

Former Eatonville mayor found guilty of voting fraud, election violations

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A jury Friday night found former Eatonville Mayor Anthony Grant guilty of several charges, including a felony voting-fraud charge.



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Orlando Sentinel

MAY 19, 2017, 11:05 PM

A jury on Friday night convicted former Eatonville Mayor Anthony Grant of a felony voting-fraud charge, as well as a felony election violation and misdemeanor absentee-voting violation.

After the verdict was read, Grant spoke quietly with his brother and other family members gathered in the courtroom. A few minutes later, he was placed in handcuffs and taken to the **Orange County** Jail.

Grant was found not guilty of two other charges in the trial involving him and two former campaign aides, Mia Nowells and James Randolph.

Jurors determined Nowells was guilty of coercing a voter to select Grant, but not guilty of the other three charges she faced. Randolph was found not guilty as well.

Leaving the courthouse late Friday, Grant's family said the conviction surprised them because they said prosecutors didn't have evidence.

"We're still hopeful," said a woman who described herself as Grant's niece. "We were very surprised because they had no evidence. ...It was a witch hunt."

Another niece chimed in: "It ain't over until God says it's over."

The attorneys for Grant and Nowells declined to speak with reporters.

"We are pleased with the jury's verdict. These cases are important to maintaining the community's trust in our voting process," said Eryka Washington, a spokeswoman for the State Attorney's Office.

Grant has been a major part of Eatonville politics for about two decades, serving as mayor of the small town from 1994 to 2009.

He ran for the seat again in 2015 against Bruce Mount, and that's when trouble arose, prosecutors say. Grant won the election despite receiving 15 fewer votes at the polls because he trounced Mount in absentee votes, receiving 196 to Mount's 69.

Jurors began deliberations about 1 p.m. Friday, and the verdict was read a few minutes before 9 p.m.

They concluded the longtime elected official should have known that Mildred McKnight wasn't an Eatonville resident when he showed up at her Rosemont apartment to bring a form to request an absentee ballot.

McKnight testified this week that "Rosemont is my home," and prosecutor Richard Wallsh stressed that comment to jurors. Wallsh showed jurors a lease she signed for the apartment in 2011, but the defense claimed she had voted in four elections in Eatonville since then.

Grant took the stand Thursday and said he never asked McKnight where she lived. Prosecutors alleged it was because he didn't want to know the answer.

"Mr. Grant ran this election to win. ... He wanted everyone's votes," Wallsh said in his closing statement. "I can't think of a more clear example of willful blindness."

Jurors also convicted Grant of coercing Danielle Jones into voting for him.

Jones testified this week that she intended to "Christmas tree" her ballot. She said she wanted to vote for Grant but didn't want to vote for the entire team he campaigned with.

The former mayor was also found guilty of accepting a pecuniary benefit for possessing more than two absentee ballots. The benefit, prosecutors said, was becoming mayor.

The charge Nowells was convicted of was for influencing Latoya Jackson to vote for Grant.

After the election, Grant's opponent Mount was concerned about the number of absentee votes and filed a lawsuit seeking a new election. It was tossed out on a technicality.

However, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement launched an investigation of its own into Grant's victory.

Grant was arrested on the charges last year and was suspended from his post by the governor the next day.

A grand jury formally charged Grant, Nowells and Randolph with various elections and absentee-ballot violations last year, according to a 25-count indictment.

The offenses were pared down this week, with prosecutors declining to pursue several and Orange-Osceola Circuit Judge Keith Carsten tossing out several more Thursday.

It's not clear how much jail time Grant could face. He will likely remain in custody until his sentencing, and a date for that hasn't been set.

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