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Gwinnett commissioner calls John Lewis 'a racist pig,' faces backlash



NEWS

By **Tyler Estep**, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

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Gwinnett County Commissioner Tommy Hunter found himself facing calls for his resignation Monday, just two days after his social media post calling **civil rights icon and U.S. Rep. John Lewis** "a racist pig."

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Hunter is one of the highest elected officials in one of Georgia's largest and most diverse counties.

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The commissioner wrote the controversial Facebook post on Saturday, amid a well-publicized feud between Lewis and President-elect Donald Trump — and in the middle of a weekend set aside to honor **the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.**, a close friend of Lewis.

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Lewis ignited the dispute Friday, when he said he would not be attending Trump's inauguration on Friday and said **he didn't consider him "a legitimate president."** Trump then responded on Twitter, calling Lewis "all talk" and proclaiming his Congressional district — **which includes most of the city of Atlanta** — to be **"in terrible shape and falling apart."**

After The Atlanta Journal-Constitution published screenshots of several of Hunter's posts on Monday, the Gwinnett Democratic Party asked the commissioner to apologize and resign.

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Hunter was alternately conciliatory and defiant Monday. He told The AJC that his "racist pig" comment was "probably an overreaction" and eventually deleted the Facebook post in question. But he left several other potentially controversial posts up and later wished his followers a "Happy MLK Day."

“Remember it’s the content of your character, not the color of your skin that matters,” Hunter wrote. “Someday, hopefully that will become reality.”

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Asked if Hunter would apologize, campaign consultant Seth Weathers said on Monday that the commissioner was “making a point about Lewis.”

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“[Lewis’] past as a civil rights leader was great and Republicans are supportive of it,” Weathers said. “That doesn’t mean someone can make false statements and get away with it.

“Take out Lewis’ past and deal with the here and now. What someone accomplished yesterday doesn’t make up for making false statements now. What was his comment calling Trump illegitimate based on? If a Democrat screams racist it’s a fact. But if a Republican accuses someone of doing something racist, everyone screams that the Republican is racist.”

'A disgrace to Gwinnett'

Hunter's colleagues on Gwinnett's Board of Commissioners - including Chairwoman Charlotte Nash - did not respond Monday to multiple requests for comment on Hunter's posts. Hunter and the rest of the county commissioners are scheduled to have their next meeting on Tuesday.

While they and other local GOP leaders remained silent, Democrats were happy to weigh in.

State Rep. Dar'shun Kendrick, whose District 93 touches part of Hunter's territory in Gwinnett, shared her thoughts on Twitter, saying she was "ashamed."

Gwinnett Democratic Party Chairman Gabe Okoye called Hunter "a disgrace to Gwinnett County in particular and Georgia in general."

Hunter, who was first elected to his county post in 2012 and narrowly won re-election in November, represents the county's District 3. That region covers a wide and diverse swath of southern and eastern Gwinnett, including parts of Snellville, Loganville, Grayson and Dacula.

Though much of suburban Gwinnett remains a Republican stronghold, **Hillary Clinton won the county in November's presidential election**. It was the first time a Democrat took Gwinnett since Jimmy Carter in 1976.

With nearly 900,000 residents, Gwinnett is also the second-most populous county in Georgia and a majority-minority county, meaning non-white residents account for more than half of its population.

Not shy about posting

Hunter is the vice president of a local environmental testing firm and, prior to his time on the board, he worked in the county's department of public utilities and served on its water and sewage authority and its planning commission.

Hunter represents himself as a staunch conservative and has questioned county proposals for things like mass transit.

He's never been shy about posting his opinions on social media.

On Sunday, a day after the "racist pig" post, Hunter took aim at Lewis a second time, calling the longtime congressman's election wins "all illegitimate" because his district, which covers most

of the city of Atlanta, is “drawn to keep him in power.”

He later posted an image that included this phrase: “If you’re easily offended and looking for a ‘safe place’ my page ain’t it.. Move along snowflake.”

Sometime shortly before 11 a.m. Monday, however, the “racist pig” post was no longer on Hunter’s timeline. Other posts remained — including ones that mock U.S. Rep. Hank Johnson; ask if there were “any white guys” on the University of Alabama’s football team; and criticize Gov. Nathan Deal’s decision to declare a state of emergency ahead of last weekend’s ultimately uneventful winter storm.

Hunter’s page saw an influx of nasty comments Monday, many of which called the commissioner disparaging names or urged him to “stay classy.”

Donna McLeod, a Democrat who narrowly lost her bid last year for Ga. House District 105, which is partially in Hunter’s district, said she wasn’t surprised by Hunter’s comments.

"This is the kind of campaign that the president-elect ran," said McLeod, who was attending **Gwinnett's MLK parade Monday**.

Not all of the feedback on Hunter’s comments was negative, though. Many comments on Hunter’s Facebook page expressed support. And Jasmine Smith, a black woman who described herself as a personal friend of Hunter’s, posted on his Facebook page to call him “a fantastic man with an exceptional heart.”

“So what if he openly put his view on [Facebook],” Smith wrote. “We all do a little too much of that. So if expressing yourself on [Facebook] is now wrong we all need to get off.”

—Staff writers Lauren Foreman and Greg Bluestein contributed to this article.

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Tyler Estep is a reporter covering DeKalb County, its government and its people. A Gwinnett County native and University of Georgia graduate, he has been with the AJC since 2015. He previously covered his home county and served stints on the paper's hyperlocal and breaking news teams.

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