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# Dodge sheriff pleads not guilty; voter fraud probe ongoing

## BY RODNEY MANLEY

DUBLIN — Former Dodge County Sheriff Lawton Douglas Jr. and two co-defendants pleaded not guilty Thursday to federal vote-buying and conspiracy charges stemming from elections in 2004.

After the hearing, an investigator hinted that more charges and arrests could be forthcoming from an ongoing investigation by the Georgia Secretary of State's Office, FBI and GBI.

"This is just the 2004 election," said Greg Harvey, agent in charge of the GBI office in Eastman. "We're still investigating the 2008 election."

Douglas, 37, was indicted in July on two counts of conspiracy and four counts of vote buying. Olin Norman "Bobo" Gibson, 43, of Helena, also was indicted on all six counts, while a third defendant, Thedy Deneen McLeod, also 43, is charged with two counts of conspiracy.

McLeod has been to federal court before on vote-buying charges. She was implicated in 1996 when Dodge County was targeted in what federal officials described at the time as the largest election-fraud prosecution in U.S. history.

More than two dozen people — including several county officials — either were convicted or pleaded guilty to charges that included vote buying and that people voted under the names of the dead. McLeod pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to buy votes and was sentenced to four weekends in jail, three years on probation and 100 hours community service.

In court Thursday, U.S. Magistrate Judge Leon Barfield summarized the government's latest allegations, saying Douglas, Gibson and McLeod conspired to "buy votes and have persons vote more than once" in the July primary and August runoff that year.

Douglas is accused of giving money to Gibson, McLeod and others to pay people to vote for him in the elections. Besides cash, Gibson and McLeod, who is also identified in court documents as Deneen Gordon, also gave voters alcohol and drugs, according to the indictment.

"He's innocent," Douglas' attorney, Paul Kish of Atlanta, said after Thursday's arraignment. "We're looking forward to our day in court."

Assistant U.S. Attorney Brian Tanner told Barfield that he planned to turn over to defense attorneys 327 pages of evidence consisting mostly of summaries of FBI and GBI interviews and witness testimony before the grand jury. The evidence also includes a CD of tape recordings, Tanner said.

After the hearing, Tanner declined to say whether the recordings were of interviews or of secretly taped conversations.

To ensure that paid voters actually voted for Douglas, his supporters transported voters to the polls and accompanied them into the voting booth, according to the U.S. Attorney's Office.

The indictment also alleges that Douglas and Gordon purchased and obtained blank absentee ballots from voters, which they then completed with votes for Douglas and submitted to be counted in the election.

Court records identify at least two voters by their initials who were allegedly paid cash to vote for Douglas. The charges each carry a maximum of five years in prison, a \$250,000 fine and three years supervised release, Barfield said.

Douglas, Gibson and McLeod were released on \$10,000 bail bonds and ordered not to travel outside the court's southern and middle districts. Barfield also warned them not to contact witnesses or each other without their attorneys present.

Also Thursday, Harvey issued a statement saying that a special prosecutor had been appointed to handle any state charges that might come out of the investigation. Oconee Circuit District Attorney Tim Vaughn has disqualified his office from the case and asked for the special prosecutor, the statement said.

State Attorney General Thurbert Baker has tapped Brunswick Circuit District Attorney Steven Kelly for the job, and Kelly has assigned Assistant DA David Perry to handle the case.

In 2004, Douglas, a former Helena police chief and Dodge County commission chairman, defeated former Eastman police Sgt. Dan Wilcox in a runoff to unseat incumbent Sheriff Ed Graham. There were no Republican challengers.

Wilcox, who was bidding to become Dodge County's first black sheriff, had finished as the top vote-getter in the primary. After the runoff, Wilcox told The Telegraph that he had heard reports of voting irregularities.

Douglas lost his bid for re-election last year.

In the 1996 case, former Sheriff Jackson Jones and former County Commissioners J. Don McCranie and Doyce Mullis all served time in prison.

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