

## **UNC board members were kept in dark about legislature's order to move offices to Raleigh**

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### **RALEIGH**

North Carolina legislators decided to move the UNC System Office to Raleigh next year without input from the full UNC Board of Governors, upsetting some board members who say they didn't know about the mandatory relocation until it became law.

At least three board members — former Republican lawmakers Art Pope, Leo Daughtry and John Fraley — raised questions about the move and its \$100 million price tag.

But their primary objection is over the lack of consultation with board members, emails obtained by *The News & Observer* show.

Pope, a Republican megadonor, said in an email last week that it was “regretful that the Legislature is mandating such a move, without the move ever being discussed, much less voted on, by the UNC Board of Governors.”

The mandatory move — and the money to pay for it — was quietly added to a more than 600-page spending plan three days before it was signed into law.

The decision to relocate the headquarters out of Chapel Hill without the board's input reveals the political power that lawmakers have over North Carolina's higher education system. And it comes at a time when many faculty and staff members at the state's flagship university in Chapel Hill have joined forces to push back against what they call “partisan interference.”

“The Board of Governors were set up as a buffer to make sure we keep, as much as possible, the politics out of the university,” Daughtry said in an interview.

If you move the system and BOG headquarters to Raleigh, it would be “almost impossible” to do that, he said.

Daughtry and other members emphasized that they're not necessarily opposed to the move. Their biggest concern is that they didn't know about it, they said.

UNC Board Chairman Randy Ramsey did know about and support the legislature's plan to mandate the relocation, but he declined to inform his fellow board members, the emails show. Faced with pushback over that decision, Ramsey hesitantly shared Pope's request that the legislature change the law.

“Even though it is against my better judgment, I will reach out to Sen. Berger and Speaker Moore over the Thanksgiving Holiday,” Ramsey wrote in the email.

But Senate leader Phil Berger, a Republican, declined to make that change, the emails show.

His spokesperson defended the legislature's authority to bring the UNC System office in "closer proximity to the rest of the state's education administration."

### ***'Majority May Not Support Your Personal Agenda'***

The conflict is yet another chapter in the years-long political struggle between the state's Republican-controlled General Assembly and higher education leaders.

In an interview, Pope said, "I don't hold the legislature responsible for any overreach."

Instead, he faulted Ramsey for not bringing the issue to the board before signing off.

"As chairman, you should not keep issues from the full UNC Board of Governors because the majority may not support your personal agenda," Pope wrote in one email to Ramsey. "And even when you think you have the support of the majority, such major positions and actions should only be taken after a full and transparent study and debate, and formal public action by the full UNC Board of Governors."

Emails show Ramsey was hesitant to voice opposition to the relocation plan because the legislature has the constitutional authority to manage the system and because such a move isn't a new idea. He also mentioned the significant amount of money the legislature allocated for campuses in the latest budget.

"Since you all served in the legislature, I feel confident that you understand my hesitancy to tell the elected officials ... that their decisions on this specific issue are wrong," Ramsey said in an email.

Fraley responded that he understands that, but he still questioned the mandatory move. He highlighted board members' frustrations over how the decision was vetted, how quickly the system offices will have to move and who was involved in the process.

Fraley also questioned why "many" board members "had to learn about this by reading the budget or articles in the press," according to an email.

UNC System President Peter Hans also previously told *The News & Observer* he was not involved in the decision.

### ***Mandatory Relocation to Raleigh***

Relocating the UNC System headquarters has been discussed among political leaders for years. But in 2017, the UNC board determined there was no clear reason to relocate, particularly if it was costly.

This summer, however, lawmakers proposed funding the study of a future downtown state government complex that included the system office. The legislature's requirement in the budget

goes even further than that, mandating that all staff and operations move to a new, undetermined space before Dec. 31, 2022.

In this year's spending package, lawmakers allocated about \$3.8 million for the UNC System to lease the undetermined space in Raleigh for three or four years. That location will be selected by the board.

The budget allocates an additional \$11.4 million for the planning and design of a second and permanent move to a future downtown government complex in Raleigh. That complex could house the UNC system, the N.C. Community College System, the state's K-12 school leadership and the Department of Commerce in one location.

In total, lawmakers authorized \$100 million for the relocation project. But Pope said it's unclear whether that money is for a new building, renovation of an existing building or the physical cost of moving.

Having the system office "close to the seat of government" and potentially in the same building with K-12 schools, community colleges and commerce will be beneficial "because all of them, at least in part, need to be focused on economic development," Berger previously told *The News & Observer*.

Board members agree that the question of where the UNC System should be located in the long term is legitimate. But they still say it shouldn't have been added to the budget at the last minute, without the input of some of those it impacts.

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