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TAYLOR BATTEN

# *So a liberal and a conservative walk into a bar...*

By Taylor Batten

*Editorial Page Editor*

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Art Pope, a former Republican lawmaker and current member of the UNC System Board of Governors, criticized the lack of transparency in the legislative decision to move the UNC System headquarters from Chapel Hill to Raleigh. CHRIS SEWARD [cseward@newsobserver.com](mailto:cseward@newsobserver.com)



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## Conservative Art Pope and liberal Rick Glazier walk into a bar...

This is no joke. Pope, Glazier and some of North Carolina's other most prominent liberals and conservatives are breaking bread together, trying to find something that has been elusive in recent years: a shred of common ground. These 35 leaders in business, politics, philanthropy, education, law and other areas are investing their time to test whether bipartisan ideas and civil discourse between Republicans and Democrats really are dead.

It's called the North Carolina Leadership Forum, and it's just ramping up. The group met for the first time in March and will gather again on June 17 at Duke University. They hope to convene in Charlotte later this year.

What makes them think this is worth the effort? In an era of Trump and Clinton, Fox News and MSNBC, HB2, gerrymandered districts and legislators who are an ocean apart, it seems hopeless. But it is that deepening gulf in society that makes this effort so urgently needed.

The group will meet four times in the first year, tackling the question of how to enable more North Carolinians to earn enough to support their families. They hope to agree on specific policy proposals, but they know liberals and conservatives may see very different causes of and solutions to that issue.

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Just having the conversation, though, and doing so civilly and respectfully, may be a more important and lasting product of this experiment. The group was created as much to foster reasoned conversation as it was to devise policy solutions. Even if members can't agree on a minimum wage, the thinking goes, they might set an example that others can follow, whether they are legislators, City Council members or just Uncle Fred at the Thanksgiving table.

True listening to the other side, after all, rarely happens anymore. A lot of people consume only the news that reinforces their existing positions. Combine that with a politically divided state and "what you have is political discourse in North Carolina and lots of places that falls short of what we can and should provide," said John Hood, president of the conservative John William Pope Foundation. "Lots of people are disenchanting."

The Leadership Forum was born after Hood wrote a column about North Carolinians living in "media cocoons" and the disappearance of civil debate. Democrat Leslie Winner, then head of the progressive Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, read it and met with Hood about changing that. They recruited a bipartisan steering committee, then the group of 35.

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Hood emphasizes that the goal is not to find moderate solutions.

“Our point is not we have these extremes and if everyone was more centrist we’d be better off,” Hood told me last week. “We *like* the fact that we have people way out on the right and left. The goal is not to marginalize them and aim for the common denominator.

“The point is to have a dialogue that is very robust with points of view strongly argued, but respectfully and with no name-calling. ... If we can have people argue rather than bicker, make good-faith logical arguments, that’s a very valuable outcome.”

It’s easy to imagine this group having civil conversations around a conference table, only to see the divisiveness persist among elected officials. But with what passes for debate today, I’m glad they’re taking a shot.

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The North Carolina Leadership Forum

Anita Brown-Graham, Institute for Emerging Issues

Pete Brunstetter, Novant Health, Inc.

Pearl Burris-Floyd, Gaston Regional Chamber of Commerce

Jack Cecil, Biltmore Farms, LLC

Dan Clodfelter, Parker Poe Adams & Bernstein, LLP

Gene Cochrane, The Duke Endowment

Sharon Decker, Tryon International Equestrian Center

Martin Eakes, Self-Help Credit Union

Dan Gerlach, Golden Leaf Foundation

Rick Glazier, North Carolina Justice Center

Ann Goodnight, SAS

Maurice “Mo” Green, Guilford County Schools

Robin Hayes, Cannon Charitable Trust and Cannon Foundation

Hank Henning, Commissioner of Guilford County

John Hood, John William Pope Foundation

Bob Hunter, North Carolina Court of Appeals

Jeff Jackson, North Carolina Senate

Raquel Lynch, Crisis Assistance Ministry

Esther Manheimer, Mayor of Asheville

Frederick “Fritz” Mayer, Sanford School of Public Policy, Duke University

Chuck McGrady, North Carolina House of Representatives

MaryBe McMillan, North Carolina AFL-CIO

B.J. Murphy, Mayor of Kinston

Chuck Neely, Williams Mullen

Jim Phillips, Brooks Pierce

Art Pope, John William Pope Foundation

Robert Reives, North Carolina House of Representatives

Tom Ross, Volcker Alliance

Richard Stevens, Smith Anderson Law Firm

William Thierfelder, Belmont Abbey College

Eugene Washington, Duke University Health System

Andy Wells, North Carolina Senate

Brad Wilson, Blue Cross & Blue Shield North Carolina

Stefanie Williams, Vance-Granville Community College

Leslie Winner, Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation

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