

# Recording contradicts political operative's claims about Joe Mullins investigation

By Steve Crawford

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A candidate running for the state House District 122 seat claims a recording his campaign released Tuesday will bolster a state ethics complaint against his opponent.

Joe Mullins, one of four candidates seeking the seat, said Tuesday that the recording verifies to him that despite claims to the contrary, his rival Mack Taylor had engaged a private investigator to dig up dirt on him.

## Hear the recording

“I am disappointed that my opponent and his consultant would stoop so low,” Mullins said. “My family and I are relieved to know where all of this mudslinging, lies and these half-truths started. I just hope we can now spend the rest of this campaign talking about my ideas to make Columbia County and Georgia even better than it is today.”

A complaint filed this week with the State Ethics Commission by a supporter of Mullins claims that Taylor failed to properly disclose the services of a private investigator commissioned to investigate Mullins. The complaint includes copies of text messages among Taylor, political adviser Reagan Williams and others, apparently discussing the investigator’s work.

Last week, Mullins said those text messages were shared with his campaign by Joe Edge, the president of Sherman & Hemstreet Real Estate Co., a claim Edge has emphatically denied.

“It’s not true,” he said Saturday.

Edge did take responsibility for the private investigator’s report on Mullins. He said he shared the report with Taylor but denied the investigation was requested or done on behalf of Taylor’s campaign.

A recorded conversation released Tuesday by Mullins’ campaign office, however, places both of those statements by Edge in doubt.

The conversation among Mullins, Edge and Mullins’ adviser Jody Dickson took place Saturday evening after allegations in the complaint were reported by *The Augusta Chronicle*.

In the recording, Edge asks Mullins and Dickson to delete copies of the text messages he sent to Dickson in September.

“First of all, I need y’all to delete everything I sent you,” Edge says to the two. “Second of all, I need y’all to not mention these text messages from me at all.”

Edge repeatedly cautions Mullins and Dickson about discussing the text messages because they were included in the ethics complaint.

“The problem is you guys are talking about it,” Edge said. “You are talking about it and now these screen shots are part of an ethics complaint. That’s the problem.”

Edge did not respond to repeated calls and messages seeking comment.

Otis Williams, a supporter of Mullins who filed the complaint, said Tuesday that he was privy to the text messages when they were first sent by Edge to Dickson and Dickson gave him copies.

Williams’ 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.”

State Ethics Commission officials confirmed that Williams’ complaint had been received and would be looked into.

Robert Lane, an attorney with the Georgia Ethics Commission, confirmed Tuesday that he had also received the recording from Mullins.

In the recording, Edge blames Taylor political adviser Jim Cox for initiating the investigative report.

“Listen, had they not approached me about doing the report, I would not have done it,” Edge told Mullins and Dickson. “It is not the first time I have done that for a campaign. I did the one on Wright McLeod against Lee Anderson. I mean, they came to me and asked me to do that one and I agreed. I’ve still got a copy of it.”

McLeod, an Evans lawyer, ran an unsuccessful campaign in 2012 for Georgia’s 12th Congressional District. He was a few hundred votes short in the Republican primary to get into a runoff, which was won by Anderson when he defeated Rick Allen. Anderson later lost in the general election to incumbent Democratic Rep. John Barrow.

Edge said hiring an investigator for background checks was not unusual in such contests.

“So, they approached me about doing it. I was like, ‘Yeah, sure.’ I don’t want to contribute to anybody’s campaign, but if they don’t have the money to run a background check, I’ll pay the money to do it,” Edge said in the recording. “So I did it. But it was not my idea, really. It was not initiated by me. They had a copy of it before I did.”

Cox denied he was behind the investigation, saying had he wanted one, he would have hired Chilton himself. He said he had only met Edge on one occasion and had never spoken to him before that.

“From what I can ascertain, there are several different versions of the same story Mr. Edge is pushing in an attempt to cover his actions: what he chooses to say to Mack Taylor, what he chooses to say to Joe Mullins, what he chooses to say to Reagan Williams, what he chooses to say to Alex Chilton and what he chooses to say to the media. Then, there’s the truth, whatever that actually is,” Cox said. “It’s a shame when someone manipulates the facts to blame others for their own actions.”

Taylor said he got a copy of the ethics complaint and reviewed the contents. He said the text messages, which appear to be his, only confirm what he has already said, that he knew about the investigative report and discussed it with the others, including Chilton.

He maintained, however, that he did not request the report or ask Edge to provide it.

“Somebody’s not telling the truth, and I know it’s not me,” Taylor said. “There’s a lot of serial lying going on and all I’m trying to do is focus on the race and get through this election.”

Taylor said he has not taken any action against Mullins and has tried to stay out of any mudslinging.

“One-sided warfare is not warfare,” he said. “I have not been attacking him at all.”

Lane, with the Ethics Commission, said Taylor has 30 days to respond to the complaint. Only after that will the state begin the investigation, he said.

Taylor said he didn’t see how the complaint could proceed based on what he has seen.

“Quite frankly, I don’t see how they can continue the complaint with unauthenticated information,” Taylor said. “This is an attempt, in my opinion, for Joe Mullins to look like the victim.”