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**EASTOVER
ELECTION FRAUD TRIAL TO BEGIN
MAYOR AND POLICE CHIEF ACCUSED OF INTIMIDATING VOTERS
DAWN HINSHAW *dhinshaw@thestate.com***

Eastover's mayor and police chief are scheduled to go on trial together Tuesday, charged in connection with an election fraud case.

The two -- suspended mayor Chris Campbell, 41, and Chief Tim Ford, 35 -- are charged with conspiring to intimidate witnesses after absentee ballots changed the results of a hotly contested Town Council race. Two high-profile criminal defense lawyers from Columbia, John Delgado and **Jack Swerling**, are representing Campbell and Ford. The trial, being prosecuted by the S.C. Attorney General's office, is expected to last a week or more.

The small Lower Richland town, surrounded by country churches, farmland and the International Paper Co., long has been known for its political liveliness. The Eastover case centers on 62 absentee ballots cast in an April 2006 council election. Six names were on the ballot for two council seats.

Initial reports were the winners, Geraldene Robinson and Walter Jones, each got 113 votes.

But two days later, once challenged ballots were reviewed, Jones and Odell Weston were declared the top vote-getters, with 134 and 125 votes, respectively. Each had picked up 21 votes.

With her third-place finish, Robinson was knocked out of the running.

She complained to reporters that Campbell had intimidated elderly and homebound voters, prompting the mayor to issue a statement: "Let me assure you, and the good people of Eastover, that there has been no misconduct on my part on the matter of absentee ballots during Tuesday's election -- of this I am absolutely positive."

The State Law Enforcement Division investigated and, a year later, Campbell was indicted.

Two months later, charges were filed against the police chief as well for obstruction of justice and intimidation of a witness. He was not accused of election fraud.

Cases of election fraud are almost unheard of since 1989, when they were given over to the Attorney General's office for prosecution.

The office has brought just one other case, which it lost, in 1996.

Three other state-led investigations of election fraud ended without indictments

Spokesman Mark Plowden has acknowledged election fraud is tough to prove: "The numbers speak for themselves."

In the Eastover case, prosecutors have a potential witness list of 52 people, many of them residents.

Among those likely to be called are town Councilman Anthony Gibson, who was charged with malicious injury to property and assaulting a police officer after trying to force his way into Town Hall with a crowbar, saying he was helping gather evidence of financial wrongdoing by the mayor; and Eastover resident Tommy Lee Gilmore, who was named in the indictments as having been threatened by the mayor and police chief.

Since the controversy, the town has been plagued with difficulties which include being unable to complete an audit of its finances.

Campbell, who was elected mayor in 2000, was suspended by the governor once he was indicted by the state grand jury in April 2007.

He issued a news release to deny the charges, saying the allegations came from "unreliable sources" and "known criminals."

"All of us have seen many cases where African-Americans have been wrongly and falsely accused," he said then. "This is yet another example of the same."

The mayor appointed Ford police chief in 2004. At the time, Ford was 32, the youngest chief in Richland and Lexington counties.

He has been allowed to stay on as a police administrator.

"He loves the town of Eastover, and these allegations against him are not true," **Swerling** said last week.

Reach Hinshaw at (803) 771-8641.

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THE CHARGES

Cases of election fraud have been rare since they were given over to the S.C. Attorney General's office in 1989 for prosecution. The office has brought just one case to trial, in 1996, which it lost.

Suspended Eastover Mayor Chris Campbell faces three felony charges: illegal conduct at elections, intimidation of a witness and conspiracy.

He also faces three misdemeanor counts: forgery, obstruction of justice and misconduct in office.

The maximum prison sentence for any single charge is 10 years. If convicted of all six charges, Campbell could be sentenced to 43 years in prison and fined at least \$11,000.

Eastover Police Chief Tim Ford faces two felony counts -- conspiracy and intimidation of a witness -- and two misdemeanor counts -- obstruction of justice and misconduct in office.

If convicted on all four charges, Ford could get 30 years in prison.

ABOUT EASTOVER

The Lower Richland town, roughly a square mile, has about 830 residents. It has seen many changes since Chris Campbell was elected mayor in 2000. Some include:

** It has a new municipal building, which couples Town Hall and the Police Department with a senior center.

** It received state grants to raise a new water tower and beautify Main Street with landscaping, sidewalks and a town clock.

** It started a program to pave dirt roads, again with state money.

** It attracted a funeral home, a dollar store and training/marketing firm.

(1) - Campbell

(2) - Ford



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**EASTOVER MAYOR GUILTY
CHIEF CLEARED
CAMPBELL SENTENCED TO 18 MONTHS FOR FORGERY, MISCONDUCT**
DAWN HINSHAW dhinshaw@thestate.com

A jury deliberated 4 1/2 hours Friday before finding suspended Eastover Mayor Chris Campbell guilty of voter fraud, forgery and misconduct in office.

Judge Michael Nettles of Florence sentenced Campbell to 18 months in prison for each of the three crimes, to be served concurrently, plus 300 hours of community service. A 41-year-old firefighter at McEntire Air National Guard base, Campbell will be eligible for parole after serving about eight months.

Co-defendant Tim Ford, the town's police chief, was found not guilty on all counts in an alleged conspiracy to intimidate witnesses in the Lower Richland town of 830.

Wailing could be heard in the hallway as Nettles weighed the sentence. An ambulance was called after Campbell's mother, Shirley Robinson, collapsed.

Speaking softly, Campbell apologized to "the fine people who live in Eastover" for what he described as unwittingly breaking the law. "But, as I have learned through a jury of my peers, I did do some things that were not correct."

Throughout the eight-day trial, defense attorney John Delgado portrayed Campbell as a brash young leader who set out to improve his hometown.

But Assistant Attorney General Susan Porter cast him as a cheater who wanted to deny his archenemy a seat on Town Council.

The guilty verdict delivered the state its first election-fraud victory since the attorney general was given authority to prosecute the crime in 1989. The state lost the only other case it prosecuted, in 1996.

Seven black jurors and five white jurors found Campbell not guilty on charges of conspiracy, intimidation of a witness and obstruction of justice.

When he was indicted, Campbell, who is black, said the accusations against him were racially motivated.

Porter said Campbell cast 16 ballots illegally in Eastover's April 2006 election, approaching voters who were addled or infirm with absentee ballots he then marked for his candidates.

While Campbell acknowledged helping fill out the absentee ballots, he never signed his name as a witness. Instead, he enlisted the help of two other men.

"If you're not doing anything illegal, stand proud," Porter said. "Sign your name."

Porter derisively referred to Campbell as "a saint" during her summation after Delgado portrayed his client, mayor since 2000, as a public servant who just wanted to modernize Eastover and ensure that "all his people" were given the chance to vote.

"This is all politics," Delgado said. Ford, 35, chose not to testify.

His lawyer, **Jack Swerling**, maintained the state's conspiracy charge rested on the presumption "the chief's going to do anything the mayor says." **Swerling** said there was no proof of a conspiracy.

Posted on the wall in Courtroom 2B at the Richland County Judicial Center was a sheet listing the six candidates on the ballot in the spring of 2006, along with their vote totals.

On Election Day, Geraldene Robinson won one of two available seats on Town Council.

But the results changed once the absentee ballots were counted two days later. Robinson fell eight votes shy, and Campbell's "picks," Walter Jones and Odell Weston, were seated on the council.

The criminal case began to unfold three days before the election when candidate Richard Johnson hosted a Sunday barbecue and Tommy Lee Gilmore came. Johnson testified Gilmore told him he had already lost the election -- because Gilmore had helped the mayor with the absentee ballots.

Porter suggested the mayor selected Gilmore as a partner precisely because Gilmore lacked credibility.

"He drinks and he fights," Porter said. "Why do you think the mayor picked him? Exactly what they've said: Who would believe him? Who would believe him?"



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