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Dutchess Elections Commissioner Fran Knapp pleads guilty to 2 charges, will resign

by Patricia R. Doxsey
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POUGHKEEPSIE >> Dutchess County Democratic Elections Commissioner Fran Knapp pleaded guilty on Friday to two misdemeanors and agreed to resign.

The plea brings to a close an elections wrongdoing case in which she was indicted for 46 felonies and 48 misdemeanors and former Dutchess County GOP Elections Commissioner David Gamache was brought up on one felony and two misdemeanor charges.

Dutchess County Senior District Attorney Ed Whitesell said Knapp pleaded guilty to falsifying a treasurer's report for her husband Fred's 2007 Poughkeepsie mayoral campaign and to signing a poll watcher's certificate in 2012 that she was not authorized to sign.

As part of a plea agreement, Westchester County Judge Barry Warhit ordered Knapp to resign by the end of December and pay a \$175 fine. Also, he ordered the release of the grand jury report in the case, which had been sealed.

Knapp will not serve any jail time.

Knapp faced 41 felony counts of misconduct by an elections official and 41 misdemeanor counts of official misconduct for allegedly changing the designated agent to receive absentee ballots of 41 individuals authorized to vote absentee in 2010.

She also faced felony and misdemeanor charges for allegedly committing fraud in 2008 by falsely creating a certificate of substitution by a committee to fill vacancies. She additionally was charged with felony and misdemeanor counts of misconduct by an elections official, as well as official misconduct, for allegedly fraudulently signing a poll watcher's certificate on behalf of Republican candidate Neil DiCarlo during a state Senate primary in September 2012.

Whitesell said the plea deal allowed his office to accomplish four things that it sought: closure in the case, Knapp being held responsible for her actions, Knapp resigning, and the grand jury report being made public.

The grand jury report, reviewed by the Freeman Friday afternoon, said, among other thing, that Knapp:

- Attempted to sabotage the Democratic candidate running against the party's nominee in a 2011 Poughkeepsie mayoral primary by giving him incorrect information about filing deadlines.
- Violated the county's anti-nepotism rules.
- Should be removed from her position.

Knapp's attorney, Seth Rosenberg, said in a written statement after Friday's court proceeding that Knapp is a "casualty of... partisan political warfare" at the Board of Elections.

Rosenberg said Knapp "accepts the responsibility for conduct so petty it would not likely have been pursued outside the political arena." He said there was no corruption, no fraud and no voter disenfranchisement. ...

"It can fairly be argued that no harm was ever done," he wrote. "Nevertheless, Fran has reasonably decided for herself and her family to forgo the emotional and financial toll a trial would inevitably entail, and she has wisely chosen to put the nightmare ... behind her."

Knapp and Gamache were indicted in July. Gamache was indicted for allegedly certifying as accurate 2010 election results from two districts in the town of Pine Plains that had been altered and approving the filing of those altered results with the county and state.

Gamache pleaded guilty on Nov. 1 to unlawful prevention of public access to records, a violation. In doing so, he admitted concealing records that showed a voting machine in the town of Pine Plains malfunctioned during the 2010 general election and that he transferred votes cast on one machine to another.

Warhit sentenced Gamache to a conditional discharge and ordered him to pay a \$250 fine.

The conditional discharge requires Gamache to stay arrest-free for the next year or face sentencing on the original misdemeanor charge of offering a false instrument for filing.

Mid-Hudson News Network contributed to this report.

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Since 1990, Patricia R. Doxsey has been a reporter for the Freeman, covering politics, crime, and government affairs.
