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Guilty pleas end voter fraud investigation in Benton County

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ASHLAND - Three people indicted of voter fraud charges last year in Benton County pleaded guilty Tuesday in circuit court.

Tobe Jackson, 72, of Grand Junction, Tenn.; Leon Hunt, 46, of Ashland; and Elberta G. Brown, 48, of Michigan City, entered guilty pleas to three counts of attempted bribery.

Jackson, Hunt and Brown admitted to paying \$30 to three different individuals to influence them to vote for Steven A. Thompson, who was a candidate for sheriff in a Nov. 20, 2001 special election.

The three individuals who received the money were undercover law enforcement agents participating in the investigation.

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"It was a situation where we obtained in advance of the election a tip that this type of activity would be taking place," said Lee Martin, special assistant attorney general. "It was substantiated with payments to (undercover) officers."

Sentencing has been deferred pending the completion of a pre-sentence investigative report. Jackson, Hunt and Brown each face a maximum sentence of six years in prison and a \$3,000 fine.

Charges are still pending against Thompson, who was also indicted last July.

"Our investigation revealed that they had paid anywhere from 30 to 50 individuals on this election day," Martin said. "It was not just limited to these three (undercover officers)."

Martin said Thompson was not available Monday to enter a plea, so he will either enter a guilty plea or go to trial during the next term of court.

Special election

The election was held in 2001 to fill the unexpired term of Jerry Moffitt, who died Feb. 10 following blood stem surgery at the University of Alabama Hospital in Birmingham. He had been diagnosed with lymphoma three years earlier, and his final illness was believed to be the result of toxins used in chemotherapy.

Moffitt's widow, Peggy, was named interim sheriff to serve until the election.

Of the six candidates in the primary election, the race was narrowed to Arnie McMullen and Thompson, and Thompson lost the election by 122 votes in a runoff.

"It is important that our elections are conducted in a fair and neutral manner," said Attorney General Mike Moore. "We must aggressively prosecute these cases to restore the public's confidence in the election process."

The Attorney General's Office Public Integrity Division conducted the undercover investigation with the assistance of the Criminal Investigative Bureau of the Mississippi Highway Patrol.