

S.C. governor signs law ousting Confederate flag from dome

By Jim Davenport
The Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. — Gov. Jim Hodges signed legislation Tuesday to remove the Confederate flag from the Statehouse dome where it has flown for 38 years, saying it was time the state ended years of racial divisions the banner has caused.

The flag will come down July 1. "Today, we bring this debate to an honorable end," the Democratic governor said in one of the most politically important speeches of his first term. "Today, the descendants of slaves and the descendants of Confederate soldiers join together in the spirit of mutual respect. Today, the debate over the Confederate flag above the Capitol passes into South Carolina history.

Hodges spoke for about five minutes, then signed the bill.

"This debate is over," he said. "Let us move forward together."

South Carolina alone flies the flag above the Statehouse, where it was raised in 1962 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Civil War. Critics suggest it also was to defy civil rights and say

the flag is a symbol of hate. Supporters say it represents the state's heritage.

"We must strive for reconciliation," Hodges said. "We must now work together on the other challenges that confront our state."

A legislative compromise removes the flag from the Statehouse dome and from the House and Senate chambers as of July 1 and replaces it with a square version at the Confederate Soldier Monument on Statehouse grounds.

That's not good enough for some flag opponents. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People has promised to continue and expand the tourism boycott of the state it began Jan. 1. The civil rights group says the monument, where the flag will fly on a 30-foot, \$6,400 bronze pole, is still too prominent.

House Majority Leader Rick Quinn, a Republican, said that while he approved of Hodges' remarks, the governor should have gone further and called on the NAACP to end the boycott.

"What has occurred is the

NAACP has essentially become professional agitators and I think someone needs to stand up to them," Quinn said.

NAACP officials were not available for comment.

The bill went to Hodges' desk after Wilkins and Lt. Gov. Bob Peeler, who presides over the Senate, met Tuesday morning to put their signatures on the bill. "It's big. It's historical and it felt good," Wilkins said.

Hodges was elected in 1998 to a four-year-term with the help of Confederate flag supporters who said he violated a promise that he wouldn't take a leadership role in the flag debate.

The political importance of the speech was evident as Hodges practiced his speech earlier in the day with television cameras piping the signal into the Statehouse press room. At one point, Hodges said to advisers that he wanted to "distance myself as much from the debate" as he could. "I know I can't do it entirely," he said.

Spokesman Morton Brilliant said Hodges was trying to emphasize that he did not want to be seen as the center of the solution.

Judge orders release of police tapes from Columbine shootings

By Katherine Vogt
The Associated Press

DENVER — A judge on Tuesday ordered the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office to turn over tapes of police radio communications from the Columbine High School shootings to several families who are suing the agency over its handling of the case.

Jefferson County District Judge R. Brooke Jackson ordered the release of eight tapes, most of which are 90 minutes long. The tapes contain radio transmissions, car-to-car communications and command post communications relating to the April 20, 1999, shootings at Columbine.

Jackson ruled that the tapes must be edited before they are released to delete references to a named suspect who was later cleared, and to remove the addresses of the gunmen's families. He said they must be released as soon as possible.

Jefferson County Sheriff's spokesman Steve Davis said authorities were still trying to determine how and when the tapes

would be released to the public and to the families who requested them.

The families of shooting victims Dan Rohrbough and Kelly Fleming requested the tapes and other investigative materials under the Open Records Act. The families of several other victims joined in the request.

Barry Arrington, an attorney for the two families, said he was not sure what to expect in the tapes.

"We're hoping that something in there is going to be useful," Arrington said. "But whether it's useful or not in the complaint, it removes some of the shrouds of secrecy.

"Every bit of information we get, we're one step closer to finding out what really happened as opposed to the sheriff's version of what happened," he said.

Arrington said he had heard brief portions of the tapes.

"The problem with the tapes is that they're extremely difficult to listen to and a lot of the communications are unclear," he said.

In some audio clips, officers communicate in codes that are hard to decipher, Arrington said.

Earlier this month, Jackson ordered the sheriff's office to edit the 911 tapes made during the shootings and release them to families of some of the victims and gunmen.

Arrington said he was still waiting to receive copies of the edited 911 tapes. Davis, the sheriff's spokesman, said he did not know when those tapes would be available.

Earlier this month, the sheriff's office released its investigative report on the shootings. Critics said the report lacked background information on witness statements, ballistic reports and an exact timeline.

More than a dozen Columbine families have filed lawsuits over the handling of the school shootings in which Columbine seniors Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold killed 12 students and a teacher and wounded dozens of others before taking their lives.

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