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CRIME

Ex-deputy in vote-buying scheme gets 5 years of probation

Brian K. "Wormy" Hodge was sentenced Tuesday in U.S. District Court. He also must perform 50 hours of public service.

Author: John North
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KNOXVILLE, Tennessee — **UPDATE: 6 P.M. APRIL 16:** A Monroe County man will serve a five-year federal probation term for his role in paying absentee voters for votes in the 2014 sheriff's race.

U.S. District Court Judge Thomas Varlan imposed sentence Tuesday afternoon on Brian K. "Wormy" Hodge in federal court in Knoxville.

Hodge also will perform 50 hours of community service, the judge ordered. Varlan waived a fine.

Former deputy wants probati...



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Hodge, a former county reserve deputy, conspired with another woman to find votes on behalf of sheriff's candidate Randy White. The Republican White won but later was stripped of office for lack of proper qualifications.

Hodge and Betty Best paid around \$20 a vote, according to authorities.

Best pleaded guilty last year and is serving a three-year probation term. Hodge also pleaded guilty last year in the vote-buying scheme.

Hodge had asked Varlan for a three-year term, the same as Best's. The government sought five years.

As a special condition of supervision, Hodge is barred from participating "in any electoral activity on the federal, state or local level," records state.

PREVIOUS STORY: The former Monroe County reserve deputy and firefighter who admitted paying voters in 2014 to help elect a candidate for sheriff is asking to be put on probation for three years.

Federal prosecutors counter in their own sentencing memo that he should face a five-year probation term.

Brian K. "Wormy" Hodge is scheduled to be sentenced Tuesday, April 16, by U.S. District Judge Thomas Varlan in Knoxville. He pleaded guilty last year to conspiracy to buy votes.

Co-defendant Betty Best, recruited by Hodge in 2014 in the vote-buying scheme, has already pleaded guilty and received a three-year probation term. To help the feds, she secretly recorded Hodge in 2016 talking about what they'd done as they sat in his Monroe County sheriff's SUV.

The pair paid Monroe County voters to cast ballots for Republican candidate Randy White, who won but soon was stripped of office for lack of proper qualifications. They primarily bought absentee, mail-in votes, court records state.

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Best had previously done something similar.

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White won in 2014 by 704 votes out of more than 10,000 that were cast, according to court records.

Rumors that something was amiss soon circulated.

Police talked to both Hodge and Best. They denied it, federal records state.

Agents went back to Hodge in June 2015 and he still denied it. After the election, Hodge became a reserve Monroe County deputy.

In early 2016, a confidential informant recorded Best talking about people, including Hodge, who had taken part in the plan. By July 2016, Best was secretly taping talks with Hodge to help get him charged.

When they spoke that month in Hodge's cruiser, he was in uniform and on duty. He told her to lie to FBI agents, according to the government's sentencing memo.

"The defendant assured (Best) that she would be alright and that the investigation would not come to anything," the memo from Assistant U.S. Attorney Bart Slabbekorn states. "The 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."

Both were later indicted, and Best pleaded guilty and was sentenced to the three-year term.

Hodge should get more, Slabbekorn argues.

It was he who approached Best about buying votes to help White because he knew she'd engaged in the practice before, according to court records. It was he who gave Best money to buy votes, according to court records.

The going rate for a vote was about \$20.

"(Hodge) deliberately recruited (Best) into the campaign and into the conspiracy and he supplied the funds necessary to commit the crimes that were the object of the conspiracy," the government wrote.

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Federal authorities are also asking Varlan to impose a fine for Hodge, the maximum would be \$30,000 under government guidelines.

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A graduate of Sequoyah High School in Monroe County, Hodge has worked as an EMT/paramedic in Monroe County, as a Republican Party organizer, a part-time Tellico police patrolman and as a firefighter for Consolidated Nuclear Security, which oversees operation of the Y-12 nuclear plant in Oak Ridge.

In the vote-buying scheme, he got caught up in Monroe County's "infamous dirty politics," his sentencing memo from attorney Michael McGovern states.

He was misled, the record argues. Best, the memo suggests, is more culpable.

"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," his sentencing memo states. "He considered it his civic duty to become involved in the election process and achieve desired better government through the ballot box."

Hodge is a church-going, upright, good-hearted family man, his lawyer argues. He now works as a paramedic and operations supervisor for MedicOne Medical Response.

Hodge says it's only right that he get the same three years that Best got.

Letters of support have been submitted to the court on Hodge's behalf from his pastor and an acquaintance.

"Mistakes have been made which cannot be undone and Brian has been paying the consequences for them," Sweetwater pastor Johnny Carr wrote. "This young man's life has been marked by service to community and country. While his name has been tarnished, I believe he will rise above it and the man of integrity that I know will reestablish himself."

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