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Knott judge-executive sentenced for vote fraud

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Knott County Judge-Executive Randy Thompson has been sentenced to 40 months in prison for vote fraud, but plans to appeal his conviction.

U.S. District Judge Gregory F. Van Tatenhove ordered Thompson and three others convicted with him to report to prison in late March, said attorneys involved in the case.

However, Thompson has asked to remain free on bond while asking an appeals court to overturn his sentence. "He's reporting to work every day," said Thompson's attorney, R. Kent Westberry of Louisville

Thompson could have gotten up to 90 months behind bars under federal guidelines, but Van Tatenhove, noting Thompson's contributions to the county, imposed less prison time than the guidelines called for, Westberry said.

Jurors convicted Thompson of scheming to buy votes in the November 2006 election by using public funds to improve driveways and build bridges on private property.

Jurors also convicted John Mac Combs and Phillip G. Champion, assistants to the judge-executive, and Ronnie Adams, a former magistrate who worked for the county, with taking part in the scheme.

Van Tatenhove sentenced Combs to 36 months, Champion to 18 months and Adams to 32 months, according to a spokesman for U.S. Attorney James Zerhusen. The sentence also calls for the men to repay the county \$238,793, said Kyle Edelen, the spokesman.

A court document indicates Adams will appeal, and Combs' attorney, Larry Webster of Pikeville, said he will appeal as well. Champion's attorney was not available for comment Wednesday, but Webster predicted he will appeal as well.

All four men denied doing anything illegal. Court documents show they plan to appeal on several grounds, including that jurors were allowed to hear some evidence and testimony that they argue shouldn't have been admitted.

Thompson is the second Knott County judge-executive in a row sentenced to federal prison for vote fraud.

His predecessor, Donnie Newsome, refused to give up his office even after he went to prison. He stayed on as judge-executive behind bars, resigning only after a federal appeals court upheld his conviction.

Kentucky law allows an elected official convicted of a crime to stay in office while appealing. After Newsome resigned in 2006, then-Gov Ernie Fletcher appointed Thompson to replace him.

Thompson then won a full term in the 2006 election — the first Republican elected judge-executive in the history of the heavily Democratic county.

Many residents say Thompson has had significant accomplishments, expanding water and sewer service, pushing construction of a popular sports complex and helping expand other recreational and tourism opportunities.

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