

Protesters rally as conservatives confer - Legislators huddle inside as critics cite corporate collusion

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Tim Funk and Bruce Henderson Staff Writer Ann Doss Helms and The News & Observer reporter Craig Jarvis contributed

Inside the hotel: Hundreds of conservative legislators, huddled behind closed doors with representatives from businesses and think tanks, crafting "model legislation" the lawmakers can introduce in their states.

Outside the hotel: About 30 demonstrators, protesting corporate influence on government and the past enactment of "model" laws that have restricted early voting, promoted school vouchers, and made it harder to prosecute those who shot others because they felt threatened.

That was the scene at the Westin hotel in uptown Charlotte on Friday, as members of ALEC - American Legislative Exchange Council - held their "spring task force summit."

The group has faced mounting criticism over the past year as public interest groups obtained voluminous documents showing how ALEC influences the nation's lawmakers.

North Carolina has longtime ties to the organization through its Republican lawmakers and N.C.-based corporations such as Reynolds American, GlaxoSmithKline, Bank of America - and Duke Energy Carolinas, which underwrote ALEC's Charlotte meeting with a \$50,000 donation.

Last month, ALEC disbanded its public safety task force in the wake of criticism of its espousal of "stand-your-ground" gun laws, following the death of teenager Trayvon Martin, whose killer, George Zimmerman, has invoked Florida's version of the law.

That incident, which eventually led to Zimmerman's indictment, also caused several corporations, including Coca-Cola, to pull out of ALEC.

On Friday, MoveOn.org reminded uptown pedestrians and drivers of Martin's case - and ALEC's promotion of the gun law at issue - by mounting a billboard on a truck, then driving it around the Westin for two hours.

"THANKS TO ALEC'S SUPPORT OF 'KILL AT WILL' BILLS," it read, "YOUR CHILD COULD BE NEXT."

The sign also featured a large photo of Martin, staring straight ahead, wearing his hoodie.

Inside the Westin, the Observer and other news media were barred from the meeting areas. Several N.C. lawmakers - including Rep. Fred Steen II of Rowan County, an ALEC leader - were in attendance, but efforts to reach them for comment were unsuccessful.

ALEC spokeswoman Kaitlyn Buss said the group invites the news media to cover its annual meeting, but not the spring summit of its eight task forces, where proposed legislation is discussed.

She described the Charlotte gathering, which drew about 600 people, as "an open exchange" pairing legislators with "employers, job creators from across the country" to talk about "the most critical things facing them in their states."

But critics have called ALEC a "bill mill" in which businesses pony up financial support and then tell mostly Republican legislators what legislation they want introduced.

J.R. Tolbert, executive director of the National Caucus of Environmental Legislators in Washington, said: "ALEC is fostering a system in which legislators are sitting behind closed doors with corporations rather than talking to constituents on their doorsteps."

Among Friday's agenda items was model legislation to repeal state renewable-energy mandates, according to the advocacy group Common Cause. The mandates require utilities, including Charlotte-based Duke Energy and Progress Energy in Raleigh, to produce a portion of their electricity from the wind, sun or organic wastes.

North Carolina became the first Southeastern state to adopt such a standard in 2007, setting renewable-energy targets that reach 12.5 percent by 2021.

A bill to repeal the N.C. mandate, introduced last year by a Jacksonville Republican, Rep. George Cleveland, remained stuck in committee. But freshman Republicans in the legislature hope to freeze the standard at current levels.

Duke spokesman Tom Williams said Duke is complying with the N.C. mandate and works with states that adopt the standards.

A second ALEC model bill asserts state control over the practice of hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, in which water and chemicals are pumped underground to extract natural gas. The bill would force drilling companies to say what's in their fracking fluids, information previously treated as trade secrets.

N.C. legislators last year ordered up a state study of fracking but did not address disclosure of fracking fluids. The study, released in April, concluded that drilling can be done safely. Fracking is expected to be a priority of legislators.

Prominent among the protesters Friday were leaders of **Mecklenburg ACTS**, which opposes reliance on standardized testing to evaluate students and teachers.

Passing out giant faux pencils and chanting "No more, no more, high-stakes testing," the group said testing companies that are part of ALEC are promoting their own profits by pushing states to use such exams. They also say education reform legislation recently introduced by GOP lawmakers echoes language suggested by ALEC. A bill introduced by state Senate leader Phil Berger would end teacher tenure and keep third-graders from being promoted until they master reading skills.

Other model bills considered Friday, according to Common Cause, would restrict the ability of state attorneys general to enforce regulatory laws; give states authority to collect sales tax on retailers that operate on the Internet but outside the states' borders; offer tax credits of up to 75 percent of tax liability for providing health care for the uninsured; privatize Medicaid; and weaken public employee unions.

Besides paying \$50,000 to sponsor ALEC's Charlotte meeting, Duke Energy said it has contributed \$66,000 to ALEC since 2009, including \$20,000 to sponsor its 2011 spring meeting in Cincinnati.

Duke said it doesn't support all of ALEC's positions.

"It's like legislative hearings," said spokesman Williams. "We don't necessarily agree with everything that's said, but we like to know what's going on." Duke gives to seven other policy groups with a wide spectrum of positions.

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Inside the ALEC playbook

The American Legislative Exchange Council, better known as ALEC, brings together corporate interests and state legislators to craft free-market, conservative bills behind closed doors.

This "model legislation" is considered for promotion across the country. Over the years, there have been

800 to 1,000 such bills.

ALEC task forces include those that debate and craft bills related to: energy and agriculture; 21st century commerce and taxation; transportation and infrastructure; digital learning; fiscal policy reform; civil justice; and health and human services. N.C. critics , including Progress North Carolina, have called on legislators to abandon the group.

Craig Jarvis