

## Gwinnett board doing best to conduct business amid ‘racist pig’ fallout

The well-timed chorus of coughing, meant to overwhelm whatever Gwinnett County Commissioner Tommy Hunter was saying, reached a crescendo, then died down as his voice trailed off.

When he tried to resume talking, it happened again.

And again. And again.

All four times during that Tuesday afternoon meeting, commission Chairman Charlotte Nash had to pound her gavel and implore the hacking crowd — gathered to yet again protest Hunter and his Facebook post calling U.S. Rep. John Lewis a “racist pig” — to cut it out.

“Come on now, please,” Nash shouted, calm but firm. “We have business that needs to be conducted.”

Feigned respiratory distress is just one, arguably sophomoric, example of the disruption that Gwinnett’s Board of Commissioners has faced in the past three weeks.

The fallout continues from Hunter’s controversial social media post, prompted by Lewis’ declaration that he didn’t consider Donald Trump the country’s legitimate president. The civil rights icon continued, saying, “The Russians participated in helping this man get elected.”

A Senate Judiciary subcommittee is looking into whether Russia meddled in the United States’ presidential election.

Reaction to Hunter’s comment was swift.

Sign-waving protesters have eaten up hours of public comment time during board meetings, both calling for Hunter’s resignation and shouting down his colleagues for, in their opinion, not doing or saying enough in the aftermath of his comments.

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Nash said she’s been inundated with calls and emails, and a newly filed ethics complaint against Hunter has added another wrinkle to things.

But while board members admitted this week that it’s all been a distraction, they say they’re making sure it doesn’t hurt government operations.

“I don’t think people have seen any sort of decline in service level or anything like that,” Nash said. “We’ve

been able to keep that going. But it certainly takes some time and energy away from other things that perhaps would need to be taken care of, too.”

‘Difficult to hear’

To be clear, neither Nash nor her fellow board members are making any attempt to downplay what Hunter wrote on Facebook, or the concerns of those speaking out against him.

Nash has sent an apology letter directly to Lewis, widely venerated for his role in the civil rights movement, during which he often risked his life. Every other member of the board has publicly denounced Hunter’s comments. District 4 Commissioner John Heard has even said he’s “proud” of his community for speaking out.

The board has had to cancel a pair of “informal business discussions” because protesters ate up far more time than is typical during the public comment periods that precede them. But commissioners say they’ve been able to get done what they’ve needed to get done.

It does take a mental toll, though.

“Some of the [protesters’] stories are kind of heartbreaking in the sense of, you just get the sense that there’s a ... loss of the trust that we’ve worked to develop over the past several years,” District 1 Commissioner Jace Brooks said. “So that part is difficult to hear.”

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Heard said it’s also been hard to listen to protesters repeatedly chastise him and his fellow commissioners for not trying to force Hunter out.

“The protesters, I don’t know that they fully understand that keeping Tommy on the board is totally in their hands,” Heard said. “The voters put him in there, and the voters are the only ones that can remove him, besides his own resignation.”

‘A long-lived kind of situation’

Since his initial comments on the matter, which included apologizing for his “choice of words,” Hunter has said little on the situation. A consultant tapped to serve as his spokesman has repeatedly said the commissioner won’t resign.

One of the options voters have in their effort to oust Hunter is a formal ethics complaint. Such a document was filed Monday by two local attorneys.

Heard, who was on the Board of Commissioners when it adopted the county’s current ethics ordinance, said this week that Hunter’s Facebook activity definitely did not violate “the intent” of the ordinance, which is rooting out corruption and conflicts of interest.

But Heard also said he didn’t know if Hunter’s comments encroach upon the parts of the ordinance targeted in the complaint, including a line that says officials should “never engage in conduct which is unbecoming to a member or which constitutes a breach of public trust.”

Others aren't sure what to make of the complaint either.

**Richard L. Robbins**, an Atlanta attorney with no involvement in the case, told the AJC he found Hunter's comments "reprehensible," but said he was "not sure that offensive statements made by city or county commissioners on social media rise to the level of ethics code violations."

Kenneth White, an associate professor of political science and criminal justice at Kennesaw State University, carefully couched his thoughts on the matter, saying it "would appear" that the complaint might have a legal leg to stand on.

Nash has declined to comment on what she thinks Hunter's fate should be. But the chairman has vowed that, no matter what the continued fallout brings, her government will be ready.

"I was very sure from the beginning that this was a long-lived kind of situation," she said. "And I'm prepared for that to be the case."