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'Stunning news' brings calls for prayers

Resignation or impeachment talk premature

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COLUMBIA – Minutes after the press conference ended Wednesday at which Gov. Mark Sanford confessed to an affair, constituents of Sen. Larry Martin of Pickens were already calling him to ask that the governor be impeached or resign.

"My view of that is everybody needs to calm down and get a grip," Martin said.

Other lawmakers and officials reacted with restraint Wednesday in statements, offering prayers for Sanford's family and muted criticism of the governor's confessed sin.

U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham said he had been a friend of the Sanfords for years.

"The Sanford family needs time and space to work through their challenges," he said. "I hope they are afforded that opportunity. As for the future, I hope Mark will reconcile with his family and can continue serving as our state's governor."

U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis of Travelers Rest offered his friendship to Sanford.

"The truth is that none of us is capable of fully living the truths that we proclaim, so each of us is dependent on grace," he said. "Mary Anne and I have prayed for Mark, Jenny and the boys, and we will continue to do so. I'm glad to have read Psalm 51 this morning; it prepared me for a day like this—a day of tears, not of taunts. I haven't always agreed with Mark's policies or politics, but today I want more than ever to be his friend."

Others were more critical.

"Today's revelations are disturbing and shocking," House Speaker Bobby Harrell said. "There is no excuse for the unfortunate events that have transpired in recent days. The personal issues must be sorted out by the Sanford family and we hope for the best for them during this most difficult time."

Senate Majority Leader Harvey Peeler said he was "deeply disturbed" that no one knew where Sanford was the past five days.

"We cannot let the governor's personal life overshadow his public responsibility, or in this case, his negligence of gubernatorial authority," he said.

House Majority Leader Kenny Bingham was one of several legislators who said they were impressed by Sanford's honesty.

"It is truly unusual in politics to see someone who takes responsibility and offers an honest apology," Bingham said. "Now is the time to pray for the Sanford family. We join with the governor in calling on the media to give the governor what he requested, some personal privacy for his family so they can begin the healing process."

Martin said while Sanford is deserving of condemnation, he does not believe he has done something deserving of impeachment unless it is shown he has abused his office during the affair. As to his future as governor, he said, "he's going to have to come to terms with how effective he can be."

"I respect the fact that he faced the issue head-on," he said. "He didn't have to do that."

Sen. Kevin Bryant, an Anderson Republican and staunch Sanford ally, told The Greenville News it's unclear whether Sanford can continue to be an effective standard bearer for reform and wasn't sure if he should resign.

"I do think it needs to be considered," he said.

Bryant said after learning of the governor's admission, "I felt like I'd been kicked in the gut. Speechless. Anger. Disappointed. Shock."

Sen. David Thomas, a Greenville County Republican, told The News the burden remains on Sanford to reunite with his family.

"I'm not going to abandon the governor because of this mistake," he said.

Rep. Dan Cooper, a Piedmont Republican and chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, said he wasn't sure how Sanford's disclosure would affect state government and it was yet to be determined how effective Sanford could be now.

Cooper said it was up to Sanford as to whether the governor should resign.

"I admire him and respect him for telling us the truth," Cooper said. "The rest is up to him."

Assistant House Majority Leader Bruce Bannister of Greenville said in a statement the news was "stunning" for him.

"While the Republican Caucus has had its share of differences with the governor over the years, we all stand in support of the Sanford family," Bannister said. "Nobody wants to see this happen to any family."

State Republican Party Chairman Karen Floyd said the incident was sad, especially because it was being played out in public.

"Effective, responsive and responsible government is a hallmark of our party," she said in a statement. "Conservative leaders have earned and kept the trust of South Carolina's majority for many years, and I will make every effort to ensure our party keeps that trust."

Rep. Vincent Sheheen, Camden Democrat and gubernatorial hopeful, said Sanford's disclosure does not change state government, which has been "dysfunctional for several years."

"We've had a leadership vacuum in the state and unfortunately this doesn't help fill the leadership vacuum," Sheheen said.

State Attorney General Henry McMaster said in a statement his heart goes out to Sanford's family.

"My hope is that this sad experience will make Mark a better governor and a better public servant during the final months of his administration," he said.

State Democratic Party Chair Carol Fowler deferred talk of Sanford's future.

“Mark Sanford should be given time to focus on his family right now,” Fowler said. “There will be other opportunities in the weeks ahead to discuss his effectiveness as our state’s governor.”

Even before the press conference, political analysts said Sanford’s prospects as a presidential candidate had been diminished, if not fatally damaged, by his mysterious trip out of the country.

Sanford’s visit could be interpreted as “dereliction of duty, wholly apart from the question of what he was going,” said Larry Sabato, director of the Center for Politics at the University of Virginia.

“The sad fact for Sanford is the vast majority of the public now knows exactly one thing about him. This controversy,” Sabato said.

“He’s going to be a staple on Letterman, Stewart, Colbert for weeks and months,” Sabato said.

“This is the only thing most Americans are going to know about him. It’s the kind of thing that eliminates you from serious consideration for the presidency.”

Bruce Ransom, a political science professor for Clemson University’s Strom Thurmond Institute, said just because Sanford came forward does not remove the impact of a sex scandal.

“I don’t think it gives him a free pass or a get-out-of-jail card,” he said. “We can’t put a happy face on this.”
