



# Georgia House District 122 fight gets rough between Joe Mullins, Mack Taylor

By **Steve Crawford**

Columbia County Bureau

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The gloves have come off in the fight for the Georgia House District 122 seat.

Joe Mullins, one of four candidates vying for the seat vacated in July by former State Rep. Ben Harbin, has come out swinging against Mack Taylor, the opponent Mullins says is behind media reports and other allegations questioning his qualifications for residency in the state.

After several days of contentious postings and accusations between the two camps on social media, Mullins announced Friday that a supporter of his has filed a formal ethics complaint against Taylor, accusing him of filing a false campaign disclosure with the state Ethics Commission.

The other candidates, Jodi Lott and Pat Goodwin, are being careful to stay out of the fray, which looks to get rougher before the Nov. 3 election day.

The complaint, filed by Otis Williams, of Hickory Drive in Evans, claims Taylor failed to disclose the services provided to his campaign by a private investigator, which he contends should have been listed as an expenditure or an in-kind contribution.

The complaint states that, "Taylor benefitted and his campaign helped coordinate the professional services of Alex Chilton of Alex Chilton Investigative Services," but denied in social media and in news reports that he was "aware of the private investigator's work."

To back up the claims in the complaint, Williams provided copies of text messages that included Chilton, Taylor, political consultant Reagan Williams and Joe Edge, president of Sherman & Hemstreet Real Estate Co., discussing the investigator's work and Mullins' campaign.

Taylor said Friday that he had been privy to the investigative report on Mullins that had been done by Chilton, but that he had not requested it and that the work had been paid for by a third party not connected to his campaign.

"Yes, I talked to them," Taylor said. "Yes, we had some group text messages, but it wasn't my goal to say 'Hey, I'm going to get you to hire a private investigator, so that you can give me the information. That wasn't the goal.'"

When reached by phone Friday, Chilton said he had a strict nondisclosure agreement with all his clients that prevented him from confirming or commenting on any of his work.

On Saturday, Edge claimed responsibility for hiring Chilton and paying for his services.

"I hired Alex Chilton to do the report. He did a very thorough job," Edge said. "I gave him instructions and permission to distribute it to the other campaigns."

Edge said he had originally commissioned the report because he was considering a run for office himself. After he changed his mind about running, he decided to deliver the report to opponents of Mullins. Taylor was the only candidate who accepted it, he said.

"Jodi (Lott) said she did not want the report and I don't think I offered it to Pat Goodwin," Edge said.

Lott and Goodwin confirmed that they did not receive copies of the report.

Edge said such background investigations are common in politics, especially in state and federal races. He said

candidates who can't withstand such scrutiny shouldn't be in politics to begin with.

"I'm not ashamed that I hired him to do this report," he said. "There should have been one done on all four (candidates) in my opinion."

Another Taylor advisor, Jim Cox, the owner of Southeastern Marketing Group, also said he knew about the Chilton report on Mullins, but the investigator's work wasn't disclosed in Taylor's campaign report because the campaign did not use the information.

"We haven't done a mail piece, we haven't done a radio ad, haven't done a television ad, we haven't done a billboard, we haven't done anything with any of the information," he said. "Show me where the campaign paid for it."

Rick Thompson, the former head of the Georgia Ethics Commission, said the arrangement skirts the line between what is and isn't supposed to be disclosed on state campaign reports. He said it depends on whether the candidate got any value from the service provided.

"If someone was paying that (private investigator), and the candidate knew about it, and he was receiving information, that sounds like it all should have been reported," said Thompson, now of R. Thompson & Associates in Atlanta.

Taylor said there's no way to value the information and it wasn't put to use by his campaign. Edge said Saturday he didn't remember how much the investigative report had cost him.

"I didn't ask for it. It was given to me and I didn't use it," Taylor said. "I could understand if I said I want a private investigator to do some work for me, but I didn't ask for a private investigator, I didn't ask for anybody to hire a P.I."

On Saturday, Mullins said he had learned that the person who paid for the investigator's report was Edge, the same person he said had been sending his campaign copies of text messages between Taylor and his advisors – the same text messages forwarded to the state Ethics Commission.

Edge said he knew about the text messages but denied providing them to the Mullins camp.

"That's not true," he said.

Mullins contends the Taylor campaign used the investigator's report to spread rumors and feed local media outlets.

"They kept releasing false information or incomplete information in conjunction with a certain radio person to confuse the voters," Mullins said in a statement Friday. "It has become clear that he has been untruthful with the public and he is untruthful with the Georgia Ethics Commission when he filed false financial disclosures."

Information uncovered by *The Augusta Chronicle* last month showed that Mullins had taken actions in recent years that called into question whether he was a legal resident of the state and thus qualified to run for office.

The Sept. 18 article reported that Mullins had acquired driver's licenses in North Carolina and Florida in the past two years and had more than one valid license at the time he declared his run for office in July.

Taylor said Friday that the license issue was something he discussed with Chilton after seeing the report.

"Alex did ask me about the licenses and I told him, I did some research," he said. "I found that to get a license in North Carolina you had to claim residency and that it's a felony under North Carolina law to do that and to be a resident of another state, the same in Florida. They are both felonies from what I recall looking at on that."

Although he has accused Taylor of being "untruthful," Mullins admitted Friday that he had not been truthful about some of his own residency claims.

Mullins admitted he had falsely claimed in 2013 to be a full-time resident of Florida in order to pay lower fees to West Lake Country Club. On April 1, 2014, the country club board informed Mullins that he was not qualified for

“non-resident status” awarded to him in July 2013 after he claimed residence in Flagler Beach, Fla.

At the time, Mullins disputed the decision and provided documents, including a driver’s license and a 2013 tax return, to prove he lived in Florida. When the documents, including correspondence with the club, were made public in September, Mullins claimed they had been fabricated by an opponent to smear him.

On Friday, he said the West Lake documents came from a dispute that began in 2013 over dues for a membership he rarely used.

“When the membership was about to expire, I went to the management and said I wasn’t happy with the way the club was going, I wasn’t happy with the way things were going and I just wanted to cancel the membership,” Mullins said, explaining that the club manager at the time said he could possibly qualify for an out-of-state membership, since he lived part-time in Florida.

“I said that’s fine, I’m down there a few months a year, I’m back and forth. Never moved my residency,” he said. “He instructed me what to do. I did it.”

Mullins said when his status was challenged a year later, he falsely claimed he was a full-time resident of Florida. He said it was a mistake he now regrets.

“I was doing what I was instructed to do by management, so I wouldn’t cancel my membership,” he said. “In retrospect I should have just canceled it.”

Mullins said when confronted by the information last month he wasn’t sure where it came from or how to react. He said there are more documents involved in the West Lake situation, but they were not released.

“Whoever turned that in has to have the rest of the stuff,” he said “Investigators are given bits and pieces of stuff to try to spin it and that’s where it’s frustrating.”

Stefan Ritter, executive director of the Georgia Ethics Commission, said once his office receives the complaint it will become a public record, available upon request.

Such complaints are investigated and are then dismissed, settled or sent to a preliminary hearing before the full commission, according to the Ethics Commission Web site. If an investigation finds reasonable grounds that a violation has occurred, the matter is forwarded to a hearing before an administrative officer. Penalties for violations can range from civil penalties and administrative costs to reporting suspected criminal violations to law enforcement.