

The first Black speaker of the House of Delegates takes pride in his rural roots

Tapped for the chamber's top job earlier this week, Don Scott has forged an unlikely friendship with a Southwest legislator.

by **Markus Schmidt**

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At first glance, Don Scott doesn't come off as someone who can relate to the oftentimes hard life in rural Virginia. The U.S. Navy veteran, trial attorney and lawmaker from Portsmouth, who was just nominated by the House Democratic caucus as the first Black speaker in the legislature's 404-year history, is rarely seen without one of his many fitted designer suits and alligator-skin cowboy boots. Pictures of his dark-blue electric 2022 Porsche Taycan 4S have made wide rounds on social media.

But behind the flashy facade is a humble and thoughtful man who says he is proud of his roots in rural Texas, who has done hard time in federal prison and, most recently, who has formed an unusual friendship with Sen. Travis Hackworth, R-Tazewell County.

"I'm country as hell," Scott said, smiling, during a recent interview at his House minority leader office on the 14th floor of the new General Assembly Building in Richmond. His desk is bare, the bookshelf

behind him is empty, and his belongings are packed up in numerous boxes scattered around the room, ready to be moved to his new, much bigger office down the hall.

As the designated 58th speaker of the House of Delegates, Scott is aware that many voters in the western part of the state are skeptical, even concerned about what his party's recently regained control of the General Assembly will mean for their livelihoods.

But Scott, 58, vows that he will always take seriously and listen to the people in Southwest Virginia and Southside — including those who'd never vote for him.

“Southwest Virginia, Northern Virginia, Hampton Roads, Southside and Central Virginia all benefit from the commonwealth. The rising tide is what lifts up the boats, right?” Scott said. “We are the commonwealth of Virginia. We've got to get rid of this parochialism and this animosity of one against another. I want to be just as focused on Southwest Virginia's success as I am on Northern Virginia's success, because at the end of the day, you have to be able to empathize with everybody.”

Hackworth, one of the most conservative senators in the legislature, who has tried to ban abortion altogether in Virginia, believes that Scott's interest in the Southwest is genuine.

“When we first connected, I told him that I'm a businessman, and Don is a businessman, and that was the first point we connected on,” Hackworth said in a phone interview. “Whether you're an attorney or a small-business owner, you have to run things, you have employees to take care of, and there's still a lot of common ground where we

connected. And he said, ‘Travis, I like you, I’d like to get to know you better.’”

Just recently, Hackworth invited Scott and his wife, Dr. Mellanda Colson Scott, a dentist in Norfolk, and their daughter to spend a long weekend with him and his wife, Angel, and their daughter. Scott accepted, and on the third weekend in December both families plan to tour the [Pocahontas Exhibition Coal Mine & Museum](#) in Tazewell County, hike the trails in the far Southwest, visit a finished stretch of the [Coalfield Expressway](#) and, they hope, see a few of the [Rocky Mountain elk](#) that were relocated into Buchanan County from southeast Kentucky.

“I want to show him what tourism has done to transform Southwest Virginia,” Hackworth said.

Naturally, the new friendship between the two lawmakers is also driven by mutual economic interests. Hackworth is hoping for more government funding for the 5th Senate District, which he represents, and other parts of the Southwest.

“We’ve done well with the limited resources that we have, but being able to have Don come down as the new speaker of the House is a unique opportunity,” Hackworth said. “We’re not asking for a handout, we’re asking for a hand up, just help us. The dollar value in Southwest Virginia is really good because we know how to stretch a dollar.”

There are plenty of nonpartisan issues for Republicans and Democrats to come together on, Hackworth added.

“We are miles apart on maybe some social issues, but other kitchen-table issues, those are definitely things that I think we can connect on, like cleaning up waste coal in Southwest Virginia and making it a better place for drinking water and the environment, education, housing, which we desperately need, and workforce development. All that is nonpartisan,” Hackworth said. “I think that these are the areas where I want to connect with Don. That’s the reason I asked him to come down, he accepted, and we are really happy to be able to do that.”

Stephen Farnsworth, a political scientist at the University of Mary Washington, said that Scott’s background and willingness to connect with Republican legislators from Southwest is unusual for a Democrat, but it could benefit both sides.

“Given the fact that the Southwest Virginia delegation is almost entirely Republican, the political influence of the region is greatest when there is a Republican majority. And because Democrats tend to do poorly in the region, a number of Democrats might not be interested in focusing on the region’s concerns,” Farnsworth said.

“But the incoming speaker’s background suggests more familiarity with the concerns of rural areas and an expressed willingness to reach out to the region, even if it doesn’t elect members who are Democrats.”

While Scott is proud of his country roots — he grew up in Jasper, a town of 7,000 in Deep East Texas about 40 miles west of the Louisiana state line — he said he feels comfortable moving in all population settings.

“I also spent a lot of time growing up in Houston, which means I know both rural and urban well,” he said in the interview. Upon graduating

high school, he went to Texas A&M University, majoring in agriculture.

Following his undergraduate education, Scott served as a Naval officer until 1991, when he received an honorable discharge. He went on to obtain a law degree from Louisiana State University Law School, but shortly after his graduation in 1994, he was arrested by federal agents on a single charge of conspiracy to possess, related to a crack cocaine distribution ring.

Despite pleading no contest as a first offender, Scott was sentenced to 10 years in a federal prison, of which he served seven and a half.

More than 22 years after his release, Scott looks back at his time behind bars as a life lesson that has taught him important traits, such as empathy and relatability.

“I think there are some people who, when some adversity hits, they fold up,” he said. “I’ve been blessed to be able to overcome adversity, which gives me a different insight into what folks are going through and what they might need, to be able to empathize. I’m grateful to be in the role that I am, and I am also grateful for all my experiences, and for my mistakes and scars, because you learn from scars and then you can move on.”

Scott said he was among thousands of nonviolent felons who had their [civil rights restored](#) under former Republican Gov. Bob McDonnell, which eventually allowed him to run for public office. Scott added that he was “really disappointed” in Gov. Glenn Youngkin, who all but ended the restoration programs of his three predecessors — including McDonnell — that automatically restored the rights of at least some people convicted of felonies who have served their terms.

People with felony convictions seeking to have their rights to vote, run for office and serve on a jury restored are now required to file an application given to them once they are released, but critics have called this process arbitrary and less transparent, pointing out that several thousand Virginians have been removed from the voting rolls without explanation.

“I think he says one thing and does something else,” Scott said of Youngkin. “When he claims what his values are, he doesn’t make decisions in line with those values. So I’m always concerned when I see that type of hypocrisy.”

Scott said that under his leadership House Democrats will “look into how all of those people were disenfranchised. We don’t know where those people were, where those votes were, which districts they were in, but we are going to get to the bottom of that.”

While it isn’t known if Youngkin’s new policy has impacted last week’s election one way or another, Scott said that those affected deserve better either way.

“These people’s rights were restored by another governor, and then this governor comes along and takes them away,” Scott said. “They don’t know if they can get them back, they don’t know if a mistake was made. Even if they were notified, they don’t know what this means. Sometimes folks don’t know.”

Youngkin, Scott added, may not really understand the impact it can have on someone when they lose their civil rights.

“But I know what that means,” he added. “And I think when you do that and you play with people’s lives like that, you probably need to have some self-reflection on who you are and what you are doing, because that’s just wrong.”

However, Scott signaled that he does not want to see his life reduced to the image of the former felon-turned-politician who understands the system because he has lived it.

“I also want to talk about the fact that I’m a trial attorney, that I have a great marriage, a great family,” he said. “I’ve been vetted by my voters now three times in my district, I’ve been vetted by my caucus, I’ve been in leadership twice now. I think I’ve been blessed, and I am grateful to be in this position, because I don’t think you earn this kind of stuff. I think it’s only by God’s grace that I get to be in these kinds of roles.”

Scott was first elected in 2019 to represent what then was the 80th House of Delegates District, which includes Chesapeake, Norfolk, Portsmouth and Suffolk. He ran unopposed in the primaries and defeated James Evans, the Republican nominee, and independent candidate Ryan Benton with 66% of the vote.

Two years later, Scott won his second term in the House, topping Republican Deanna Stanton, again with 66% of the vote. Because Democrats lost their majority in the House during that election, Scott in April 2022 [led a revolt](#) to oust Minority Leader Eileen Filler-Corn, D-Fairfax, the former speaker, from her leadership role.

A little over two months later, House Democrats [elected Scott](#) as their new minority leader, after fending off challenges from Del. Charniele

Herring, D-Alexandria, and Del. Rip Sullivan, D-Fairfax, who also competed for the leadership spot.

Just days after Democrats regained the House majority last week, Scott's caucus nominated him for the chamber's top job on Sunday. Within just four years, his rapid ascent to speakership was complete.

But Scott denies that it was impatience that put him on a fast track to the third highest office in Virginia. "I would not say that I'm in a hurry, I'm 58 years old, man, I don't know what you're talking about," he said, laughing.

"Look, I'm not impatient, I don't know the plans of God the almighty," Scott said. "I've been in a position where I have stayed true to my faith and my purpose, and true to my vision, and I have been propelled by, I believe, just trying to stay in that will and at the same try to serve as many people as I can to do the most good."

Despite his short time in the legislature, Scott said that he isn't worried that he may not have the experience and the skill set needed for his future role.

"I think I've demonstrated that I'm a pretty quick learner, I think that's what it takes here," he said. "I'm well read, I love reading the rules, I love knowing what's happening. I think I'm prepared. But don't get it confused, I know that I have much, much more to learn, I know that there are things that I don't know that I don't know yet, so I'm going to be a sponge to try to continue to learn as much as I have and to continue to be an asset to the commonwealth of Virginia."

After Scott was nominated Sunday, outgoing Speaker Todd Gilbert, R-Shenandoah County, turned to X, the social media platform formerly known as Twitter, to assure his successor his full support.

“I want to congratulate Don Scott on being chosen by his caucus to make history as the next speaker of the House,” Gilbert wrote. “Serving as speaker has been the greatest honor of my lifetime, and I will work with the incoming speaker to ensure a seamless transition of the institution.”

Scott said in the interview that he is well aware of the historical significance of being the first Black American among Virginia’s 58 speakers of the House.

“I am grateful for this role, I know there were people who came before me who were Black and who probably were more talented and gifted than I am, probably greater orators, who never had this opportunity because of their skin color,” he said. “I know that I stand on the shoulders of giants and that my ancestors, who probably were here, had their humanity discounted during the time that this Capitol was being built. I think that I will always carry that with me.”

But at the end of the day, Scott said, Virginians want leaders who are “competent and empathetic, who have been going through some adversity in life, and I have. And that’s why I am grateful to be the first Black speaker, but I’m also grateful to be the speaker who just happens to be Black, and I think that’s a big difference.”

Despite Scott’s historical moment, he is aware that despite their gains in the legislature, Democrats still face working with a Republican governor who will likely scrutinize every piece of legislation they will send him.

Talking to reporters at Richmond's Capitol Square on the day after the election, Youngkin said that the close election has shown that Virginians want both parties to work together.

“Virginia has historically moved back and forth from control of one party in the legislature to the other, the governor's races with very thin margins, and we saw that on display again last night,” Youngkin said. “And I think what that reflects is the fact that we are a state that is very comfortable working together, across party lines, in order to get things done. That's exactly what we have done over the course of the last two years, where we have worked with a legislature that has had a divided government, and we are going to continue to do this.”

While Scott agrees that last week's Democratic victory doesn't equate a mandate, he added that a lot of races that candidates from his party lost were very close. “I think this shows us that's where most voters are, they want us to work together to get some things done, but they also want their freedoms that they rely on to be protected,” he said.

“I think that voters told us that they don't like the government in our bedrooms, that they want people who are responsible gun owners and they want to continue to protect them,” Scott said. “Voters also told us that they want an economy that works for everybody. The fact that the governor would propose a billion-dollar tax cut in this environment for corporations while we still have schools that aren't fully funded is a misplaced priority.”

Still, there are areas where Democrats and Republicans are likely to find common ground, Scott said.

“I think we can work together on things around education, around mental health, around stemming the tide of opioid addiction, around

making sure that we have gun violence prevention and safety-focused, responsible gun owners,” he said. “I think those are the things that we can agree on with the governor, and we look forward to working with him on those things.”

The Republican defeat, Scott said, is Youngkin’s opportunity for “a reset and refocus” on Virginia.

“I think he had some other goals maybe, but now he gets the opportunity to really be a governor for everybody, as I view myself. I’m not the speaker for the Democrats or the Republicans, I am the speaker of the people’s House, and I take that responsibility very seriously, and I want to make sure I’m fair to everyone at all times, no matter what political party you serve in.”

Stepping into his new role, Scott vows to share his blessings with everyone in Virginia. “I think this country has been great to me, the commonwealth of Virginia has been great to me and my family, so the vision that I have for my own family, I want that for every family.”

And despite his personal setbacks and adversities in the past, Scott is determined to look forward. “I think persistence and resilience pays off in the end, and as Dr. King said, ‘It is best that the arch of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice, and I think we continue to bend a little closer to justice.’”

Some voters don't believe candidate Tim Griffin lives in his district. They have hired a PI to investigate.

In April, the Bedford County general registrar determined that Republican Tim Griffin met the requirements of a legitimately registered, practicing voter. But some GOP voters still aren't convinced that the candidate actually lives where he says he does.

by **Markus Schmidt**
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More than five months after a Bedford County official determined that Tim Griffin — then a candidate for the GOP nomination in the 53rd House of Delegates District — has legally met residency requirements to make the ballot for the November election, questions remain among some Republican voters in the district about his eligibility for the ballot.

Griffin, who [has since become his party's nominee](#), cited in a court filing from June 16 an apartment complex on Cottontown Manor Drive in Forest as his current residence. But several longtime Republicans are skeptical that he has in fact established a formal domicile in the district, as required by law.

Ginger Burg, a member of the Amherst County School Board, said that she and other concerned Republicans have hired a private investigator to look into Griffin's current residency situation.

Burg, who formerly managed the campaign of Griffin's primary opponent Sarah Mays, said that the private investigator — who was not willing to be interviewed — has seen Griffin's car at the property just once, and that was "only after a reporter reached out asking for residency confirmation and a lease agreement," she said in an email.

Griffin did not respond to specific emailed questions about the history of his legal residencies, and he declined to provide documentation such as copies of lease contracts in support of his claims of domiciles.

When a reporter visited the apartment building Griffin lists as his residence, the main entrance was locked, preventing the reporter from reaching Griffin's individual apartment to knock on the door. An employee at the leasing office said she could not verify whether Griffin lived at the complex.

A search through an electronic directory of residents by the building's main entrance yielded no results that appeared to match Griffin's name.

Donald Toms, a retired schoolteacher and lifelong Republican from Bedford County, said that Griffin enjoys the protections of the Bedford Republican Committee, which he chairs. General Registrar Barbara Gunter, who decided in April that Griffin's residency status was legitimate, reports to a Republican-majority electoral board.

“One of the obstacles is that the local Republican Party is carried away with this guy. They think he walks on water,” Toms said in a recent phone interview. “They want him in there for some reason.”

On April 6, Toms was one of three Bedford Republicans who filed a petition challenging the legitimacy of Griffin’s voter status.

The complaint alleged that Griffin, an elections attorney and a former assistant prosecutor in Amherst and Bedford counties, did not properly meet residency requirements by living in a detached garage in Forest. Because of the alleged improper registration, the petitioners called for Griffin to be removed from the Bedford County voter rolls.

After two public hearings and examination of evidence including photographs and various documents, [Gunter determined](#) on April 26 that Griffin met the requirements of a legitimately registered, practicing voter.

“After reviewing testimony presented, when meshed with the code, Virginia Administrative Code, and State Board of Elections policies and procedures, it is my decision that Mr. Griffin has both a place of abode, and has established domicile sufficient to meet the residency requirements of a non-traditional residence in the commonwealth of Virginia and in Bedford County,” Gunter said at the time. “Because these requirements have been met, I cannot justify a cancellation of his voter registration record.”

Griffin went on to defeat Mays, who owns and operates a day care in Amherst County, at the GOP convention at Jefferson Forest High School two weeks later. He will face Democrat Sam Soghor in November in the heavily Republican district, which includes Amherst

County, parts of Nelson County and the northern part of Bedford County.

But Gunter's clearance of Griffin did not silence concerns about his eligibility. And over the past few years, the Republican has muddied the waters himself by making numerous contradictory statements about his legal domicile, many of them in court, sometimes under oath, and first documented on the blog "The Griffin Files." (Cardinal News could not determine who is behind this platform but has independently verified any court testimony quoted with the original audio source.)

"He wasn't a legitimate candidate, based on all the facts that we learned," said Margie Jones, a longtime Republican who has lived in Bedford County for almost 50 years and is one of the petitioners who sought to have Griffin's name removed from the voter rolls.

"I don't know anything about where he currently lives," Jones said in a recent interview. "The only thing I know is what people have said, people have told me that he has given his place of residence. But then people tell me they never see him there."

Tanner Bonovitch, Griffin's campaign manager, said in an email that the issue of the candidate's residency "has been handled" by Gunter, the county registrar. He also said there was no ongoing concern among residents about Griffin's eligibility.

"Republican voters across the 53rd District clearly have not shown these 'widespread doubts' as evidenced by Mr. Griffin's overwhelming victory at the Republican Convention this past spring," Bonovitch said. "Mr. Griffin remains focused on the Nov. 7th election and sharing his

conservative platform to the voters of Amherst, Bedford, and Nelson counties.”

Soghor, Griffin’s Democratic opponent, said that he doesn’t plan to campaign on the controversy, despite sharing doubts with Republicans who continue to believe that Griffin is ineligible.

“As a candidate, I only want to focus on my own virtues and not focus on the failings of my opponent,” Soghor said in a phone interview. “However, as a voter I am extremely concerned with these allegations against my opponent, because of course part of my candidacy is about electing good people. We need quality leadership that believes in the right actions and conduct, and leadership that is going to put the needs of the district above the needs of the party.”

The Richland Drive address

The controversies over Griffin’s multiple residencies date back to at least the summer of 2020, three months after he had been elected chairman of the Bedford County Republican Committee. On July 5 of that year, Griffin [received a citation](#) for “disturbing and touching wildlife” after he petted wild Chincoteague ponies at Assateague State Park in Maryland, which is prohibited.

For the original citation, Griffin provided his driver’s license with an address on Richland Drive in Lynchburg — the former home of his mother, who no longer lives there, according to court testimony by Griffin.

The legal drama over this incident, which later went viral on social media as “Ponygate,” dragged out for more than two years, after

Griffin failed to appear for trial on Oct. 2, 2020, and a warrant for his arrest was issued later that month. Subsequent court correspondence, including the arrest warrant, referred to the Richland Drive address as Griffin's residence. If and for how long he lived at this address remains unclear.

The Airbnb on Elkridge Drive

In a [notarized statement](#) in a civil case over child custody against his ex-wife Angelica Griffin filed in Lynchburg Circuit Court on Nov. 20, 2020, Griffin said that he lived in a studio apartment at an Airbnb on Elkridge Drive in Forest from Nov. 17, 2017, until July 31, 2020. (The start date actually was in 2019, as further court testimony shows.) Griffin also said that after July 31, 2020, he did not have a local residence at all because he had been "working on the [Trump] campaign out of state [primarily in Michigan]." The document was notarized in Arlington.

Almost one year later, during a hearing on the same case on Nov. 3, 2021, the owner of the Airbnb on Elkridge Drive testified that Griffin had lived at this address for "about eight months," from December 2019 or January 2020 until July 31, 2020. When asked by Judge Patrick Yeatts, the owner added that there was no rental agreement but that he had no issue with Griffin's continued use of the Airbnb as his permanent residence.

In an [audio recording](#) of the hearing, Griffin's attorney Michael Brickhill can be heard struggling to explain to Yeatts where Griffin stayed after he had moved out of the Airbnb. "I think that he stays at colleagues' houses, or he stays at friends' houses, or rents a hotel, or I think sometimes he goes camping," Brickhill said.

Yeatts then interrupted Brickhill. “Well, that’s essentially being homeless,” he said. “I’ll put him under oath if I need to. This should not be very complicated to get a physical address.”

If Griffin purports to be a legal resident of Virginia, “then he should have a residence in the commonwealth of Virginia,” Yeatts continued. “A residence. I don’t think it’s an Airbnb where he stayed over a year ago, that’s like me saying, ‘The Virginian Hotel, I stayed there last year one night and it’s my physical address.’”

After Brickwill conceded that he didn’t have anything “that is satisfactory to give the court the answer to the questions being raised,” Yeatts ordered a brief recess allowing Brickwill to confer with Griffin.

“I think that there are some other legal issues at play here with the state bar, and voting matters, and I probably need to advise him [Mr. Griffin] of his Fifth Amendment privilege if I’m going to put him under oath to answer those questions,” Yeatts said. “Either he has an address in the commonwealth of Virginia or he doesn’t. And if he doesn’t, the court needs to know.”

Minutes later, Brickwill said that he would not be able to give the court additional information beyond what he’d already said. “He basically does not have a permanent address,” he said, referring to Griffin. “[He has] been living out of his car, or in people’s houses, or wherever.”

Despite Griffin’s own notarized statement and subsequent court testimony that his eight-month stint on Elkridge Road ended in July 2020, Griffin cited the Airbnb as his permanent residence during three general elections in 2020, 2021 and 2022; one GOP primary election on June 8, 2021; and two party-run conventions — the 2021 statewide

Republican convention and the 5th Congressional District convention in 2022.

Under [state law](#), voters may only register to cast their ballots in a locality where they maintain “both domicile and a place of abode,” which are clearly defined: “To establish domicile, a person must live in a particular locality with the intention to remain. A place of abode is the physical place where a person dwells.”

The garage on Woodfin Court

In another court hearing in Lynchburg on Jan. 20, 2023, Griffin [told the judge](#) that he no longer lived at the Elkridge address, but that he now lived in a garage on Woodfin Court, “like a 40-year-old man should.”

On March 2, Griffin changed his voter registration in Bedford County at the local registrar’s office to the address of the garage on Woodfin Court. On the same day he also filed his paperwork to run as a candidate for the Republican nomination in the 53rd House of Delegates District, using the same address.

After some Republicans in the district expressed concern with Griffin’s eligibility to run due to questions over his legal residency, Griffin turned to Facebook on March 20 to reassure voters that he lived in Forest.

“The residence where I lay down my head at night is the same address where I am registered to vote at. I was at this address before I filed to run in this race. My voter registration status is clear, and there is

nothing that would prevent me from running for House of Delegates,” Griffin wrote.

He stated that “as I traveled out of state,” he retained his home address where he still received mail, “even when I was physically present” in other states.

“There is no requirement under Virginia law that someone who travels for work change their physical voting location from state to state as they fight for clean elections,” Griffin wrote. “A voter may set his ONE domicile or residence and register to vote there. My home has always been, and always will be Central Virginia ... I have always maintained one voting residence.”

Amid the controversy, Toms and Jones said that numerous Republican voters in the district urged them and fellow Republican Billy Hackworth to file a petition with the office of the general registrar and the Bedford County Electoral Board to cancel Griffin’s voter registration.

“We were very concerned about where he lives,” Toms said in the recent interview. “We knew that he didn’t have an address, enough people had checked that out. That’s why we hired a lawyer.”

The petition argued that Griffin’s voter registration application is for the house of the property owner, not the detached garage in which Griffin said he had been living. The claim in the petition stated that Griffin “attempted to establish residence in a detached garage owned by a friend for the purposes of establishing a voter registration residence” on the very day he filed to run for the House seat.

According to a notice of violation and enforcement order issued April 18 by the Bedford County Department of Community Development after an inspection of the garage four days earlier, the space was not zoned for occupancy.

The petition stated that “this garage appears to both lack a full bathroom, and a certificate of occupancy, as well as the property itself appearing to lack the proper zoning ordinance to have a detached apartment from the regular living quarters of the house.”

The petitioners alleged that Griffin did not intend to make this garage his primary, long-term home, or “establish domicile,” as required under Virginia law to vote.

Toms said that he and his co-petitioners decided to not appeal Gunter’s ruling. “We spent about \$7,000 already, and the legal fees were going to be a lot more than that to appeal it,” he said.

Gunter, the general registrar, could not be reached for comment for this story because she is currently out on sick leave. But Ann Duncan, the chair of the Bedford County electoral board, said in an email that she was “not aware of any lingering doubt,” and that she tried to stay out of political gossip.

“I am satisfied with the decision that Barbara Gunter made back in April on the eligibility of Tim Griffin. Her references to the Code of Virginia and her research into Mr. Griffin’s residency were complete and well thought out,” Duncan said.

The Cottontown Manor address

On June 16, Griffin notified the Lynchburg Circuit Court of his new “physical address” at an apartment complex on Cottontown Road in Forest, a court filing shows.

For Republican officials in Bedford, however, the controversy ended with Gunter’s ruling in April.

Toms and Jones said that after their unsuccessful attempt at getting Griffin’s voter registration canceled they are no longer welcome in the Bedford Republican Party and that their dues payments were returned to them.

“Everything was stacked against us, he got the group that’s in control of the Bedford Republican Party behind him,” Toms said, referring to Griffin. “They did not care about anything, his court record made no difference to them.”

And barring unforeseen circumstances, Griffin will likely be the next delegate representing the heavily Republican district, Toms said.

“To be very honest, it’s a done deal. He’s running, and the Democrats are running a weak candidate who doesn’t have a chance of winning. All these public officials are in his corner,” Toms said.

Burg, the former campaign manager of Griffin’s Republican opponent, said that she doesn’t understand why the Republican Party, which “claims to follow the rule of law,” continues to stand behind him when there is “documented proof of voter fraud as well as currently being on probation” in Maryland for the charges in the pony case.

“Tim Griffin also cannot prove his residency within the state of Virginia for the last year, which is a requirement to be a candidate under state law,” Burg said. “The Republican Party is losing all credibility by allowing Tim Griffin to continue in this race as a fraudulent representative of District 53.”

Reporter Matt Busse contributed to this story.

Campaign signs paid for with undisclosed contributions point to challenge with enforcing campaign finance laws

A well-known Republican couple in Montgomery County has purchased campaign signs supporting nine local candidates. The signs say they were funded by a group called Citizens for Local Government, but no PAC by that name is registered in the state.

by **Markus Schmidt**

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Campaign signs in Montgomery County. The disclaimer across the bottom reads "Paid for by Citizens for Local Government." Photo courtesy of Robin Sanborn.

On the first weekend in August, campaign signs started to appear around Blacksburg in support of Jason Massie and Dave Shelor, two conservatives running as independents for local offices.

Unlike other campaign ads during election season, the signs lacked the disclaimer required by law stating whether the candidates had authorized the ads, only saying that they were "paid for by Citizens for Local Government."

In the weeks that followed, more signs and larger billboards started popping up around Montgomery County and the towns of Blacksburg and Christiansburg, bearing the same disclaimer and backing a total of nine candidates in local races. With the exception of Massie and Shelor, they were all Republicans.

Voters and candidates alike began to wonder who was behind the group that called itself Citizens for Local Government, which to this day has not registered as a political action committee as required by Virginia's [campaign finance laws](#), and who was funding it.

Their inquiries revealed a flaw in Virginia's election law, which currently provides no mechanism for local agencies to investigate specific complaints, instead deferring to the Virginia State Board of Elections.

But the board deals with so-called [Stand By Your Ad](#) complaints only twice a year — at its January meeting to consider complaints received between the previous July 1 and Nov. 30, and at its August meeting, when it hears complaints received between the previous Dec. 1 and June 30.

Any complaints that the board receives in the busiest five months of a general election season will be heard only after the election has taken place — when it no longer will impact the outcome.

“Enforcement after an election is as bad as no enforcement at all,” said Stephen Farnsworth, a political science professor at the University of Mary Washington.

It's problematic when groups that no one has ever heard of and that haven't filed any finance reports are spending money, Farnsworth said.

"We have a very fluid financial system in Virginia for funding campaigns, and a wide-open system for contributing creates opportunities for abuse if there isn't fundamental transparency with respect to donors and expenditures," he said.

April DeMotts, a Democrat and current member of the Montgomery County Board of Supervisors, said in a recent interview that in campaign finance reports released after the signs first appeared, there was "no information in these reports reflecting any cash donations or in-kind donations associated with this group."

DeMotts, who is facing Shelor — one of the first candidates to benefit from the sign campaign — said that her own research did not reveal any record of Citizens for Local Government. "There is no PAC with that name, and nobody has claimed ownership of the signs," DeMotts said.

Among local message groups on Facebook such as [Everyone Blacksburg](#), voters and candidates have expressed concern that an unregistered political group was helping to fund campaigns of conservative candidates.

The discussions prompted Ed Gitre, an associate professor of history at Virginia Tech and a candidate for the Montgomery County School Board, to flag Citizens for Local Government to county registrar Connie Viar, citing possible violations of campaign finance laws and Virginia's Stand by your Sign disclosure issues and campaign finance filing issues.

On Oct. 19, Viar referred the matter to Commonwealth’s Attorney Mary Pettitt, who then searched for Citizens for Local Government using Committee Electronic Tracking, or [COMET](#), a database hosted by the Virginia Department of Elections, but she, too, was unable to locate a group of that name.

“It appeared that Citizens for Local Government was operating as a PAC, which is a form of political committee,” Pettitt said in an email Wednesday, adding that the group “might be in violation of the Campaign Finance Disclosure Act for failing to file independent expenditure reports, failing to register as a PAC and failure to file campaign finance reports.”

Under state law, PACs that don’t file required campaign finance paperwork with the state can face civil penalties of up to \$1,000. If a PAC fails to file a Statement of Organization, it can face a fine of up to \$500.

Pettitt, a Republican, said that under Virginia’s election laws, the duty of determining such violations lies with the State Board of Elections, which is then required to report them to the appropriate prosecutor — which in the case of violations by a PAC is the commonwealth attorney’s office in Richmond.

Since she had no jurisdiction over the alleged violations, Pettitt said in the email that on Oct. 23, she advised the State Board of Elections of the issue, “so that they could investigate and report it to the appropriate commonwealth’s attorney.”

The Virginia Department of Elections did not respond to several emails seeking comment for this story.

While voters in Montgomery County continued to wonder who was behind Citizens for Local Government, Massie — the first school board candidate to benefit from the ad campaign — revealed that information after a candidate forum at Harding Avenue Elementary School on Oct. 9.

That day, Massie told Robin Sanborn, treasurer for Gitre’s campaign, that William Price, a well-known Realtor from Blacksburg, and his wife, Jo Anne Price, had paid for the Citizens for Local Government signs.

“Mr. Massie said that the local sign store called him up one day and told him that his signs are ready, and that they had been paid for by that group,” Sanborn said in an interview. “Jo Anne and William Price are big local Republicans, but there is no accounting for where that money came from.”

Earlier this week, Massie [confirmed on Facebook](#) that William Price had reached out to him back in the summer, stating that he had purchased some signs for him and Shelor, the independent candidate running for the Montgomery County Board of Supervisors, on which both candidates appeared together.

Massie said in a phone interview Tuesday that he and Price have been friends for about 20 years.

“I do construction work, he does construction work. He does a lot of stuff in Blacksburg and pays a lot of taxes in Blacksburg, and we do a lot of work together. William Price is a great guy,” Massie said.

At the onset of his campaign for the Montgomery County School Board as an independent candidate, Massie said that he had asked both the Republican and Democratic parties for help.

“I reached out to both, and neither one of them gave me a dime,” he said. “I would take any donation from any Republican or Democratic organization, I would gladly take money from them if they want to support my campaign.”

Massie said that he never paid attention to the “Paid for by Citizens for Local Government” disclaimer on his campaign signs. “It wasn’t until a couple of weeks ago when somebody said something about it that I noticed that. I assumed it was Mr. Price, but if it was a group, I don’t know anything about that organization at all.”

Massie added that he doesn’t understand the controversy around the campaign signs.

“I’m just trying to do what’s best for the children. I don’t know why everybody wants to turn this around and be so mean and worry about money. I don’t understand it.”

When reached by phone Wednesday, Jo Anne Price said that “it’s simply my husband and I” who are behind Citizens for Local Government. “We do this every single election. We get signs, we buy them, and normally they are not authorized by any campaign, or by anybody.”

Jo Anne Price served as the chair of the Montgomery County Republican Committee until [she announced](#) her resignation in July.

She also owns the Trump Store in Christiansburg, which sells a variety of ephemera relating to former President Donald Trump.

The local campaign signs that she purchased and put up around the area are her “free-speech right,” Price said. “I’m a personal person. I could write it on a sign and put it outside of my Trump store and say ‘vote for so-and-so.’ If I wanted to, that’s my right. They [the candidates] had nothing to do with it. I put out what I wanted to do, I have the billboards, they are mine.”

She and her husband paid for the local campaign signs “out of our personal checking account,” Price said. She would not disclose how much money the couple invested (“that’s none of your business”), but said that she offered to forward the invoices to the candidates if they wanted to report the in-kind contributions.

Neither Jo Anne nor William Price has reported any in-kind contributions to the candidates in question, according to the Virginia Public Access Project, a nonprofit tracking money in politics.

But Price denies that the couple’s efforts may have been in violation of Virginia’s campaign finance disclosure laws.

“The Board of Elections said I needed to put [on the signs] who paid for them, so we’ve met that criteria,” she said. “If I have to go and put a strip of paper on them that says ‘authorized,’ then I’ll get a little strip of paper and put it up there.”

She also didn’t consider her support as helping to fund a candidate’s campaign. “I haven’t called anyone and asked them if they wanted

campaign donations. If I was going to do that, I'd send them a straight-up donation."

Price blamed local Democrats for stirring up the controversy around Citizens for Local Government. "The Democrats are making a big deal out of it, as they always do," she said.

"This is a hack job. We've gotten to the point where nobody gets any free speech anymore, if someone doesn't like something, they go find a law. I don't have anything to worry about, I'm exercising my free speech rights."

Massie said that after he received the invoice for his signs from Price, he disclosed the contribution to his campaign. Last week he [posted a screenshot](#) of a disclosure on Facebook, showing receipt of \$800.28 for in-kind donations in form of the campaign signs, crediting not the Prices but Citizens for Local Government for the contribution.

However, at the time of this story's publication, there was no evidence that his [campaign finance report](#) with the Virginia Department of Election had been updated.

Shelor, the Montgomery County Board of Supervisors candidate sharing a campaign sign with Massie, did not respond to text messages and phone calls seeking comment.

And it wasn't until after Cardinal News inquired about his missing disclosure that he amended his campaign finance report to include the same \$800.28 in-kind contribution, also crediting the Citizens for Local Government.

While the Prices maintain that their support for hand-picked candidates in the form of signs and billboards doesn't constitute a campaign, some of their opponents view it differently.

Wendy Glass, a Republican running for a seat on the Christiansburg Town Council without support from Citizens for Local Government, said that "it's definitely possible" that the signs and billboards elevating other candidates are hurting her campaign.

"I'd like to believe the citizens will educate themselves before going to the polls, and if they do, they'll learn they have another conservative option who is a proven leader and who doesn't engage in this type of misleading and deceptive behavior," Glass said.

And Gitre, who is facing Massie in the Montgomery County school board race, said that while it was clear to observers familiar with campaign finance laws that the Citizens for Local Government signs might violate state law, they also gave voters the impression that "a group of fellow independent-minded county residents had quickly banded together" in support of these campaigns.

"One beneficiary has confessed that nothing could be further from the truth, that these prominently displayed signs on commercial properties were paid for secretly by the Prices, well-known Republican activists, to help buy these elections. The intent of this county-wide scheme to skirt campaign finance disclosure laws, involving a number of local candidates for office, appears to be thoroughly corrupt."

And this, Gitre said, should alarm every voter. "Dark money corrodes our democracy," he said.