

By PHILLIP RAWLS (AP) – 2 hours ago

MONTGOMERY, Ala. — The owner of Alabama's largest casino, four state senators and several lobbyists face federal charges of conspiring to buy and sell votes for millions of dollars to get electronic bingo legalized, according to an indictment released

Monday.

One lobbying firm employee has pleaded guilty to offering \$2 million for the vote of an indicted senator.

The indictment, which lists 11 defendants, was made public as FBI agents made arrests across the state. It accuses casino owners and lobbyists of making payments and campaign donations, and legislators of soliciting bribes, to affect pro-gambling legislation. One senator was accused of seeking \$100,000 for his vote.

The head of the Justice Department's criminal division, Lanny Breuer, said the criminal activity was "astonishing in scope ... a full-scale campaign to bribe legislators and others."

VictoryLand casino owner Milton McGregor was among those indicted. His casino, now shut down, has more than 6,000 electronic bingo machines. His attorney, Joe Espy, said his client is absolutely innocent and looks forward to proving it.

Also indicted was Country Crossing casino developer Ronnie Gilley of Dothan and state Sens. Harri Anne Smith of Slocomb, James Prueitt of Talladega, Larry Means of Gadsden, and Quinton Ross Jr. of Montgomery.

All four senators voted for the unsuccessful legislation designed to keep electronic bingo casinos operating.

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Also indicted were lobbyists Tom Coker and Bob Geddie, who represent VictoryLand; lobbyist Jarrod Massey and public relations executive Jay Walker, who represent Country Crossing; and Ray Crosby, an attorney for the Legislature who helped write gambling legislation.

A hearing at the federal courthouse in Montgomery was scheduled for later Monday.

Federal authorities announced Monday that one of Massey's employees, Jennifer Pouncy of Montgomery, pleaded guilty Sept. 28 to conspiracy. She admitted that at Massey's direction, she offered Preuitt \$2 million for his vote and that Massey authorized her to offer \$100,000 to Means for his vote.

The indictment alleges that Means, who had abstained from an earlier vote on the pro-gambling legislation in 2010, solicited bribes from McGregor, Gilley, Massey and others in return for voting in favor. In one case, the indictment says, he sought \$100,000.

The indictment accused Ross of pressuring McGregor for campaign donations before voting for the gambling bill. It accuses Smith of voting for the bill and encouraging other legislators to support it in exchange for promises and payments from Gilley and others of hundreds of thousands in campaign funds. And it says the Preuitt was offered financial support, free polling and concerts by country music artists to help with his campaign.

The probe was announced last spring prior to the final votes on the bill, which died when sponsors could not line up enough for passage.

Backers of the bill, mostly Democrats, accused Republican Gov. Bob Riley's administration of derailing the measure with the announcement. While Riley's state public safety director was involved with the announcement, federal authorities said the Justice Department was handling the investigation.

Of the four state senators indicted, Means and Ross are Democrats, Preuitt is a Republican and Smith is an independent who was a Republican when the bill was in the Legislature. All are seeking re-election except Preuitt, who recently pulled out of his race.

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Smith called her arrest "a nakedly political move, coordinated by the prosecutors in cahoots with the governor's office" to influence legislative elections Nov. 2.

The governor's spokesman, Jeff Emerson, said that last spring, Riley had labeled the gambling bill "the most corrupt piece of legislation ever considered by the Senate."

"Today's action by the Justice Department shows he was, sadly, right," Emerson said.

Electronic bingo casinos operated in Alabama for several years until the governor labeled the machines illegal slots and organized a task force to close them down. The unsuccessful legislation was designed to thwart Riley's task force and keep the electronic bingo machines operating.

McGregor's casino, 15 miles east of Montgomery, was the state's largest, but it has been closed since Aug. 9 to prevent a raid by the task force, which managed to close all privately operated electronic bingo casinos during the probe.

Only three casinos operated by the Poarch Creek Indians remain in operation. They are not under state supervision.

Associated Press writers Pete Yost in Washington and Bob Johnson in Montgomery contributed to this report.

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