

CRIME & COURTS

Ex-deputy blames 'infamous dirty politics' for vote-buying scheme in Monroe sheriff's race

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Story Highlights

A former reserve deputy says he was "misled" about "the infamous dirty politics of Monroe County"

Brian "Wormy" Hodge won't tell federal authorities who led him down that criminal path

He faces sentencing Tuesday before a federal judge for his role in a conspiracy to buy votes

A former reserve deputy says he was "misled" by others in "the infamous dirty politics of Monroe County" when he engaged in vote-buying in the 2014 sheriff's race.

But Brian "Wormy" Hodge won't tell federal authorities who led him down that criminal path, documents show.

Hodge, 34, faces sentencing Tuesday before U.S. District Judge Tom Varlan for his role in a conspiracy to buy votes for Republican Randy White in White's successful 2014 campaign for sheriff in Monroe County.

White won that election by a narrow margin of 700 votes over incumbent Democratic Sheriff Bill Bivens but then was booted from office after a judge ruled White couldn't meet the basic requirements to be sheriff.

Tommy Jones, a deputy chief at the time, was tapped to take White's place and promptly hired White as his chief deputy. Jones also tried to hire Hodge as a jailer after Hodge was indicted in 2017 on federal charges he and Betty Jane Best paid at least 13 Monroe County voters \$20 to \$40 each for filling out absentee ballots casting a vote for White.

'Infamous dirty politics of Monroe'

Hodge is hoping to persuade Varlan to grant him the same punishment of three years of probation that Best — described in court records as a marijuana dealer and notorious vote-buyer in Monroe County — received.

Attorney Michael McGovern wrote in a sentencing memorandum that Hodge has already suffered much.

"Until July 18, 2018, when he entered his plea of guilty in this case, the 34-year-old Brian Hodge had led an ordinary life, with an unblemished criminal history, and an impressive work history in law enforcement, military reserves, and emergency medical services," McGovern wrote. "Brian Hodge now stands before the court forever branded as a felon."

McGovern said Hodge never intended to commit a crime and might not have — but for those who deceived him into vote-buying.

“Mr. Hodge’s involvement in the 2014 election was initially motivated by nothing more than a genuine desire to see a change for the better in Monroe County government,” he wrote.

“He considered it his civic duty to become involved in the election process and achieve desired better government through the ballot box. Unfortunately, Mr. Hodge was misled and got caught up in the infamous ‘dirty politics’ of Monroe County. That, of course, was his downfall.”

Prosecutor: Lying lips now sealed

But Assistant U.S. Attorney Bart Slabbekorn counters that Hodge knows just who “misled” him into engaging in a vote-buying scheme but won’t tell the FBI — even now.

“Although his recorded conversations indicate that he has knowledge of other members of the conspiracy, (Hodge) has not provided any assistance or evidence to aid authorities in identifying others involved in this crime,” Slabbekorn wrote.

Worse, the prosecutor argues, Hodge told Best to lie to the FBI. She secretly recorded him instead.

“(An undercover) recording reveals that (Hodge) went so far as to write down fake lead information in a notebook that he planned to show the FBI as corroboration for these lies,” Slabbekorn wrote.

Slabbekorn isn’t quarreling with a probationary sentence since Best received one. But he wants the length of probation for Hodge to extend five years, not three. He’s also asking Varlan to impose a fine between \$3,000 and \$6,000.

Slabbekorn noted Monroe County records more votes by absentee-by-mail ballot as a percentage of population than every county in Tennessee. Monroe County recorded 1,043 absentee-by-mail ballots in the August 2014 election.

“By contrast, Coffee County had nearly identical numbers of registered voters in August 2014, as well as votes cast in August 2014 and Coffee County counted only 98 absentee-by-mail ballots,” he wrote. “These statistics illustrate the serious implications that voter fraud present to the integrity of the election process.

“The August 2014 election included federal primary elections, as well, with a Congressional primary decided by just 1,474 votes,” the prosecutor wrote. “That underscores the potential ripple effects that can occur unless the sanctity of the ballot box is adequately preserved.”

Current sheriff mum, too

The vote-buying scheme was initially exposed by a disgruntled employee of White, who secretly recorded a neighbor saying Hodge paid him to vote for White. The employee, court records show, went to the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation with the recording. White fired him. Jones was chief deputy at the time.

A friend of the Best family later overheard Best bragging about the plot to buy votes for White. The friend agreed to secretly record her as part of TBI Agent Jason Legg’s probe.

Legg confronted Best, and she agreed to secretly record Hodge, Slabbekorn wrote. Hodge arrived at a meeting with Best — who told him the TBI was snooping around about the vote-buying plot — in a Monroe County Sheriff's Office cruiser and in uniform, records stated. He told Best he was “on duty.”

Best captured Hodge on an audio recording in which the pair discussed “hauling” voters “and working for Randy White, the candidate, and the current sheriff, Tommy Jones, who was also working on White’s campaign,” the prosecutor wrote.

Jones and White are not charged in the conspiracy.

Slabbekorn — at a 2017 hearing when Jones sought to hire Hodge, who had been an unpaid reserve deputy, as a paid jailer — repeatedly pressed Jones about his relationship to White, Hodge and the vote-buying plot.

Jones deflected most of those questions. A jail administrator also admitted at that hearing there were no job openings for a jailer when Jones offered Hodge a position.

According to the plea agreement in Best’s case, Hodge, a Loudon County resident, reached out to her in May 2014 because she was a well-known vote-buyer. Best says Hodge recruited her to find voters who would apply for absentee ballots, vote for White and get paid between \$20 and \$40. Hodge provided the money.