Last of 16 defendants enter pleas in voter fraud case

JACKSON – The last of 16 defendants in the Benton County Voter Fraud case have plead guilty in court, Attorney General Jim Hood said. Kenny Ray Bowen and Billy Street both appeared before Judge Andrew Howorth in Benton County Circuit Court and plead guilty to two counts of voter fraud.

Three additional defendants, Ronnie Wilkerson, Jasper Buggs and James Bullock plead guilty to voter fraud the day before.

Wilkerson plead guilty to one count of conspiracy to commit voter fraud, Buggs plead guilty to two counts of voter fraud and Bullock plead guilty to five counts of voter fraud.

Each defendant has agreed to testify on behalf of the state in the remaining voter fraud cases. Judge Howorth sentenced all three defendants to five years, with four suspended and one to serve under house arrest on each count, with all counts to run concurrently.

Each defendant received four years of post release supervision and must pay $1,000 to the Crime Victim's Compensation Fund.

Judge Howorth sentenced Bowen and Street to five years in the custody of the Mississippi Department of Corrections with four and a half years suspended, six months to serve on house arrest and four and a half years on post release supervision.

Bowen and Street must also pay $1,000 to the Crime Victim's Compensation Fund.

Hood said these pleas bring to a close a three-year long investigation and a 16 defendant indictment.

All 16 defendants have either plead guilty or were found guilty of buying votes in Benton County related to elections in 2007.

"The judge and juries have sent a message that vote buying is outdated and will not be tolerated any longer in Benton County," said Hood.

Sentencing for some of the defendants, including former **Benton County Supervisor Tate King**, has been postponed until Oct. 8.

King also appeared in court and plead guilty to one count of voter fraud that a jury hung up on late last month.

The same jury found King guilty of another count of voter fraud.

King faces up to five years behind bars or up to a $5,000 fine.

The court also removed King from his public office as a Benton County Supervisor.