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Douglas leader's racial comments spark calls that he resign



LOCAL NEWS

By **Ernie Suggs**, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

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A longtime Douglas County commissioner, under fire over a video recording of him making disparaging comments about black candidates and leaders, is being pressured to resign and end his bid for re-election.

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Commission Chairman Tom Worthan was secretly taped at a public county festival two weeks ago.

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Facing competition from a black woman, Worthan said governments run by blacks “bankrupt you,” and that if African-American sheriff candidate Tim Pounds were elected, “he would put a bunch of blacks in leadership positions.”

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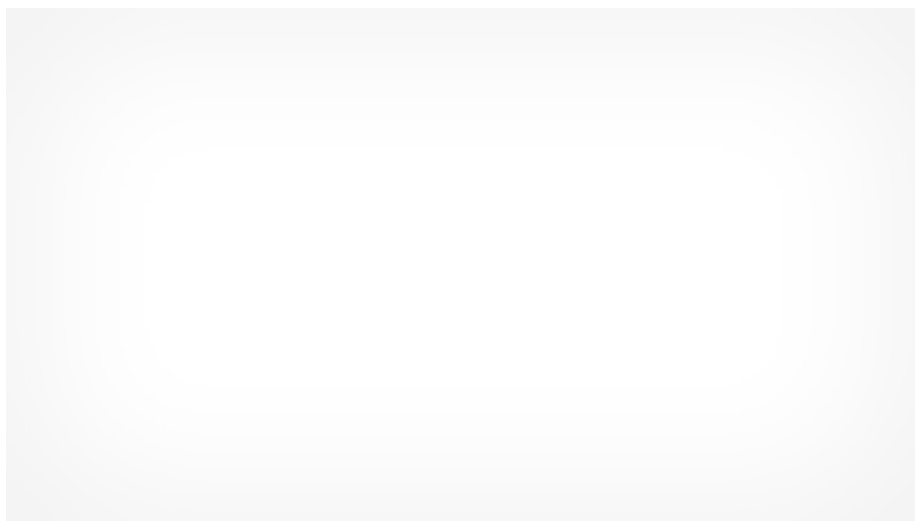
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He later adds: "I'd be afraid he'd put his black brothers in positions that maybe they're not qualified to be in."

After the tape surfaced, Worthan, who has been elected five times as county commissioner and the past three as chairman, went on Fox 5 Atlanta and apologized.

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"I spoke as a politician, trying to say what I needed to say to get a vote," he told the TV station. "And that's unfortunate. And I certainly apologize for doing that."

Worthan has been on something of an apology tour. Rochelle Robinson, the first black and female mayor of Douglasville, said he called her personally to apologize. Robinson said she has known and worked with Worthan for years and never would have suspected such comments from him.

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"I am shocked, hurt and disappointed that he would make those statements. When he called and asked me to forgive him and admitted that he was pandering, I heard him out and forgave him," said Robinson, who was elected in December 2015. "I know who he is. My moral compass and Christian principles led me to forgive him. But I am not saying that the trust has not been broken and that we don't have work to do to get back to where we were."

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State Rep. William K. Boddie Jr., who won a Democratic runoff election in July to represent House District 62, which includes parts of Douglas County, isn't buying the mea culpa. In an open letter, he calls for Worthan not only to drop out of his race for re-election but to resign immediately from his current position.

"Your comments were racist and not mere political pandering. The racist and insensitive comments you made were not a mistake or a lapse in judgment. The racist and insensitive comments you made regarding African-American politicians and candidates represent your true feelings. That is your thought process. That's your mentality," Boddie wrote.

"I grew up under (former Atlanta mayors) Andy Young and Maynard Jackson. I have a lot of respect for them and what they accomplished," Boddie later told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. "So for him to make a statement that no government has been successful under black politicians is offensive. He has lost touch with the constituents."

Douglas County is 45 percent black, according to a 2015 census estimate.

Calls to Worthan, whose bio on the county website lists him as a charter member of the Republican National Committee, were not returned Thursday or Friday. A spokesman for the Douglas County Commission said Worthan was likely on Jekyll Island.

William Boone, a political scientist at Clark Atlanta University, said Worthan's comments were an extension of the national narrative in the general election, particularly the racially tinged rhetoric coming out of the Trump campaign.

“It fits into the larger narrative about innuendo about the ability of certain groups of people — most notably blacks, Mexicans and women,” Boone said.

‘Have to pack up and get out’

Worthan was taped by longtime Douglas County resident Mark Dodd, who questioned the commissioner while running a cellphone video recorder hidden in his shirt pocket.

Dodd said Worthan, who is running against political newcomer Romona Jackson-Jones, had made racist comments to him before. So he wanted to get him on tape talking about Jackson-Jones and Pounds.

“I want black people to have the same opportunities that white people have. I’m tired of seeing black people arrested, beaten and killed for no reason,” said Dodd, a white man who has two mixed-race children.

“If white people are not going to stand up for what they believe is right, if we are not going to stand up for the African-American community, we’re just as bad as the people doing it.”

In the recording, Dodd asked Worthan what would happen if Jackson-Jones and Pounds won.

“Probably going to have to pack up and get out of here, you know?” Worthan said.

Between two men ‘and the lamp post’

Dodd kept pushing, assuring Worthan that their conversation was just between the two of them “and the lamp post.”

“Well, do you know of another government that’s more black that’s successful? They bankrupt you,” Worthan continued, adding that if Pounds becomes sheriff, he will “put a bunch of blacks in leadership positions.”

"I wasn't surprised, because I knew that is what he wanted to say," Dodd said.

Pounds, a 40-year veteran of the Douglas County Sheriff's Office, said he was blindsided by the "derogatory and disparaging comments" of Worthan, whom he once called a friend.

"As the chief executive officer of Douglas County, Tom Worthan should know that any negative remarks that he makes regarding any citizens of Douglas County based on race are unequivocally unacceptable," Pounds said Thursday. "I am very disappointed that Tom feels that race is a measure of a person's ability to lead and serve a community."

Pounds said while he has supported Worthan in the past, he will not vote for him in the Nov. 8 election.

Calls to Jackson-Jones, meanwhile, were not returned Thursday or Friday.

'A better way of making a statement'

Boone said the notion that black-run governments are inept is steeped in both racist beliefs of black inferiority and "a fear of being dominated by blacks."

"The number of cities that go bankrupt, that are run by African-Americans, does not exceed those run by whites," Boone said.

Yet he stops short of urging Worthan to resign or drop out of the race. Instead, he favors the democratic process.

"The resolution is to talk about inclusion. There needs to be a referendum in terms of a vote that will send a message," Boone said. "Voting him out of office is a better way of making a statement."

Boddie said protesters will attend Monday morning's County Commission meeting to call for Worthan's resignation.

About the Author

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Ernie Suggs



Ernie Suggs is an enterprise reporter covering race and culture for the AJC since 1997. A 1990 graduate of N.C. Central University and a 2009 Harvard University Nieman Fellow, he is also the former vice president of the National Association of Black Journalists. His obsession with Prince, Spike Lee movies, Hamilton and the New York Yankees is odd.

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