

Would-Be Extortionist Nabbed by FBI at St. Croix Park After Threatening Businessman and His Family

Following days of threats against a St. Croix businessman and his family, an FBI operation led to the arrest of the suspect who is now considered a flight risk and a danger to the community

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Janeke Simon **August 21, 2024**

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ST. CROIX — On August 16, a would-be extortionist showed up to a prearranged rendezvous point at Altoona Lagoon Park and rummaged through a vehicle which he expected to contain a substantial cash payment. Instead of the money, Delani Benjamin found himself in handcuffs, arrested and charged with federal crimes.

Last Monday, a St. Croix businessman began getting calls and text messages from a blocked number. The person on the other end was a male with a Crucian accent, the businessman told police. The caller informed the businessman that he needed to pay \$5000 to satisfy a drug debt,

and said that if he didn't pay, he would be killed. On Tuesday morning, the unknown man called again. "I'm coming for my \$5000 before 8:30 a.m. or I will grab your wife and put her in a fish bag," he reportedly told the businessman, refusing to heed protestations that the man was not involved in the drug trade and owed no drug debts to anyone.?

The man called again that morning, around 8:51 a.m. to say that he was waiting for the money in the Gallows Bay parking lot. Half an hour later – another call, this time to say that a passing police unit had spooked him into leaving. "If you getting cops involved in this...I'ma kill your wife," the aggressor told the businessman. A few minutes after that, the man called again, threatening his target's wife, or to "shoot up" his business place.

After the calls, the businessman said, came a barrage of text messages reiterating the threatening man's claims: that he was an assassin hired to kill the business owner, but that if the businessman paid the money, he would be spared.?

On August 15, the man's instructions changed. Now, he wanted the businessman to send the \$5000 through PayPal. Details in the man's threatening messages began to raise suspicion that he was not as familiar with his target as he seemed. A menacing message that the businessman was being watched while on his balcony rang hollow, because the man's residence is not visible from the street, and the porch secluded from view.?

Later that afternoon, as the businessman still had not sent the money, the would-be extortionist called and texted again, threatening to "spray the block" in a bid to prevent the business from opening the following day, and also threatening to kidnap the man's wife. The wife also received a message via social media, informing her that her life was on the line due to her husband's nonpayment. The businessman confessed that he had sought the assistance of law enforcement, but told his tormentor that he received no assistance from police.?

The following day, Friday August 16, the businessman once again received a call from a blocked number. The person on the line introduced themselves as Officer Daniels, who sounded to the businessman a lot like the man who had been trying to extort money from him. "Officer Daniels" said that the businessman's complaint was out of the jurisdiction of the police, and thus he could receive no assistance. "Whatever you did to those guys you gotta take it up with the streets," said "Officer Daniels". That was when the businessman decided to go to the FBI, who came up with a plan.

FBI asked the businessman to schedule a time for a money drop at Altoona Lagoon Park, which he did. The money was to be collected from the back of the businessman's truck, which would be parked on a dirt road near the park's exercise equipment. Law enforcement set up a surveillance operation of the site at around 1:50 p.m on August 16. At about 3:15, Delani Benjamin showed up and tried unsuccessfully to open the vehicle. Authorities watched as he called the businessman to express his frustration that he could not access the camper. He tried again and then left.?

Benjamin then returned after calling the businessman and receiving instructions on how to open the compartment. Law enforcement, still surveilling the area, saw him open the camper on the businessman's truck and rummage around inside. When he returned to his vehicle, he was arrested. A canine unit alerted on the vehicle and authorities reportedly recovered an unlicensed firearm from the vehicle.

? "I know this doesn't look good," Benjamin told the arresting officers, insisting that he had been summoned to pick up a package.

Benjamin was charged with violations of the United States Code governing interstate communications, and with interference with commerce by threats of violence. Prosecutors have asked the court to deny bail, arguing that the nature of the case makes Benjamin a “danger to the community and specifically the victim, his family, and business employees.” The severity of the potential penalties faced by Benjamin makes him a flight risk, government attorneys say, and thus there is no condition or combination of conditions that can assure the community’s safety or ensure his presence at trial.

On Tuesday, U.S. Magistrate Emile Henderson III found probable cause to uphold the charges against Benjamin. A public defender has been appointed to represent him in this matter.

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