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NC election fraud probed long before 2018 race

By Michael Biesecker and Emery P. Dalesio
RALEIGH (AP) - Long before accusations of absentee ballot fraud in a small North Carolina county cast doubt on

the results of a heated 2018 congressional race, a state elections investigator spent weeks probing whether the man at the center of the current scandal was among a group buying

votes. That 2010 investigation was one of at least a half dozen instances over the last nine years that prosecutors and elections officials received complaints of serious elections irregularities in Bladen County, a rural locale of 35,000 people that has long had a statewide reputation for political chicanery by both Republicans and Democrats. The state's ongoing criminal investigation into 2018 voting irregularities has focused on Leslie McCrae Dowless Jr., a local political operative and convicted felon.

Marshall Tutor, who retired in March after 15 years as an investigator for the N.C. Board of Elections, told The Associated Press his office first fielded accusations nearly a decade ago that Dowless, now 62, was among a group giving voters cash to fill out ballots the way he directed.

Emails obtained by AP through a public records request detail the elections board's 2010 investigation in Bladen, which began after a Democratic candidate for county commissioner reported seeing political operatives handing voters what he suspected to be cash outside an early voting site.

Tutor traveled to Bladen multiple times, but said in an interview Monday, Jan. 7, he was unable to build a strong enough case against Dowless to support criminal charges.

"Dowless was throwing a lot of money around," said Tutor, 70, recounting the 2010 investigation. "There was no paper trail. Witnesses refused to give sworn statements or testify in court. No one was going to admit they were paid \$5 to vote. But where there's that much smoke, there was fire."

Dowless did not respond Tuesday, Jan. 8, to a message seeking comment. His attorney, Cynthia Adams Singletary, issued a statement last month asserting that Dowless hasn't broken any campaign laws.

The AP first reported last month that North Carolina's top elections official issued an urgent plea nearly two years ago for the Trump administration to file criminal charges against Dowless and others, warning in a January 2017 letter that those involved in illegally harvesting absentee ballots in Bladen would likely do it again if they weren't prosecuted.

Both federal and state prosecutors failed to file criminal charges before the now disputed 2018 vote, the last unresolved Congressional election in the nation.

Investigators are now probing whether Dowless ran a sophisticated operation over multiple election cycles to collect absentee ballots from voters, potentially altering the selections or not turning them in to be counted. Under state law, it is illegal for anyone other than a voter or their immediate family to handle an absentee ballot before it is sealed and mailed.

Also at issue is whether Dowless was working as part of a larger local political machine, including whether he could have had improper help from current or former Bladen County officials.

The state Board of Elections refused to certify the results of the Nov. 6 vote where Republican Mark Harris leads Democrat Dan McCready by 905 votes, according to unofficial results. State investigators are also probing Dowless' work for Harris for the May 2018 Republican primary, in which he narrowly defeated incumbent U.S. Rep.

Robert Pittenger. Harris has admitted making the decision to hire Dowless after hearing about him from Bladen GOP officials, paying for the absentee ballot operation through a political consulting firm. Harris, a Baptist minister, has denied knowledge of any wrongdoing. He filed a lawsuit last week asking a state judge to order his certification as the winner of the November election.

North Carolina's appointed elections board was dissolved earlier this month by a panel of three state judges who in October struck down the GOP-back law that formed it as unconstitutional. A revamped board is due to be seated Jan. 31.

Democratic leaders in the U.S. House have said they won't allow Harris to take office because of the ongoing investigation. The U.S. Constitution makes the House the judge and final arbiter of its members' election contests.

Tutor, the former elections investigator, said he suspected in 2010 that political candidates or their supporters were funneling undisclosed cash to Dowless to fund efforts to influence votes.

"Dowless deals in cash," Tutor said. "He doesn't care about party affiliation. You show him the money, and he'll get the votes."

Years later, evidence surfaced that at least some political cash had been steered to Dowless that was never disclosed in campaign finance reports, as required by state law.

Jeffrey S. Smith, a Bladen County sweepstakes parlor operator, says he gave Dowless off-the-books cash in 2014. Smith testified as part of a lawsuit that he gave Dowless three cash payments totaling \$5,800 on behalf of current Bladen County Sheriff Jim McVicker, a Republican.

"Everybody will tell you that McCrae takes cash for work," Smith told AP in an interview last month, recounting the payments.

North Carolina's legislature has repeatedly voted to outlaw so-called sweepstakes games, which typically resemble video slot machines. But many of the operations have managed to stay open with court challenges, software tweaks and frequent political donations.

Ex-officer accuses chief, city of slander in police beating

RALEIGH (AP) - An ex-North Carolina police officer says Asheville and its former police chief used her as a scapegoat during the case of a white officer filmed beating a black pedestrian.

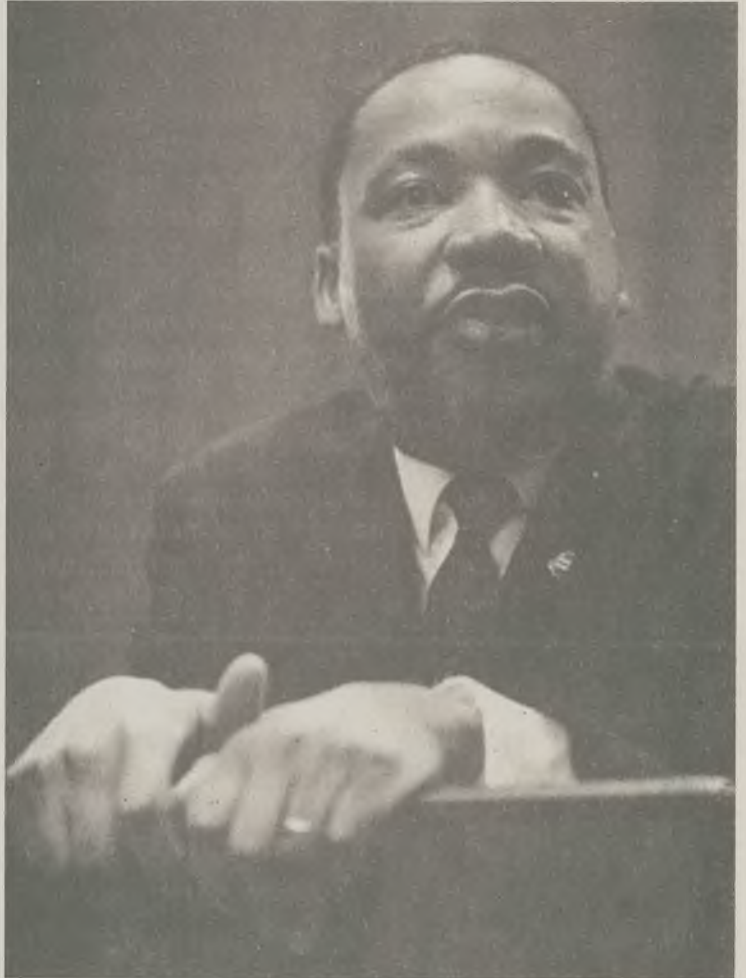
The Asheville Citizen-Times reported Wednesday that former Sgt. Lisa Taube is suing Asheville and former police Chief Tammy Hooper for slander and libel.

Hooper publicly criticized and disciplined Taube for her response to the August 2017 beating of Johnnie Jermaine Rush, who was accused of jaywalking.

Former officer Christopher Hickman is charged with felony assault in the beating, which was recording by police body cameras. The city settled for \$650,000.

Taube was Hickman's supervisor. Then-city manager Gary Jackson said Taube didn't immediately review body camera video or share case notes.

The city has said Taube doesn't have a viable case.



Monday, January of the Martin Luther King, Jr., National Holiday,

Durham Civil Rights Works Reunion Set for Jan. 21 at St. Joseph

SAVE THE DATE --

The Durham Civil Rights Workers' Reunion Committee will host its 32nd annual MLK, Jr. celebration on Monday January 21, 2019 at 1:00pm at the St. Joseph's AME Church, 2521 Fayetteville Street. The theme for this Occasion is "Shifting the Atmosphere: Promoting Safety in our schools, homes and world. Taking it to the next level - Making all Lives Matter". The guest Speaker will be Brother Marshall Thompson, a native of the Durham Community. Brother Thompson is a graduate of Hillside High School, the former Durham Technical Institute, and North Carolina Central University. He served four Years in the United States Marine Corps. Marshall is a longtime member of the St. Joseph's AME Church of Durham, and served on the Durham Police Department for twenty years. Music will be rendered by the Anointed Hillside High School Alumni Choir of Durham, North Carolina, Sister Mary H. Scott, founder and Sister Valerie H. Murphy, pianist. This will be an enlightening, educational and a spiritual event.

If you have any questions, please contact: Sylvia Knuckles-Rebenson, chair Durham Civil Rights Workers' Reunion Committee 919-641-5758

Sen. Kamala Harris (D-CA) Re-Introduces Legislation to Promote Diversity and Inclusion at Federal Reserve

WASHINGTON, D.C. - U.S. Senator Kamala D. Harris re-introduced the Ensuring Diverse Leadership Act, legislation to ensure that at least one minority and one female candidate are interviewed for each vacancy for the presidency of a reserve bank at each of the twelve reserve banks in the Fed (San Francisco, Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Richmond, Atlanta, Chicago, St. Louis, Minneapolis, Kansas City, and Dallas).



SENATOR HARRIS

Of the more than 130 individuals who have served as presidents of the twelve reserve banks, only 3 have been non-white. In 2017, Raphael Bostic became the first African American reserve bank president when he became president of the Atlanta Fed. Additionally, there have been only seven women to ever serve as a reserve bank president.

"Bringing greater diversity to the Federal Reserve will ensure that more perspectives are heard as major decisions are being made about our nation's economic future and will produce better outcomes for the American people," said Senator Harris. "We must do more to ensure that this country's leadership reflects the people they serve—not just at the Federal Reserve, but across all levels of government."



Maryland Rep. Anthony Brown/Courtesy MD|DC CUA & WSSC FCU

Government Shutdown Hits African Americans the Hardest

By Stacy M. Brown, NNPA Newswire Correspondent @StacyBrownMedia

With over 50,000 federal employees, the fourth congressional district in Maryland represents the fifth largest number of workers, and Maryland likely counts as the third-largest impacted state by the government shutdown, according to Democratic Rep. Anthony Brown.

"So, I'm hearing about this, like my colleagues, each and every day from my constituents while this shutdown is set to become the longest in the nation's history," said Brown, who joined Congressional Black Caucus Chair Karen Bass (D-Calif.), Rep. Bennie Thompson (D-Miss.), and Rep. Barbara Lee (D-Calif.), on a media conference call on Friday, Jan. 11.

The CBC members said they were calling for an end to the shutdown so that workers can again begin to collect their paychecks and critical government services can resume.

During the call, the members discussed the debilitating effects of the ongoing government shutdown as thousands of federal employees are unable to collect their paychecks.

They also denounced President Donald Trump's threat to declare a state of emergency if Congress refuses to fund a border wall - one in which the president claimed during his campaign that Mexico would pay for.

"This shutdown and the whole issue of the wall is a fake crisis," Bass said.

"At the end of the day, even if he had all the money, it would still take eminent domain to build his wall. That process will take years. This is further evidence that this is a fake crisis and, in my opinion, just an attempt to change our attention away from the numerous impending investigations," she said.

Thompson, the chair of the Homeland Security Committee, said the shutdown is taking its toll on workers and government operations.

"It is a challenge for us in Homeland Security. We have 80 percent of the workforce not being paid. That goes from TSA employees in airports, to the Coast Guard, to the Secret Service, to Custom Border Protection individuals, and all of those individuals who have sworn to keep us safe, are not being paid," Thompson said.

"That's not fair and we are compromising our national security strategy by reducing the morale of the employees."

On Saturday, Jan. 12, the shutdown entered its 22nd day, a record.

NBC News and other outlets estimate that 800,000 federal employees are furloughed or working without pay because Trump and Congress cannot reach a deal to reopen the government.

They are, at an impasse over \$5.7 billion for construction of a wall along the southern border.

The number of furloughed employees does not include federal contractors, according to a report by NBC News.

It's unclear how many contract or grant employees are affected by the shutdown - or even how many there are in total - but a Volcker Alliance report estimated that nearly 5.3 million worked as contractors in 2015.

Unlike furloughed federal employees, who have received assurances that they will be paid once the shutdown ends, contractors are not owed back pay and that has left them in an even murkier economic position.

Further, communities of color are probably the hardest hit by the shutdown, said Lee, who co-chairs the Steering and Policy Committee and serves on the House Committee on Appropriations.

Black people comprise 12 percent of the country's population but are 18 percent of the federal workforce, according to the Partnership for Public Service.