counties had a higher-than-average tax rate but were still behind other counties in school funding. In 1998, the N.C. Supreme Court agreed. Over the next 27 years, the case was heard in different courts, and in 2020, a court ordered the state to adopt a plan to address the shortfalls in education.

The idea is sound but lacks the specifics to make concrete changes. This has been evident across the conversation on education. We keep hearing about teacher pay, class sizes, failing schools, making investments in education, building better schools, etc. These are nice emotional adjectives and goals that do not address distinctive needs.

Pre-kindergarten programs universally applied result in the same argument of poorer areas lacking the resources found in other areas. Targeted pre-K programs in poor areas may have a better result in future education performance across the spectrum. Put resources where they are needed to gain advantage where it is missing.

Another issue is reading. The Senate bill that WRAL reported on, SB 387, is designed to ensure reading ability is established at the first few grade levels in elementary school that will ensure higher grade performance. Reading comprehension problems have been reported for years, with test results noting a significant percentage of high school graduates do not read at their grade level.

The issue of pay is important for teachers and staff. They should be paid commensurate with their job, education and ability. There should also be standard staffing at schools regardless of size to ensure class sizes remain within guidelines and student services are consistent between schools.

The answer to education cannot be just adding funding. There must be a comprehensive and targeted plan of where the money goes to ensure it's designed to make real and measured improvements. The job of our legislature is to provide the necessary oversight on taxpayer investments.

Mick Rankin (Wilson Times, 11/1/21)

NOV 2021 Opposed New Electoral Maps

The General Assembly passed the new electoral maps this week. I spoke out against these maps in the Redistricting Committee and on the floor of the House.

I do not believe these maps allow for equal representation across our state, and I am concerned that they will violate the Voting Rights Act. You can watch my full remarks on my Facebook page through the shortened link <https://bit.ly/3wkmeBJ>.

It is important to note that the maps for Wilson County have been affected by these new districts. The N.C. House district for Wilson that I currently represent will now include Middlesex and Bailey in Nash County.

The Senate district that Sen. Toby Fitch currently represents has shifted down to include Wilson, Greene and Wayne counties. (Wilson Times, 11/6/21)

NOV 2021 Praises Biden Infrastructure Bill

On Wednesday, Superior Court Judge David Lee held a hearing on the Leandro case, the court case that argues North Carolina's government is not providing adequate funding for our public school system.

Judge Lee ordered North Carolina finance executives to fund the first two years of the Leandro plan, about \$1.7 billion. North Carolina has collected \$29.7 billion in revenue in the past fiscal year.

The court has given the General Assembly 17 years to assess the rulings in the Leandro case and provide its own funding plans, but none have ever been produced. Judge Lee has given the state 30 days to move this funding to our educational systems. We anticipate seeing how the legislature will respond next week.

INFRASTRUCTURE BILL

Congress passed the bipartisan infrastructure deal on Nov. 5. This legislation is set to invest:

- \$110 billion for building and repairing bridges and roads.
- \$65 billion to increase access to reliable, high-speed broadband.
- \$66 billion to repair and update passenger and freight rail across the country.
- \$55 billion to eliminate lead service pipes and provide clean drinking water to all Americans.

The deal will fund many more investments and infrastructure improvements. This is historic legislation that will not only improve Americans' everyday lives, but will create millions of jobs across the country. In the coming weeks, the White House is expected to release a guidebook detailing the grants for which localities and nonprofits can apply. Once that is posted, my office will share it with you. (Wilson Times, 11/13/21)

NOV 2021 Votes For Final Budget

Slashing tax rates today means starving public schools of money and resources tomorrow, Sen. Milton F. "Toby" Fitch Jr. warns.

Wilson County's state senator said he voted against the new North Carolina budget because it doesn't expand Medicaid eligibility and enacts tax cuts that will reduce revenue, setting the stage for miserly education spending in future years.

"We have built into this budget what I call a structured deficit," Fitch said. "In other words, you look down the road a couple years, and you will not have the money. So who suffers? Public education will suffer."

Fitch, D-Wilson, joined a half-dozen fellow Senate Democrats in opposition to the spending plan, which Republican legislative leaders introduced after protracted negotiations with Gov. Roy Cooper. Despite the absence of Medicaid expansion, a perennial priority for the Democratic governor, Cooper has pledged to sign the budget into law.

A provision in the Affordable Care Act allows states to expand access to Medicaid, the federally funded and state-administered health plan for low-income individuals. The federal government would cover 90% of expansion costs, and advocates say the option would provide health benefits to 500,000 North Carolinians who can't afford private insurance and don't qualify for Medicaid under the state's current eligibility standards.

Fitch said tabling the issue for further study and debate represents a missed opportunity.

"Never again are we going to have the sun, the moon and the stars all lined up in a position that gives us this kind of money," he said. "Studying Medicaid expansion? What is there to study? That is an insult. The hospitals are going to suffer."

North Carolina hospitals have lobbied for Medicaid expansion as a way to reduce the costs they incur from treating uninsured patients who are unable to pay.

Despite what Fitch identified as the budget's shortcomings, he voiced support for some of its provisions, including pay raises for teachers and state employees and a cost-of-living adjustment for retired state and local government workers.

"I don't want anybody to think I am anti-this budget," Fitch said. "Somebody has to tickle the keys to say this is a good budget, but it did not go far enough."

The 2021 Appropriations Act, designated as Senate Bill 105, proposes \$25.9 billion in spending for 2021-22 and \$27 billion for the 2022-23 fiscal year.

Senators approved the budget Tuesday afternoon on a 41-7 vote. Support was even greater in the House, where SB 105 passed an initial reading 104-10 on Wednesday.

Rep. Linda Cooper-Suggs, D-Wilson, joined 39 other Democrats voting aye. All 10 members who opposed the budget are Democrats.

A final House vote was scheduled for Thursday. With passage all but certain, SB 105 will advance to Cooper, who released a Tuesday statement indicating he will sign the bill into law. (Wilson Times, 11/18/21)

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As many of you might know, the General Assembly passed a bipartisan budget last week for the first time in years. I decided, after weighing all aspects of the budget, to vote "yes."

The budget includes:

- An average 5% raise for teachers over two years.
- The expansion of high-speed internet across the state.
- An expansion of the Child Tax Credit for working families.
- Raises in the minimum wage for school staff and direct care workers
- An elimination of state tax on military pensions.

This budget does not:

- Expand Medicaid.
- Comply with the court-ordered funding for our public education system.
- Significantly invest in affordable housing.
- Use American Rescue Plan funds to support the expansion of Medicaid for mothers postpartum.

It is not a perfect piece of legislation, but North Carolinians have already waited too long for increased wages, investments in our infrastructure and the disbursement of COVID-19 relief funds. North Carolinians are hurting, and we needed to act.

We are taking a step in the right direction, and I will continue fighting to fix the imperfections of this budget. I have made other comments on the budget over on my Facebook page. You can see them by visiting www.facebook.com/lcooper.suggs. (Wilson Times, 11/20/21)

2022

JAN 2022 Rankin Suspends Campaign

Rancher and retired U.S. Navy officer Mick Rankin has suspended his campaign for N.C. House District 24, citing medical treatment that could interfere with legislative service.

The Republican candidate announced his decision in a letter to the editor sent to The Wilson Times on Friday.

”Over the last week, I have received some health news that will require more testing and potential treatment,” Rankin wrote. “You, the voters, deserve a candidate who is working 100% of the time for you. I am not able to do that right now.”

LETTER: Health concerns draw focus away from campaign

Rankin didn’t elaborate on his diagnosis, writing that he’s pausing his campaign “to concentrate on my family and my health.”

His departure from the race sets a potential GOP primary between Wilson pastor Ken Fontenot and Middlesex college student Aley Hopkins for the Republican nomination, though more candidates could still enter the fray.

Rep. Linda Cooper-Suggs, D-Wilson, is expected to seek reelection in District 24. No other Democrats have declared themselves candidates for the seat.

The outcome of a state Supreme Court hearing on North Carolina’s legislative and congressional redistricting process could shake up the contest. District maps the General Assembly approved last year add the Bailey and Middlesex areas in southern Nash County to all of Wilson County in House District 24. If the court orders boundaries redrawn, Hopkins could be shifted to another district. (Wilson Times, 1/23/22)

FEB 2022 Campaigning in Middlesex

With the possibility of representing the town after new legislative maps are drawn, state Rep. Linda Cooper-Suggs stopped by to introduce herself during Monday’s Middlesex Board of Commissioners meeting.

Cooper-Suggs, a Wilson Democrat who represents N.C. House District 24, said her short time in office has been a labor of love.

The retired teacher said being a lawmaker is a full-time job even if the salary doesn’t reflect it.

The remark drew laughter from the packed house.

"I'm a farm girl," Cooper-Suggs said, explaining she grew up on a Sampson County farm.

Cooper-Suggs, who said she was raised with religious views, said she's working on initiatives important to Middlesex residents including broadband internet and agricultural issues.

As for the redistricting process, Cooper-Suggs said legislators have made a mess of things.

"Both parties have done this," she said. "It's time to stop and listen to the voice of the people. We need constitutional maps."

Cooper-Suggs is seeking reelection to the seat she won in 2020 after filling the unexpired portion of former Rep. Jean Farmer-Butterfield's term by appointment.

House 24 is currently a whole-county district consisting solely of Wilson County. Redistricting plans the Republican-majority General Assembly adopted in November added the Bailey and Middlesex areas to District 24, but a 4-3 state Supreme Court threw out the state's new voting maps earlier this month due to GOP-friendly districts the court deemed unconstitutional partisan gerrymanders.

Redrawn maps could still add voters from red-leaning southern Nash County to District 24. Since legislative districts must have roughly equal populations, District 24 is due to take on more territory.

No other Democrats have announced plans to challenge Cooper-Suggs in her reelection bid. Republicans Ken Fontenot of Wilson and Aalsey Hopkins of Middlesex are vying for the GOP nomination. (Wilson Times, 2/15/22)

APR 2022 LGBT Group Endorsement

Rep. Linda Cooper-Suggs received LGBT rights group Equality North Carolina's formal endorsement in her N.C. House reelection bid, the organization announced Thursday.

Equality NC threw its support behind 35 state House hopefuls, a dozen N.C. Senate candidates, one incumbent and one challenger seeking N.C. Supreme Court seats and one candidate each for the Asheville and Greensboro city councils in its first round of 2022 endorsements. The group says it will continue endorsing candidates in the coming weeks and months.

"At a time when the country is facing the highest number of anti-LGBTQ+ bills in our history, it is imperative that we elect pro-equality legislators. We are at a crossroads for North Carolina and the nation as a whole," Executive Director Kendra R. Johnson said in a news release. "So far in 2022, over 300 anti-LGBTQ+ bills, the majority anti-trans, have been introduced in legislatures across the country. We believe the politicians that we've endorsed are the most well-equipped to help stop this dangerous agenda and move our state and our nation toward a more equitable future."

Endorsements are technically issued by the Equality NC Action Fund, the organization's political arm.

Cooper-Suggs, D-Wilson, is seeking a second full term in the General Assembly. She was appointed to complete Rep. Jean Farmer-Butterfield's term in August 2020, then won the House District 24 seat in the 2020 general election.

With no primary opponents, Cooper-Suggs will face Republican candidate Ken Fontenot in November. (Wilson Times, 4/1/22)

MAY 2022 Supports Medical Marijuana

Wilson County's only commercial hemp grower says if medical marijuana becomes legal in North Carolina, he will be a good candidate to grow it with the knowledge he has gained.

Delmer Langley, owner of D.E.L. Hemp Farm, received a license to grow hemp from the U.S. Department of Agriculture on Jan. 7, following the Jan. 1 transfer of hemp regulatory control from the North Carolina Department of Agriculture's N.C. Industrial Hemp Program administered by the N.C. Hemp Commission.

Langley said he is pleased with the federal regulatory control, from the testing to the ease of access to federal officials.

"You've got to be FBI fingerprinted before you can get your license," said Langley, who runs a rural farm in western Wilson County.

Langley put his first hemp plants into the ground on April 16, 2019, and now harvests hemp about every five weeks from four climate-controlled, grow-lighted greenhouses.

The first couple of years were tough for Langley, who struggled to pay his bills with the meager proceeds from his crop of CBD hemp.

But since then, things have turned around and business is good for Langley, whose smokeable hemp, hemp tinctures, salves and hemp gummies have been selling well at hemp stores, vape stores, hardware stores and truck stops up and down the East Coast.

Langley is sold on the curative capabilities of the cannabis sativa plant and is poised to use the knowledge he has gained from growing hemp to use in growing medical marijuana if North Carolina follows the majority of other U.S. states in decriminalizing it for medicinal uses.

"Medical marijuana is coming real quick," Langley said.

The North Carolina Compassionate Care Act, a bill currently being considered in the General Assembly, would "prioritize the protection of public health and safety in the creation of a system for the cultivation, processing and selling of medical cannabis."

Rep. Linda Cooper-Suggs, D-Wilson, a backer of the bill, recently visited Langley's operation.

"I have had the good fortune of going out and spending about two hours with him, listening and seeing the entire operation and how truly complex it is," Cooper-Suggs said.

The legislator said the bill may pass the Senate during this short session, which begins May 18.

If it passes the Senate, it would then come to the House.

"We can relieve citizens by passing this bill," Cooper-Suggs said. "Medical marijuana can bring needed pain relief to some patients if prescribed and used properly, and it has to be regulated."

Cooper-Suggs said access to medical marijuana will help patients escape dependency on opioids.

"We know that the opioids are easily abused and we have a major societal problem with opioid abuse," she said.

Cooper-Suggs said North Carolina should learn from the 36 states that have already found ways to legalize medical marijuana.

"We must guard against cannabis grown outside of a legal framework," Cooper Suggs said. "As we see with Mr. Langley, everything is controlled. It is a controlled environment. We should carefully regulate it, and we should also prevent underage use once it is passed. And we should fund strong programs to educate potential users."

Cooper-Suggs said "we in the South should be the gold standard for implementing a framework that allows North Carolinians to benefit from raising, producing and selling cannabis."

The representative said safeguards should be put in place for medical marijuana that are even stronger than the state's Alcohol Beverage Control system for liquor. "Also, we should use the revenue to support a robust public health advocacy campaign," Cooper Suggs said.

The bill calls for some 10% of revenue from medical marijuana suppliers to be given to the state.

"I look forward to this bill, Senate Bill 711, coming to the House as we enter this short session so that we can relieve and also bring industry into North Carolina," Cooper-Suggs said. "I am very positive about it. I hope that it can be a bipartisan bill, because it would benefit our state. It would benefit persons who are in pain, from small children with these grand mal seizures and how medical marijuana can help them and their families. I look forward to us working together to be able to pass this bill, so I am very positive." (Wilson Times, 5/9/22)

MAY 2022 New Bills Filed

The General Assembly was back in full swing this past week! We are, once again, having regular committee meetings and voting sessions. On Wednesday, I attended our Health Committee meeting. If you want to stay up to date on what committees are meeting in Raleigh, you can visit ncleg.gov.

Thursday was the last day that we could file new bills for the short session. Below are the bills I have filed that I believe will help Wilson County and the rest of North Carolina:

- House Bill 1130, No Service Animal Registration Required/Funds: This bill clarifies the language regarding the registration requirement for service animals to conform with federal law and to appropriate funds for a public information campaign on the rights of people with disabilities. Read the bill at www.ncleg.gov/BillLookUp/2021/H1130.
- House Bill 1064, Water/Sewer Funds for Elm City: This bill would appropriate \$8 million to the town of Elm City to replace its municipal sewage system (www.ncleg.gov/BillLookUp/2021/H1064).
- House Bill 1066, City of Wilson Communications Service: This bill would allow for the city of Wilson to expand its communications service area to include any property that is located within both Wilson County and an adjacent county (www.ncleg.gov/BillLookUp/2021/H1066).
- House Bill 1063, Stantonsburg/Funds for Town Hall Renovation: This bill would appropriate \$812,000 to the town of Stantonsburg for the purpose of making needed repairs and renovations to Town Hall (www.ncleg.gov/BillLookUp/2021/H1063). (Wilson Times, 5/28/22)

JUN 2022 Denounces Parental Bill of Rights

We've had a busy week in the legislature. The House Democrats introduced House Bill 1136, the Working Families Act, which highlights our budget priorities for the short session. We are committed to making historic investments in North Carolina at a time where we need it now more than ever.

We are proposing giving all teachers at least a 7.5% pay raise over the biennium - which is an increase from the currently scheduled 5% raise. We need to restore master's degree pay supplements for teachers, ensuring that we are investing in our workforce and its growth.

One of my priorities that is reflected in the bill is the \$19 million investment in state substance abuse centers. We need to help end addiction in North Carolina and allow people to get the help that they need.

My colleagues in the Senate passed two monumental bills last week, House Bill 149: Expanding Access to Healthcare; and Senate Bill 711: N.C. Compassionate Care Act. These two bills expand Medicaid and general access to health care and legalize medical marijuana, respectively.

Unfortunately, last week, my Senate colleagues also passed House Bill 755, which they are calling the "Parental Bill of Rights." It is unconscionable to have created and passed this bill on the first day of Pride Month. North Carolina's educators have the tough job of preparing our children for the future and helping them build the critical thinking skills they need to succeed. I believe that curriculum should be set by educators, not by partisan politicians with political agendas. (Wilson Times, 6/4/22)