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Prince George's residents take arrest of county executive Johnson personally

by Rosalind S. Helderman, Hamil R. Harris and Ashley Halsey III, Washington Post Staff Writers, Sunday, November 14, 2010; 8:41 PM

Given that Prince George's County residents had largely said their goodbyes to Jack B. Johnson, whose eight years as county executive end in three weeks, news of his arrest on criminal charges might have been shrugged off as yesterday's news.

But then out spilled the allegations in Johnson's arrest - almost $80,000 in cash collected from wife Leslie Johnson's bra, an $100,000 check flushed down the toilet of his Mitchellville home as FBI agents stood outside.

For many residents, the events Friday made the end of his term painful. Supporters had seen his survival through years of swirling rumors of corruption as a symbol of the county's scrappy quest for respect.

Even some detractors of Johnson (D) seemed deflated by the news and wondered: If he had to go down, did it have to be like this?

"People are taking this very personally," said Angelo Vaughn, 53, as he worked on the engine of his red Jeep Cherokee with two cousins in Hyattsville on Sunday. "My wife is taking this very personally, and she never met Jack Johnson. How could a person in such a vaunted position, weeks before the end of his term, get caught?"

"People are saying this is so embarrassing," he said.

Authorities say Johnson's arrest is part of a four-year federal investigation of allegations that developers have paid bribes in exchange for official favors from Prince George's officials.

Johnson and his wife, who was elected to the County Council in November, have been charged with destroying evidence and tampering with witnesses. U.S. Attorney Rod Rosenstein said Friday that more arrests and charges are likely, which has many developers and elected leaders worried about the scope of the investigation.

At a news conference after he was released from custody, Johnson said he is innocent and will be vindicated when the facts of the case come out.

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All weekend, in front yards, in church parking lots, on street corners and in diners, Prince George's residents were talking more privately than publicly about Johnson's plight. Many spoke in hushed tones, and some asked not to be quoted.

"The people are hurt," Seat Pleasant Mayor Eugene W. Grant said. "They are also angry. They are angry at the investigators and the timing. They're angry at the people who put themselves in this position. We were the shining example of black intellect and black wealth in the country. We are the place where people in the country looked to. Now, the national reputation is based upon disgrace, ineffective leadership and corruption."

Louise Reeder, 71, lived in the county for more than 10 years before moving to the District but returns on Sundays to attend Kent Baptist Church in Hyattsville.

Sitting at the counter at Plato's Diner in College Park, she said Sunday that people are unfairly jumping to conclusions about Johnson's fate.

"A lot of people have already made their minds up, and I don't think that's fair," she said. "It's really just a shame and very sad."

For those who have long thought that the county executive has engaged in pay-to-play politics, the details of his arrest confirmed their worst fears about his tenure at the head of Maryland's second largest jurisdiction.

They were too juicy not to share, in phone calls that zipped around the county all weekend.

Frank Denevan, 62, first heard about Johnson's arrest Friday while he was working at his church's bazaar.

"I heard someone say something about a bra and a check in a toilet, and I said, 'What the hell are you talking about?' " Denevan said as he prepared to blow leaves along the College Park street where he has lived since 1954.

Web designer Seth Gomoljak, 42, got a call at work Friday.

"Jack Johnson got popped," he was told.

He spent the rest of the afternoon roaming Web sites and television for news.

Mike and Ruth Wyvill, great-grandparents who live on Croom Station Road just south of Upper Marlboro, said they talked about the charges on their way to Home Depot on Sunday morning.

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"I said, 'Ruthie, could you imagine stuffing $80,000 in your bra?' " said Mike Wyvill, holding both hands 10 inches in front of his chest. "How on earth would you do that?"

The Wyvills said they were shocked by what they consider a betrayal of the public trust. "He has set back the county two to three years and maybe more," Mike Wyvill said of Johnson.

Authorities said in court papers that they recorded Johnson accepting a $15,000 check from a developer Friday. Shortly after, they were listening in on his wiretapped cellphone as his wife frantically called to report that FBI agents had arrived on the couple's front stoop.

Johnson is accused of ordering her to flush a $100,000 check down the toilet and then attempt to hide $79,600 in cash in her underwear.

"It doesn't look good for old Jack, does it?" Gomoljak said. "Can you believe trying to hide that kind of money in your house?"

Again and again, county residents said they were not particularly surprised by the charges. Johnson has been rumored to be under federal and state investigation for years.

In 2008, federal agents swept through the county and served search warrants at two county government buildings and the homes of a top fire department official, a local developer and a former member of the County Council.

But no arrests were made, and the investigation slipped from public view.

Some residents said they were concerned that the arrest comes shortly before Rushern L. Baker III (D) replaces Johnson as county executive Dec. 6.

They fear that the unfolding investigation could overshadow the inauguration of a man who ran on a reform platform and was long one of Johnson's biggest critics.

Others said Baker offers the opportunity for a fresh start.

"We have to look at [this] as a step in the right direction," said Sharon Cummings, a retired federal worker who has lived in Marlton since 1976 and worked to elect Baker. "If good people of all races come together, we can achieve the things Mr. Baker talked about. Mr. Baker is a truly honest man, and he does what he says he will."

Staff writer Robert E. Pierre contributed to this report.

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