

## GOV. PERDUE NEEDS TO EXPLAIN LAND DEALS TO US

Sometimes our elected public officials forget who's in charge. That would be you and me. After all, we put them in their jobs. They also forget the media's role in the political process. It is the media's job to fairly and accurately report on the actions taken by these public officials so we can know whether or not we are being well-represented by those we have elected to serve us. When politicians stiff the press, the public loses because we are denied information to which we are entitled.

As Gov. Perdue begins a second term, his recent land deals just don't pass the smell test with a lot of ordinary Georgians, but he doesn't want to talk about it. To refresh your memory, in December 2004 Gov. Perdue paid \$2 million for some 20 acres of land in Florida. The land was purchased from developer Stan Thomas of Newnan, who Perdue had appointed to the state Board of Economic Development. The funds came from money the governor had made selling inherited family land in Houston County.

In the last days of the 2005 legislative session, Gov. Perdue's floor leader and personal attorney, Rep. Larry O'Neal (R-Warner Robins), helped push through a change in Georgia's tax law allowing Georgians to delay paying state taxes on land they sell in this state if they buy similar property in another state. A last-minute change approved at O'Neal's urging made the provision retroactive to land sales in 2004 — giving Perdue a \$100,000 tax break. The governor says he only learned later, when his accountant prepared his taxes, that he had gotten the benefit.

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution reports that in December 2003, Perdue acquired 101 acres next to Oaky Woods, one of Georgia's major wildlife preserves which happens also to be located in Houston County. **The state had declined to help the Nature Conservancy purchase the preserve. The state also refused to bid on the property, citing a lack of funds.** Oaky Woods is now primed for commercial and residential development. Gov. Perdue had bought the adjacent land through a company called Maryson. He was not listed on any public records as being associated with the company, although news reports indicate that he paid taxes on the land while it was in Maryson's name. In May 2004, nine days after the state formally notified the Nature Conservancy that it could not help the conservancy purchase the property, the governor put his land in his name.

In the spirit of "Let 'em eat cake," the governor doesn't seem interested in assuring the rest of us that lucky breaks just come naturally to lucky people — who also happen to be governor. His spokesperson, Brent Brantley, is quoted as saying, "Despite the media's attempts to rehash old news, we are focusing in on the policies and issues that matter most to Georgians — jobs, education and health care." It also matters to most Georgians if our public officials are perceived as using their good offices to enhance their personal bank accounts.

There are two inviolable rules for dealing with the media. First, remember that the media are not the audience. They are a pass-through to the audience — in this case, the people of Georgia. Refuse to talk to the media, and you leave the public — you and me — to draw our own conclusions. Second, the questions aren't going to go away simply because the governor's office wants them to. The press has a responsibility to check out the land deals and to assure us that nothing illegal or unethical took place. If they don't, the press are not doing their job. Whoever is handling the governor's media strategy — assuming anyone is — needs to understand that. So does the governor.

If these are the legitimate business transactions he says they are, Gov. Perdue should have no problem explaining them to us, the people of Georgia. If they are not, he should sell back the land for the original price he paid, and apologize for undermining our confidence in him and his office. Most of all, the governor needs to remember that the press is not his enemy, and that his good name is far more valuable than all the land in Georgia — and Florida.