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Chatham County ballot access forgery probe ends with fine

By Larry Peterson
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A fine has ended a probe of forged signatures intended to get a candidate on the 2008 Chatham County Commission ballot.

Meeting in Savannah on Wednesday, the State Elections Board approved a $300 fine against Kim Ross, one of those involved in the scam.

The inquiry targeted David Osborne's attempt to qualify as an independent candidate against Republican incumbent Helen Stone.

It began after Stone and Commissioner David Gellatly found fake signatures on petitions for Osborne. There turned out to be at least 50. Moreover, some signatures represented names of people who lived in Gellatly's district.

Osborne soon withdrew as a candidate.

The case dragged on in part because political operative Edwin Morris, a key figure in the probe, suffered multiple strokes and couldn't speak.

Others involved in the effort told investigators they knew little about the overall scheme.

In November, Morris agreed to a public reprimand and a $10,000 fine if he is involved in another campaign over the next 10 years.

Alexia Williams, whom testimony indicated Morris recruited and told to sign a transmittal document for the forged petitions, agreed to a $300 fine.

The board also has sent a "letter of instruction" to others it said committed technical violations of state election law.

Ross testified someone handed her and other workers “stacks” of petitions and told them to sign them as circulators “in order to get paid.”

But Ross, who was not at the Wednesday meeting, said she couldn’t remember who gave those directions.

Former Commissioner John McMasters, a political foe of Stone, also drew intense scrutiny.

Witnesses said McMasters recruited Morris and petitions were brought to the home of McMasters’ mother-in-law, who notarized them. He then submitted them to the county election office.

But he said he knew nothing about the forgeries until after he turned in the petitions. And the inquiry produced no testimony that he did.

Still, suspicion by Stone and others lingered.

“It’s common sense,” Assistant Attorney General Ann Brumbaugh, who works with the board, said at its November meeting. “You have to wonder how could he not know. Unfortunately, ‘How could he not know?’ is not evidence you can take to court.”

In the end, the board dismissed allegations against him for lack of evidence. For the same reason it opted not to send him a letter - suggested by two members - that he avoid involvement with forged petitions.

At Stone’s request, state Sen. Buddy Carter, R-Pooler, this year sponsored a bill to require anyone signing an election petition to present a photo ID. The measure died in committee.

She told the board that, had the petition drive succeeded and had Osborne won, he would have been elected illegally.

“That concerns me as a representative of the citizens of Chatham County and as a voter,” Stone said.

But even though the investigation yielded limited results, she said in a Tuesday interview, it sent a message.

“The message,” she said, “is that if you do things like this, people do check them out, and you are going to get caught.”