

By PHILLIP RAWLS

MONTGOMERY, Ala.

The 11 defendants accused of conspiring to buy and sell votes for a pro-gambling bill at the Alabama Legislature pleaded not guilty to the federal charges Friday.

Trial was set for April 4, with all 11 of the defendants to be tried together.

The defendants - four state senators, three lobbyists, two casino owners and two others - arrived at the federal courthouse to enter the formal pleas. About 20 supporters of Dothan casino developer Ronnie Gilley joining him, some carrying signs. One read: "Ronnie is innocent."

The federal grand jury indictment released Oct. 4 was accompanied by the announcement that a 12th defendant had pleaded guilty to taking part in offering a senator \$2 million for his vote.

The vote was over a bill to legalize the electronic bingo casinos that Gov. Bob Riley's gambling task force had shut down with raids and the threat of raids during the past year. Riley contends the electronic bingo machines are Vegas-style slot machines that are illegal in Alabama.

The bill passed the Senate earlier this year but, after the bribery probe was announced, it died in the House.

The defendants include Gilley, developer of the Country Crossing casino in Dothan, and Milton McGregor, owner of VictoryLand casino in Shorter and a financial backer of Country Crossing. They operate the two largest casinos in Alabama.

Written by Administrator
Friday, 15 October 2010 18:32 -

Also indicted were state Sens. Harri Anne Smith, I-Slocumb, James Preuitt, R-Talladega, Larry Means, D-Attalla, and Quinton Ross Jr., D-Montgomery. All four senators voted for the bill to legalize the machines.

Gilley lobbyist Jarrod Massey and McGregor lobbyists Thomas Coker and Bob Geddie were indicted along with Jay Walker, a spokesman for Gilley, and Ray Crosby, an attorney with the Legislative Reference Service.

Federal authorities said the 12th defendant - Jennifer Pouncy of Montgomery, an employee of Massy - pleaded guilty Sept. 28 to conspiracy. Under her plea, she admitted offering Preuitt \$2 million for his vote and that Massey authorized her to offer \$100,000 to Means for his vote.

Associated Press writer Bob Johnson in Montgomery contributed to this report

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