

Nassau Fires Supervisor For Making Racial Slurs

By BRUCE LAMBERT

GARDEN CITY, N.Y., Nov. 4 — For 18 years, Willie Warren complained of being passed over for promotions in Nassau County's public works agency. He filed a bias complaint and a union grievance and even won an arbitration ruling. But he was never promoted.

Recently, a co-worker gave him a tape recording of a supervisor repeatedly referring to Mr. Warren, who is black, by a racial slur. Mr. Warren's lawyer passed along the tape to county officials. On the tape, recorded without the supervisor's knowledge, the supervisor also described a meeting with three other supervisors where they discussed thwarting Mr. Warren's promotion.

This morning, County Executive Thomas R. Suozzi fired the supervisor, Linda Alberti, who has worked in the department since 1985. Then he held a news conference with Mr. Warren and played parts of the tape.

"That tape is hard for anybody to hear; it's especially hard for an African-American to hear," Mr. Suozzi said. In the excerpts, Ms. Alberti — who had won the low-level supervising job that Mr. Warren sought — used the racial epithet eight times.

Mr. Suozzi, who took office Jan. 1 as the first Democratic county executive here in three decades, ordered an investigation into employment practices. Vowing to eradicate any racism found, he said, "We're not going to tolerate anything like that in Nassau County."

Two critics of the county said that there was much to correct. "My shelves are full of complaints and accusations" of discrimination in local governments, said Mr. Warren's lawyer, Frederick K. Brewington, a civil rights lawyer. But without witnesses or evidence like the tape, it is often hard to prove discriminatory

Talk of blocking a promotion is heard on a tape recording.

intent, he said. He likened this voice tape to the videotape of Los Angeles police officers beating Rodney King.

The chief union officer in the county's social services department, Mike Timmons, who is black and Hispanic, said, "People have always come to me about these issues, but we never had the smoking gun like this." He said he had recently done calculations to show that the social services agency had shunned minority employees in promotions, even when they met qualifications. He praised the Suozzi administration for reversing that pattern. In the last round of 22 promotions, half went to minority employees, he said.

But major problems remain in other departments, Mr. Timmons said. He accused his union, the Civil Service Employees Association, of ignoring the issue. The union's new president, Jane D'Amico, said that in 1998 it won a grievance filed by Mr. Warren and others charging the county with violating promotion procedures, though the ruling did not cite racism. The county refused to comply by making a new promotion, she said, and 25 similar cases are pending in the Public Works Department.

Mr. Warren, 36, of Massapequa, a \$39,000-a-year equipment operator in a road maintenance crew, said he was denied promotions four times.

"I've been going through this for 18 years, constantly being passed over for promotion, and the racial slurs," Mr. Warren said in a quiet, firm voice. "They said I was a disgruntled worker." Asked about his reaction to the tape, he said: "I wasn't that shocked. I was very hurt."

His lawyer said that the epithet had also been spoken to Mr. Warren's face, but both men declined to say whether Ms. Alberti or someone else was the culprit. Ms. Alberti did not respond to messages seeking comment. In a Newsday article today, she was quoted as saying she is not a racist.

Mr. Warren's lawyer has not talked with county officials about monetary damages, he said, nor has a decision been made on whether to sue the county. Mr. Warren also has a formal complaint pending with the State Division of Human Rights.

The tape is a bit of mystery. It was made by a white supervisor, Andrew J. Petti Jr., whom Mr. Warren described as friendly to him, who recorded a telephone conversation he had with Ms. Alberti. Mr. Petti did not respond to a message seeking comment.

Several years ago, Mr. Petti taped a phone conversation he had with William T. Biamonte, chief of staff to the North Hempstead supervisor. The disclosure of that tape, in which Mr. Biamonte raised the possibility of pressuring an official to change a vote, was such an embarrassment that Mr. Biamonte left office.