

Shelton Brothers' Political Legacy: \$1 Million in 25 Years

BY BRUCE SICELOFF

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Eyebrows were arched after Charlie Shelton, a Surry County businessman, secured Republican Gov. Pat McCrory's help this year in launching a Highway Patrol crackdown on truck drivers who park for naps beside interstate highway ramps.

But Shelton and his brother, Ed, co-founders of Shelton Vineyards, have been McCrory campaign supporters since the 1990s. And state Board of Elections records show that the Sheltons have a long history as top-tier money sources for North Carolina governors and other politicians, both Republicans and Democrats.

New research by Democracy NC, a campaign watchdog group, shows that over the past 25 years, the combined donations from the Shelton brothers and their wives, children and children's spouses to state campaigns and candidates totaled more than \$1 million.

The Sheltons wrote checks to winners and losers, governors and legislators, challengers and incumbents in both political parties. Their contributions frequently were bundled – with several family members writing checks for the same amount, on the same day.

And the total of \$1.036 million in donations to state campaigns from 1990 through 2014 does not reflect the Sheltons' full impact on North Carolina politics.

These numbers do not include the Sheltons' major state and national campaign roles in the 1980s. As Republican Gov. Jim Martin's 1988 campaign finance chairman, Charlie Shelton was credited with gathering more than \$400,000 from other Martin donors, including \$34,000 from Shelton family members.

"He's an 800-pound gorilla," another Martin money man, Rusty Goode Jr., told The News & Observer in 1989. "There is no question about it."

The Shelton brothers also contributed \$200,000 to national Republican Party organizations in 1988, to help elect President George H.W. Bush and other national GOP candidates.

Every governor since Martin has benefited from Shelton campaign money. Former Democratic Gov. Jim Hunt received \$126,815 from Shelton family members during the 1990s, and Ed Shelton was Hunt's fundraising chairman for the 1992 campaign.

Former Democratic Gov. Mike Easley received \$61,000 from the Sheltons, most of it for his two gubernatorial campaigns in 2000 and 2004.

Hunt was governor when Charlie's son Chip Shelton, then 27, was named to the state Board of Transportation in 1997. But the appointment was made by a powerful Republican – Rep. Harold Brubaker, then the state House speaker.

Chip's father, Charlie Shelton, gave \$50,000 in 1996 and 1997 to the Randolph County Republican Party, money used by Brubaker and his allies to help GOP legislative candidates. Brubaker's personal campaign committee received \$24,000 from the Sheltons between 1997 and 2011. Charlie Shelton had served on the transportation board in the 1980s, a Martin appointee.

The Sheltons helped the other side at the same time, giving \$100,000 to state Democratic Party committees between 1994 and 2004.

Sen. Phil Berger, now the Senate leader, received a \$4,000 campaign check in 2012. But the Sheltons have not given current legislative bosses anything like the money they handed out in earlier years to former Senate leader Marc Basnight (\$49,000), former Sen. David Hoyle (\$34,000), or former House speakers Jim Black (\$32,200), Richard Morgan (\$20,000) and Joe Hackney (\$10,838).

Also excluded from the \$1 million total is the Shelton family support for McCrory in the 1990s, when he was Charlotte's mayor and Ed and Charlie were Charlotte developers. In 1997, when McCrory was elected to his second term as mayor, his campaign received \$1,500 apiece from the Shelton brothers.

When McCrory first ran for governor in 2008, the only Shelton money he received was a \$250 check from Charlie's son-in-law, Todd Houser. (The winner that year, Democrat Bev Perdue, got a \$4,000 check from Ed Shelton.)

But the Sheltons have returned to McCrory's side since then.

McCrory's successful 2012 election campaign received checks for \$4,000 apiece from Charlie Shelton and five other members of his family on Dec. 31, 2011, and the same amounts from Ed Shelton and three members of his family on Feb. 8, 2012 – in all, \$40,000.

Charlie Shelton met with McCrory in February or early March to press for state action against truck drivers who park illegally on the shoulders of Interstate 77 ramps to take naps. He complained a second time by email in March. State [troopers got busy ticketing truckers](#) across the state, especially in Surry County.

Although Shelton gave McCrory details about the problem, as he saw it, at several exits up and down I-77 in Surry County, the Highway Patrol focused its initial response on a single spot – Exit 93, used by visitors to Shelton Vineyards.

The Shelton brothers wrote McCrory on May 15 to “thank you for your continued support in our effort to get the truckers off the exit ramps,” and they followed it with another thank-you note on June 4.

Later in June, Ed and Charlie Shelton sent checks for \$3,000 apiece to McCrory’s 2016 re-election campaign.

“I don’t need a favor from the governor,” Charlie Shelton, 80, said in a recent interview. “I gave him money because I like him and he’s doing a good job.”

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<http://www.newsobserver.com/news/politics-government/state-politics/article44982354.html>

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McCrory donor sparked Highway Patrol campaign against napping truckers

BY BRUCE SICELOFF

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DOBSON

In the wee hours of a June morning, truck driver Robin Metdepenningen picked the wrong place to park for a nap.

He was feeling sleepy as he drove north through Surry County. So he pulled off Interstate 77 at Exit 93 and rolled up the ramp and across Zephyr Road. He parked behind two other tractor-trailers in the gravel beside the on-ramp, doused the lights and closed his eyes. It was 4:45 a.m.

“Next thing I know, the officer bangs on the door,” said Metdepenningen, 62, of Concord. “He woke me out of a dead sleep.”

Along with three more truckers dozing nearby that morning – a fourth tractor-trailer had pulled in while he slumbered – Metdepenningen was startled to find himself the target of an unusual state campaign to punish violators of an obscure no-parking law.

The new enforcement effort was sparked by complaints to Gov. Pat McCrory from a longtime political supporter: Charlie Shelton, a business executive, Republican fundraiser and former state Board of Transportation member who lives in Surry County.

On June 3 in Raleigh, the Highway Patrol [announced](#) a statewide effort to reduce crashes that involve vehicles illegally parked along interstate highways. But the Highway Patrol had quietly launched its no-parking push three months earlier, focusing at first on I-77 in Surry and Yadkin counties.

In June, a [spokesman attributed](#) the initiative to Col. William Grey, the patrol commander, who had “traveled the state and noticed a lot of this” illegal parking. But a Highway Patrol memo in March told local troopers that the I-77 no-parking effort was in response to complaints that were “funneled through the Governor’s Office.”

Charlie Shelton uses Exit 93 when he travels to and from his Surry County home here in northwestern North Carolina. So do 80,000 people who come here each year to visit Shelton Vineyards, an award-winning winery he owns with his brother, Ed.

The Sheltons backed McCrory two decades ago in Charlotte, where they were developers and he was the mayor. And recent campaign finance records show that, during the year before he was elected governor in 2012, McCrory received at least \$32,000 in political donations from the Shelton brothers, family members and Shelton company executives.

Shelton says he met with McCrory in February or early March to express concern about truckers who park along the ramps up and down I-77.

“It’s unsightly,” Shelton, 80, said in an interview. “It’s against the law to park a tractor-trailer and go to sleep there and throw your trash out on the road. ...

“I asked to talk with him about it, and I spent a little time explaining it to him. And that’s when he got the troopers involved and the DOT involved.”

McCrory’s office did not respond to email and telephone requests for comment.

The parking enforcement campaign is the second instance to become public recently in which McCrory has gotten involved in state policy on behalf of a campaign donor.

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Charlie Shelton, Republican fundraiser and Surry County businessman

The News & Observer and Charlotte Observer [reported in October](#) that McCrory had convened a meeting last year to discuss private prison maintenance contracts held by Graeme Keith of Charlotte, a friend who had contributed \$12,000 to McCrory’s campaigns from 2008 through 2012.

Keith wanted to expand the contracts to all 57 prisons; the state eventually extended the contracts at three prisons, over the objections of senior prison officials.

A focused response

Shortly after McCrory's meeting with Shelton, a March 10 Highway Patrol memo directed five troopers to "patrol the exit ramps on I-77 in Surry and Yadkin for parking violations on the ramps ... throughout your work days and not just once."

But Shelton was not satisfied with the governor's response.

"There still doesn't seem to be a lot of difference – trucks are still parking on the exit ramps," Cindy McBride, a Shelton employee, wrote in a March 31 email to McCrory. She said Shelton wanted the governor to telephone him "to see if there is anything else we can do to clean this up," and she added his cell phone number.

"Thanks," McCrory replied by email, in a message copied to Col. Grey and his boss, Frank Perry, the state public safety secretary. "I was told we are now checking. Now need to verify. Thanks. Pat."

Shelton says he was concerned about "trash and safety" around the ramps all along I-77 – not just at Exit 93, and not out of concern for the family business.

"This has nothing to do with Shelton Vineyards, nor with our wine business here," Shelton said. "That's not my reason for this. It's all up and down the state."

But after Shelton registered his second complaint – and even after the initial enforcement effort had covered two counties – Highway Patrol officials responded as if their problem started and ended at Exit 93.

"For a reference point, the NB (northbound) exit ramp and NB on-ramp are directly in front of 'Shelton Vineyards,' " said an April 1 memo to local troopers in Surry County. (Actually, as Shelton points out, the winery is two miles east of I-77. The Shelton brothers do own a Hampton Inn that fronts the I-77 off-ramp.)

An April 2 email to Col. Grey from Lt. Col. Billy Clayton, the patrol's deputy commander, identified six sergeants and senior officers who were engaged along with local troopers in "a more enhanced plan of action" to solve the problem of trucks "still parking illegally on the Zephyr Road Ramp to I-77."

Dobson police and the Surry County sheriff would be asked for help in "scheduling personnel at critical times to monitor the area for compliance," Clayton wrote.

All of this effort was aimed at enforcing [General Statute 20-140.3\(5\)](#), which makes it illegal, except in an emergency, to "stop, park or leave standing any vehicle" on the

right-of-way of an interstate highway. That language includes the paved and unpaved shoulders of the on- and off-ramps.

Violation is an infraction, punishable by a \$25 fine plus \$188 court costs.

Sgt. Mike Baker, a Highway Patrol spokesman, said Grey was not available for comment. He said troopers have stepped up enforcement of the no-parking law without cutting back on their other duties.

“They’re doing what they can to focus on all motor vehicle violations, not just the improper parking,” Baker said.

Troopers wrote just 70 tickets for illegal interstate parking across North Carolina in 2014, after having averaged 152 tickets a year since 2008, records show.

Those numbers will be higher for 2015. After logging 30 tickets statewide through the end of May, troopers kicked their parking enforcement into high gear.

According to preliminary figures from a special database the Highway Patrol created for this enforcement effort, 261 no-parking tickets were issued on interstate highways across the state during June, July and August – including 139 in Surry County alone.

Sometimes troopers wrote a dozen or more parking tickets in a single day on I-77 in Surry County, and not just at Exit 93. Apologetic troopers told truckers they had been ordered to cruise the exit ramps.

“He said that was his task that night,” trucker Trey Evans said of the trooper who woke him up at 10:47 p.m. June 3, on the Exit 100 ramp north of Dobson. “He was concentrating just on the parked commercial vehicles.”

No place to park

Dozens of citations on file in Surry County show that truckers frequently gave the same explanation for parking alongside the I-77 ramps: They had no other choice.

They were sleepy; one driver said he was weaving on the highway. Or they had run up against federal safety limits designed to fight fatigue by limiting the hours they can drive without rest.

And sometimes there was no other place to park.

Legal parking is available at commercial truck stops including one at Exit 100 that has spaces for 150 trucks, and at state-maintained rest areas including the North Carolina welcome center near the Virginia border, five miles away.

But drivers often told troopers those places and other truck stops on I-77 were filled up. That's why Evans parked on the ramp that night.

"I was out of time," said Evans, 41, of Sylvania, Ga. "I had to take a break. ...

"I told him: You know that fatigued driving is a hazard on the road. There was nowhere for me to park. He told me I should have planned better."

But Evans said there was no way he could know whether he would find legal parking options that night.

The trooper told Evans he could not order him to start driving again in violation of federal trucking "hours of operation" rules. He left a sticker on Evans' truck as a signal that other troopers should not wake him up and ticket him again.

That didn't always work. Rookie trucker Adam Clements and his training supervisor went back to sleep after a trooper ticketed them at 9:40 p.m. June 2 on a ramp at Exit 93.

"Then during the night, another trooper came by," said Clements, 30, of Florence, S.C. "We just showed him the ticket we had already received, and he went on."

Truck driver Metdepenningen of Concord was philosophical about his parking ticket. He said he had not been aware that he was violating the law. And he agreed with Shelton's complaint that drivers sometimes leave trash along the roadside.

But other truckers said the new enforcement push was unfair.

"What's worse?" Clements asked. "Driving beyond your hours or parking where it's not legal?"

Evans complained about paying the combined penalty of \$213, but said he will put the check in the mail.

"I've got two kids, and I'm a single dad," Evans said. "I do everything right and try to pay my bills. That \$200 comes off my family's table. ... I've never had an officer wake you up in your sleep time, unless it's an emergency."

He said he used to spend about \$50,000 a year on fuel at the Exit 100 truck stop on his biweekly runs up to Boston, where he had just delivered a load of Vidalia onions when he was ticketed in June. Now Evans vows never to spend another dollar in North Carolina.

More campaign money

After Grey announced the statewide enforcement campaign in June, the Shelton brothers expressed their gratitude.

Both Ed and Charlie signed a June 5 letter of appreciation to Grey, saying they also had thanked McCrory for focusing attention on I-77 “and its exit ramps that were being abused by the trucking industry.”

Meanwhile, McCrory’s re-election campaign received checks for \$3,000 apiece from Charlie and Ed Shelton on June 11 and 19, respectively. Charlie Shelton said the donations had nothing to do with their appreciation for the Highway Patrol’s parking enforcement.

“No,” Shelton said last week. “I’m trying to do something to make this state look better. I don’t need any favors out of the governor for me personally.”

He said he wasn’t ready to relax pressure on state leaders to stop truckers from parking on the I-77 ramps.

“It got better, all the ramps were cleaned up for a few months,” Shelton said. “But it’s getting worse again.

“The only way you’re going to solve it is giving tickets until you get this problem solved,” Shelton said. “It will take a year or two to get these people to understand they can’t do this. This is 2015. We don’t need that stuff going on.”

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http://www.journalnow.com/news/local/gop-officials-donors-eye-pilot-mountain-state-park-for-hill/article_0750ae2-7a47-5db7-8a56-59c70dcf7f2a.html

GOP officials, donors eye Pilot Mountain State Park for ‘hill climb’

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McClatchy Tribune

CHARLOTTE — A twisting 2.5-mile road in Pilot Mountain State Park leads to the iconic quartzite knob that’s been a landmark for centuries and in public hands since 1968.

But buried in a bill now before North Carolina legislators are a few paragraphs that would let state officials essentially rent out the park for private use.

A group of vintage sports car buffs wants use of the park for a daylong “hill climb” on Sept. 11, a Thursday. State officials appear ready to grant the request, assuming the legislation passes, for a \$10,000 fee.

The decision came after more than a year of hand-wringing among state park officials, including concerns by the park's superintendent, state records show. They say it's unprecedented to close a park to the public to such an extent.

Gov. Pat McCrory's administration, meanwhile, signals that it will be receptive to limited private use of parks if it helps local economies.

"If we see the opportunity to do something for economic development in a rural part of the state, we're going to listen to that," said Brad Ives, an assistant environment secretary who oversees parks. "We're going to expose some well-heeled people to a beautiful part of North Carolina."

Key figures in the Pilot Mountain event were heavy donors to the campaign that got McCrory elected in 2012.

The state Sierra Club, which first raised questions about the event, called it "a precedent-setting permit that would grant exclusive private use of a state park."

The club's state director, Molly Diggins, said allowing the Pilot Mountain event would open the door to similar requests. A second sports car group also wanted to hold a hill climb at Pilot Mountain but canceled it.

"This really shuts the public out of their own park," Diggins said. "And it would appear to shut them out of the process, with no public comment or opportunity for the public to weigh in."

'No political favors'

Sports car enthusiasts who will host the national convention of the Vintage Triumph Register for several days in September approached Pilot Mountain officials in early 2013, according to internal emails. The park is about 80 miles northeast of Charlotte.

One of the convention's main sponsors in Surry County is nearby Shelton Vineyards, founded by brothers Ed and Charlie Shelton. The Sheltons, who owned construction and real estate development businesses, have for years been prominent political and charitable donors.

It's not unusual for state parks to be partly closed for events such as the annual Assault on Mount Mitchell endurance bike ride at Mount Mitchell State Park. But speeding cars would eliminate the public's use of the heavily-used road to the Pilot Mountain summit for the day.

There was also a second hitch, and that led event organizers to the legislature. State parks post 25 mph speed limits. The old Triumphs are likely to charge uphill at 45 mph.

In June, a solution appeared in a bill on environmental laws that was held over from the legislature's 2013 session. The provision lets the state environment secretary waive the speed limit in parks.

Rep. Sarah Stevens, a Surry County Republican, said Ed and Charlie Shelton asked her over lunch to introduce the measure. Stevens said she hopes the legislation will be approved before this summer's session ends.

McCrorry, who appointed environment secretary John Skvarla, got at least \$32,000 in campaign donations from the Shelton brothers, family members or company executives in the year before his 2012 election, records show.

Ed Shelton said last week that he would “let the legislation speak for itself.” He said he didn’t use any political influence to make the hill climb happen.

“There were no political favors, I can tell you that,” he said. “This is more of a community event.”

Ives, who joined the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources when McCrorry took office, said no political pressure was applied on the department. Skvarla “is not even sure the governor knows this is taking place,” Ives said. “The governor’s office has had no part in the legislation.”

Risking a landmark?

Ives said the hill climb would be little different from past private uses of state land, such as the filming of 2012’s “The Hunger Games” in DuPont State Recreational Forest near Brevard.

A separate portion of the Pilot Mountain park, several miles south on the Yadkin River, would remain open to the public, he said.

“We’re trying to accommodate an event that we think will be good for that part of the state and will have minimal impact on visitors,” he said.

But emails reflect the parks division’s angst over granting the request.

Pilot Mountain park superintendent Matt Windsor warned that the hill climb would be unsafe, saying the curving road was not built for high speeds. He pointed out that the summit could lose its federal designation as a National Natural Landmark.

“This is a small amount for reserving a national natural landmark and keeping the public out. Any less and we start a troubling precedent for all parks,” Windsor wrote a supervisor last year as the division debated fees for the park’s use.

The greatest benefit, Windsor added last July, “would be to Shelton Vineyards.”

Last August, then-parks director Lewis Ledford proposed the \$10,000 fee to allow the event. Charges for camping spaces, extra staff and other costs would bring the total cost to \$13,729.

“We are not aware of other state park systems or national park sites that approve the exclusive use of whole park areas. (Both SC and VA parks have shared that they would not approve this request),” Ledford wrote Ives.

Records show little further discussion until July 10. Windsor reported that Shelton Vineyards official John Gillespie delivered an application for a permit “to close the park from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.” and a \$1,000 check.

“I explained to (Gillespie) the current status of the state park road act and he said he had been told that ‘would be changed by the end of the week,’ ” Windsor wrote a superior. He put the check in the park safe.

Possible future events

Charlotte's Steve Ward, president of the Triumph Club of the Carolinas and coordinator of the national convention, said the Pilot Mountain climb would be a one-time event. North Carolina hasn't hosted the convention in 20 years and won't likely do so again for decades, he said.

"Our argument to them was that we're doing it on a weekday, not a weekend, and it's not in the summertime so we didn't think it would impact the public as much," Ward said.

Even if the speed-limit legislation passes, Ward said, the nonprofit can't afford the \$10,000 use fee the parks division has quoted. The group has secured permission to use a rural road elsewhere in Surry County if the Pilot Mountain permit doesn't go through. Another group of enthusiasts, the Sports Car Club of America, also had wanted to use Pilot Mountain for hill climbs on multiple days this month.

After months of negotiation the club ran out of time to pull off the event, said Steve Eckerich of Asheville, the Sports Car Club's executive for the central Carolina region. The nearly \$30,000 the parks division wanted to charge helped kill the deal, he said.

The club held similar events at Chimney Rock, the formerly privately-held tourist attraction near Lake Lure that is now a state park, for 50 years. Those events ended in 1995.

In recent years, two annual climbs near Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest in Robbinsville have added \$800,000 to the local economy, Eckerich said. Spectators are encouraged at both, he said.

"It's hurting the state of North Carolina" to deny the events, he said.

The Sports Car Club still wants to have future hill climbs at Pilot Mountain and at Chimney Rock State Park, he said, and is talking to legislators to make it happen.

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<http://www.wxii12.com/news/car-club-wont-rent-pilot-mountain-state-park/27242526>

Mount Airy News July 31, 2014

Car club won't rent Pilot Mountain State Park

By Keith Strange

Officials hosting this year's Vintage Triumph Register have withdrawn a request to use Pilot Mountain State Park for a "hill climbing" event after outcry from environmental groups were reported in the media.

The issue began about a year ago when Shelton Vineyards owners Ed and Charlie Shelton approached park officials for permission to close down the winding 2.5 mile

entrance to Pilot Knob to allow members of the Vintage Triumph Register car club to hold the event.

The vineyard will host the Vintage Triumph Register National Convention from Sept. 9 through Sept. 14.

“We spoke with the park superintendent and he assured us that the entire park could be rented for special events,” said Ed Shelton of Shelton Vineyards, the host for the event.

Shelton said ultimately park officials said the park could be rented for around \$1,300.

A state law that mandates a maximum speed limits of 25 miles per hour in the park meant he would have to approach legislators in Raleigh to have the law changed.

“We asked the superintendent (of the park) if he had any problem if we talked to some people in Raleigh about the speed limit being raised to 45 miles per hour during the limited time of the ... hill climb,” Shelton said. “He did not object to our comments.”

Shelton then approached Rep. Sarah Stevens, who agreed to include a couple of paragraphs in a 50-plus page bill known as the “technical corrections” bill. The language has been included in Senate Bill 38, which is known as the “amend environmental laws” bill.

It was a move that has rankled leaders of the North Carolina Sierra Club, who said it set a dangerous precedent in the state.

“If this legislation passes, it would be a precedent-setting permit that would open the door in all of North Carolina’s state parks and forests for exclusive use of the main attraction by private interests,” said State Director Molly Diggins.

Shelton said once word of the request to change the law for the event made the media, some of which suggested impropriety and back-door politics, he changed his mind about renting the park.

“In the last few days issues have been raised concerning the limited closing of the park and the limited increase of the speed limit in the park, and also our efforts on behalf of the Triumph group have been questioned,” he said. “Due to the reaction to the information stated above, the Vintage Triumph Register has asked us to withdraw the request to use Pilot Mountain Park.”