

McGregor, Gilley and others enter pleas in Alabama bingo investigation - al.com (blog)

Written by Administrator
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Casino owner Milton McGregor and 10 others accused of trying to buy and sell votes on a gambling bill all pleaded not guilty Friday, and at least one defendant said the investigation was trumped up to stop the legislation.

Prosecutors also Friday turned over

to defense lawyers 30 to 50 hours of clandestinely recorded conversations that are expected to be at the heart of the case.

McGregor lawyer Joe Espy said as many as 3,000 phone calls may have been captured by federal investigators.

U.S. Magistrate Judge Wallace Capel Jr. set an April 4 date for the beginning of the trial -- a proceeding one defense attorney estimated could last six months because there are so many defendants.

The 11 defendants were arraigned Friday morning in a brief appearance in federal court in Montgomery.

One by one, McGregor; Country Crossing casino developer Ronnie Gilley; lobbyist Tom Coker; lobbyist Jarrod Massey; lobbyist Bob Geddie; Sen. Harri Anne Smith, I-Slocomb; Sen. Larry Means, D-Attalla; Sen. Jim Preuitt, R-Talladega; Sen. Quinton Ross, D-Montgomery; Country Crossing spokesman Jay Walker; and legislative employee Ray Crosby all entered pleas of not guilty.

"Absolutely not guilty" Espy said when entering McGregor's plea in court.

Outside the courtroom, Espy again said "absolutely not," when asked whether McGregor ever has traded campaign contributions for a vote.

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Espy said he is looking forward to hearing all of the conversations federal agents recorded -- rather than reading excerpts quoted in the indictment -- because he believes the tapes will exonerate McGregor.

"We believe they are going to show Milton McGregor committed no misconduct. In fact, they are going to show he conducted himself in the absolute right way you are supposed to, the way he has done for 71 years of his life," Espy said.

Smith lawyer Jim Parkman said prosecutors in a status conference before the arraignment said they would turn over the pertinent recordings. But Parkman said he wanted to listen to all of the recordings.

McGregor did not speak as he came out of the courthouse surrounded by television cameras and accompanied by his wife, two daughters, one granddaughter and two ministers.

'It's shameful'

The bill before legislators this past spring would have held a statewide vote on whether to allow McGregor, Gilley and a handful of other operators to offer electronic bingo. The bill passed the Alabama Senate, but it did not get a vote in the House of Representatives after federal investigators told legislative leaders they were investigating the bill's passage.

Gilley said he believed the charges were trumped up to stop a statewide vote.

"It's being contrived in such a manner to where it's shameful," Gilley told reporters.

"Not one single time have I ever offered money for a vote," Gilley said.

Gilley is the developer of Country Crossing, a country music-themed development that closed after only a few weeks of operation to prevent a raid by Gov. Bob Riley's gambling task force.

Riley contends the slot machine look-alikes that had been played at the state's casinos and bingo halls did not meet the legal definition of charity bingo.

Gilley said he will reopen when Riley leaves office in January.

"We were truly creating an entertainment dynasty. We were already in a seven-week period pulling people from 11 states," Gilley said.

Prosecutors allege legislators were offered generous campaign contributions, help with their campaigns, and in one case a lucrative job in exchange for yes votes on the gambling bill.

Smith, who along with Means and Ross is running for re-election, said the indictment has been emotionally trying, but has not hurt her support among voters. "It has doubled our support," Smith said.

Outside the courtroom, more than 20 Gilley supporters -- many of them former employees of Country Crossing -- stood outside the courthouse shouting, "Ronnie is innocent" and clapping for the defendants.

Helen Hutchinson, 62, of Geneva County carried a sign that said "Ronnie Gilley Changed My Life." Hutchinson said Gilley gave her a job as an information desk clerk when there were no

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other jobs to be found. "He gave me hope. Country Crossing meant hope. It meant jobs," she said.

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