

Collins transforms from congressman to VA chief

BY GREG BLUESTEIN
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

WASHINGTON — As former U.S. Rep. Doug Collins tells it, his appointment to Donald Trump’s Cabinet wasn’t a thunderclap moment that “fell from the sky.” Instead, it was the culmination of months of discussions that crystallized after the president’s victory.

Trump recruited the Georgia Republican during the campaign, but specifics weren’t clear until they met at Mar-a-Lago in mid-November: head of Veterans Affairs, one of the toughest — and most thankless — jobs in Washington.

“He looked at me and said, ‘Doug, it’s a big position, do you think you want it?’” Collins recounted, during his best Trump impression at a “Politically Georgia” live event last week. The ex-lawmaker quickly assented.

Collins built a national reputation as one of

Trump’s fiercest defenders, with a rapid-fire delivery and gregarious attitude that made him as comfortable sparring on cable news as he was maneuvering through the halls of Congress.

He became a fixture of the president’s first impeachment battle, using his sharp elbows and jittery energy to counter Democratic attacks while championing Trump’s agenda, including amplifying the president’s false claims in 2020 that he had won a “rigged” election.

But his new job, which he started last week after winning bipartisan confirmation, involves a completely different skill set as he leads a complex bureaucracy with a \$400 billion annual budget riddled with too many challenges to list.

It’s a role that rewards patience and policy expertise rather than campaign trail theatrics and cable news combat — and it’s far more likely to draw scrutiny for

missteps than praise for successes as he navigates disability claim backlogs and long hospital wait times.

Collins’ authority is set to expand. Trump signed an order late Monday that designated Collins as interim head of the offices of Government Ethics and office of the Special Counsel after firing the heads of both government watchdog agencies.

Collins said he’s ready to go from political brawler to government taskmaster, taking on a job that requires a relentless operator to steer a vast bureaucracy that has long struggled to meet the health care needs of veterans.

“We fight the battles. We do that because there’s a partisan system in this country. But my view has always been that I’ll find common ground with you and we’ll work together. And that leads me to the VA,” Collins said in his most extensive interview since his confirmation.

An 18-year-old accused of pistol-whipping, pointing gun at two teens, police say

BY NICK WATSON
nwatson@gainesvilletimes.com

An Oakwood teenager was charged with a handful of felonies after police said he pistol-whipped and pointed a gun at two other teens who reportedly owed him money.

Miguel Diaz, 18, was charged with aggravated battery and two counts of aggravated assault. He turned himself in Monday, Feb. 10, to the Hall County Jail, where he remains with no bond.

Oakwood Police responded around 12:20 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 8, to Diaz’s home on Vista Brook Lane regarding six to eight men fighting in the front yard.

Everyone had left the home except for the two 18-year-old alleged victims, with one suffering a deep cut to his head and bruising on his neck, Lt. Stewart Webb wrote in an email.

One was taken to Northeast Georgia Medical Center for non-life-threatening injuries.

The two 18-year-olds were hanging out at their home when Diaz “pulled up in reference to them owing him money,” Webb wrote in an email. Diaz then went back home.

“The victims later agreed to go to Miguel’s house to work out the misunderstanding



Diaz

about money,” Webb wrote in an email.

Webb said it was unclear how much money was involved and it “may have been about a previous drug transaction.”

When the teenagers showed up at Diaz’s home, there were six to eight men hanging out in the yard, Webb said.

“Miguel Diaz jumped out of a vehicle and pointed a black handgun at them,” Webb wrote. “Miguel demanded money and began hitting them in the head with the handgun. The other unknown male suspects joined in and started attacking the victims.”

At one point, one of the unknown suspects hit one of the alleged victims with a baton, police said.

Police later took out warrants for Diaz on terroristic threats, possession of a firearm during the commission of a crime and possession of marijuana with the intent to distribute.

The Times has reached out to Magistrate Court officials to see if Diaz has an attorney.

Regarding the possibility of further charges and arrests, Webb said the case is still active and that police are still working to identify additional suspects.

FROM 1A

Goss

possession of a firearm by a conviction felon and possession of a firearm during the commission of a crime.

He was booked Monday, Feb. 10, in to the Hall County Jail, where he remains with no bond.

Goss was accused of shooting Kendrick McClendin and another woman who was not immediately identified by Gainesville Police.

“Goss allegedly shot Kendrick McClendin to death at the Texaco, 100 Athens Street, after an altercation at a party,” police said on social media. “During the rapid gunfire, a female who was with McClendin was shot in

the arm.”

Police Lt. Kevin Holbrook said the current understanding of the case was that there was some dispute between McClendin and Goss at a house party.

McClendin and three women left and went to the Texaco. Unbeknownst to them, Goss followed and opened fire, Holbrook said.

The Georgia Bureau of Investigation, the FBI’s Safe Streets Task Force and the Hall County Sheriff’s Office aided in the case.

“I am thankful for the teamwork by multiple agencies and the community, who came together to quickly solve this crime and apprehend the one responsible for the senseless death,” Gainesville Police Chief Jay Parrish said in a statement.



Scott Rogers The Times

Gainesville Police and the Georgia Bureau of Investigation are investigating a fatal shooting on Athens Street and West Ridge Road Monday, Feb. 10.

FROM 1A

Retreat

Milton Robson — would have 30 cabins/cottages and a lodge for overnight accommodations, according to planning documents.

“Overnight accommodations will be ... intended for exclusive use by members of the ministry and their guests, or guest group users of portions of Shiloh Ranch,” documents state. “No overnight transitional, group home, or long-term rehabilitation facility will be housed or based on the property.”

A “day/overnight/summer camp” also is planned “to offer a traditional Christian church camp experience for single-day, overnight, weekend (two night-three days), or single week accommodation for groups with interest in organized camp-type activities,” documents state.

Accommodations will be provided in “bunkhouse settings” and/or in combination with the cabins/cottages.

New construction wouldn’t be more than 390,000 square feet.

Gainesville engineering firm Rochester DCCM is seeking to rezone the property from agricultural-residential to planned commercial development for the development.

The request is set to go before the Hall County

Planning Commission on Monday, Feb. 17. The board would formally recommend approval or denial to the Hall County Board of Commissioners, which is set to take final action at a public hearing on March 27.



Corey Rucker speaks with attorney Rob McNeill in Hall County Superior Court Tuesday, Feb. 11, for day one of his murder trial. Rucker is charged with the murder of Destyn Alexander at the Monroe Drive Motel 6 in Gainesville.

Photos by Scott Rogers The Times



Assistant District Attorney Harold Buckler delivers an opening statement to jury members in Hall County Superior Court during day one of the Corey Rucker murder trial.

FROM 1A

Rucker

work you’re ever going to see,” but the defense contended that they didn’t catch a murderer.

“This whole case is built upon lies,” the attorney said.

McNeill said Destyn grabbed Rucker and the gun went off, calling it a “horrible accident.”

“They hear the gun. They saw the muzzle flash because it was point blank,” McNeill said.

Rucker spent nearly 20 years in prison after a 1997 armed robbery in Hall County, being

released in September 2017.

“His whole life, he’s been a hustler,” McNeill said. “When you spend your formative years in prison, 20 years to the door, you get out in your 40s, you don’t know how to apply for a job. You don’t know how to do anything.”

The defense attorney claimed law enforcement was using the case as a two-for-one: getting a drug dealer off the street for a murder.

“This is the clearest case of self-defense you will ever see,” McNeill said.

INTENT TO OPT OUT OF HOMESTEAD EXEMPTION

The Hall County Board of Commissioners intends to opt out of the statewide adjusted base year ad valorem homestead exemption for Hall County, Georgia.

All concerned citizens are invited to the public hearing on this matter to be held at:

Hall County Government Center
2nd Floor, Commission Meeting Room
2875 Browns Bridge Road
Gainesville, GA 30504

On Thursday, February 13, 2025, at 6:00 PM

Times and places of additional public hearings on this matter are at:

Hall County Government Center
2nd Floor, Commission Meeting Room
2875 Browns Bridge Road
Gainesville, GA 30504

On Monday, February 24, 2025, at 3:00 PM

Hall County Government Center
2nd Floor, Commission Meeting Room
2875 Browns Bridge Road
Gainesville, GA 30504

On Thursday, February 27, 2025, at 6:00 PM