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Poll: Scandal hits Dyer hard

Ousted mayor rates poor showing

By Jason Garcia
Sentinel Staff Writer

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The election scandal that led to Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer's criminal indictment and suspension has been so politically damaging that nearly half of city voters say he should resign, according to a new poll.

And less than one-third of those polled said they would vote for Dyer if he were to run for mayor again, the Orlando *Sentinel*/WESH-NewsChannel 2 survey found.

The poll also shows that former Mayor Bill Frederick is already a strong front-runner in a special election to temporarily replace Dyer -- 20 percentage points ahead of his nearest competitors.

"That's very encouraging," Frederick said, though he quickly added, "We're not going to rest on it, I'll tell you that."

The numbers show a staggering fall from grace for Dyer, who Florida Democrats once touted as a gubernatorial contender. Less than three years ago, he was the party's nominee for state attorney general.

Forty-seven percent of respondents say they would not vote for Dyer if he were allowed to run for mayor again, the opinion survey shows. Just 28 percent say they would.

Although Dyer won just more than 50 percent of the vote in his re-election bid last year, 43 percent of those polled said they think he should resign the office. Another 42 percent said he shouldn't resign and 15 percent said they were unsure. The telephone survey was conducted Thursday through Saturday among 625 city residents likely to vote in the May 3 special election. It has a margin of error of 4 percentage points.

A grand jury indicted Dyer on March 10, charging him with paying a consultant to collect absentee ballots, a practice prohibited by state law. Gov. Jeb Bush quickly suspended Dyer from office.

Also indicted was consultant Ezzie Thomas, and Dyer's campaign manager, Patti Sharp. Circuit Judge Alan Apte was indicted and charged with hiring Thomas to collect absentees in the judge's 2002 campaign.

Dyer would not comment on the results.

Pollster Brad Coker said there were some figures Dyer could take heart from. He pointed to numbers that showed 48 percent of respondents said they thought the charges against him were politically motivated; 31 percent did not think so.

"I think if he gets cleared on the legal charge, he may be able to resurrect himself," said Coker, the managing director of Mason-Dixon Polling & Research, which conducted the survey.

Even some of the respondents, who said they would not vote for Dyer, said they could change their minds depending on the outcome of special prosecutor Brad King's criminal investigation.

"At the moment, it's hard for me to give a straight answer," said Dana Buchawiecki, a 32-year-old convention planner who has lived in Orlando for almost 10 years. "At the present moment, probably not. It just puts a little bit of a bad taste in my mouth."

Voters appear comfortable with letting Frederick step in until Dyer's troubles are resolved. The winner of the May 3 special election will serve until Dyer's fate is determined. If he is acquitted, Bush must restore him to office; if he is convicted or resigns, Orlando must hold another election to pick his permanent replacement.

Frederick, who was Orlando's mayor from 1980 to 1992, is well ahead in a pair of potential matchups, according to the poll.

When facing a slew of prospective challengers, Frederick scored 32 percent of the vote.

The next closest finishers -- attorney Tico Perez and businessman Ken Mulvaney -- registered 12 percent each. No other candidate was in double digits, and 17 percent of respondents were undecided.

When the pool was limited to candidates who have committed to run -- Frederick, Mulvaney, retired Orlando police Capt. Sam Ings, *Orlando Weekly* columnist Billy Manes and businessman Edward Lopes -- Frederick's support swelled to 44 percent.

Mulvaney was second with 26 percent. No other candidate received more than 2 percent, and 28 percent were undecided.

The survey did not include outdoors writer Tom Levine, who filed papers for the race Monday. Levine unsuccessfully challenged former Mayor Glenda Hood in 2000.

Frederick's campaign, meanwhile, was further strengthened when Perez announced Monday that he would not run. He was one of the few remaining high-profile contenders still considering a run against Frederick. "Recent events have put our city in a state of turmoil and I believe the citizens of Orlando would not be well served by a heated campaign," Perez said in a statement. He also declared he would throw his support to Frederick. But Frederick still has some work to do. According to the poll, nearly one-quarter of respondents don't recognize him.

"I really don't know enough about him," said Wayne Ford, a 60-year-old hotel worker who has lived in Orlando for about six years. Frederick, by contrast, hasn't been mayor for more than a dozen years.

Mulvaney said there is still plenty of time for others to catch up. Mulvaney is the man who nearly forced Dyer into a runoff last year, and his campaign's challenge of the results led to the investigation that toppled the suspended mayor.

"It's still early yet," Mulvaney said. "An election can turn on a dime toward the end."

Jason Garcia can be reached at jrgarcia@orlandosentinel.com or 407-420-5198.

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