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Padded Invoices, Lavish Trips, Cash Bribes — Current and Former USVI Officials Charged With Fraud and Corruption

Prosecutors claim high-ranking officials from the Bryan administration manipulated government contracts, inflating invoices and accepting bribes, with recorded calls and millions of documents supporting the allegations.

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Jenifer O'Neal, Ray Martinez, and Calvert White appeared in District Court on Friday for their initial and arraignment hearings. Benjamin Hendricks was also present for the proceedings, though we were unable to capture a photo of him. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM

On Friday morning, Commissioner of Sports, Parks and Recreation Calvert White walked into the District Court's St. Thomas courtroom. So did Jenifer O'Neal, former director of the Office of Management and Budget, Ray Martinez, former commissioner of the Virgin Islands Police Department, and Benjamin Hendricks, owner of A Clean Environment, which does business with the government.

Handcuffed and shackled before Judge Alan Teague, they all pleaded not guilty to bribery and fraud charges connected to contracts involving Mon Ethos Pro Support. The local company is formerly owned and operated by David Whitaker, who [himself pleaded guilty](#) to wire fraud and bribery charges in connection with his dealings with Mr. Martinez.

Two indictments were issued by a grand jury earlier this week. The first, naming Mr. Martinez and Ms. O'Neal as defendants, alleges that the former high-ranking government employees worked together with Mr. Whitaker to pad Mon Ethos invoices with bogus charges and push them through the procurement process. The extra money received from the government would then be spent, prosecutors say, on lavish trips, cash bribes, and other inducements for Martinez and O'Neal.

The indictment, which describes the scheme in significant detail, includes alleged text messages and phone calls between the defendants and Mr. Whitaker. In one exchange, Mr. Martinez reportedly instructed Mr. Whitaker to pad a Mon Ethos invoice submitted to the VIPD by \$70,000. Mr. Whitaker also reportedly recorded meetings that he had with the senior government officials. One such recording, prosecutors say, captures Ms. O'Neal agreeing to accept goods as bribes instead of cash. The indictment against the pair comes amidst reliable reports of failed plea negotiations between the parties.

The allegations against Mr. White and Mr. Hendricks are that the DSPR commissioner also pressed Mr. Whitaker for bribes, using Mr. Hendricks as a go-between to make demands and attempt to conceal his tracks. As in the case against Mr. Martinez and Ms. O'Neal, prosecutors say they have text messages and recorded calls and meetings involving the defendants to support the allegations.

[[Read the indictments: Martinez, O'Neal | White, Hendricks](#)]

In one such call, Mr. White reportedly told Mr. Whitaker that he needed to speak to “Benji” about an urgent matter, as a project for which Mon Ethos had submitted a bid would soon be up for consideration. Soon afterwards, Benjamin Hendricks allegedly approached Mr. Whitaker while he was at work on St. Croix to inform him that Mr. White would need \$16,000 to ensure that the Mon Ethos bid prevailed. After that meeting, Mr. White allegedly contacted Mr. Whitaker by WhatsApp to verify that he had received the message. Mr. White is also alleged to have shared confidential details about the other bids with Mr. Whitaker. In recorded phone calls, he is alleged to have stated that he's “been doing this for a while.” Prosecutors say Mr. Whitaker only ended up sending \$5,000 to a bank account controlled by Mr. Hendricks, “partial payment for the contract” allegedly noted on the wire transfer.

In court on Friday, the Sports, Parks and Recreation Commissioner was presented with one count of an honest services wire fraud scheme, and one count of bribery concerning programs receiving federal funds. Mr. Hendricks, as Mr. White's alleged partner in the scheme, is also facing the same charges. Attempts to reach Governor Albert Bryan Jr. for comment on the indictment against his cabinet member were unsuccessful.

Meanwhile, former commissioner Martinez is facing one count of bribery concerning programs receiving federal funds, two counts of obstruction of justice, five counts of honest services wire fraud, and one count of participating in a money laundering conspiracy with Ms. O'Neal. She also faces two counts of honest services wire fraud and one count of bribery concerning programs receiving federal funds.

After receiving their not guilty pleas and requests for a speedy, public jury trial, Judge Carney granted all four defendants bail in the form of a \$10,000 unsecured bond. They will each have to surrender their passports, and will further be restricted from leaving the territory without prior written authorization from the court. Mr. Martinez surrendered his two firearms, while the judge approved a request that his wife, who is an active duty VIPD officer, be allowed to keep possession of a firearm. However, the weapon must be secured in a safe.

A trial date was set for February 24, however with the mountains of documents and data to be handed over for discovery and pored over by the defense, it is almost inevitable that the start date will be postponed. "To call discovery voluminous is a grotesque understatement," one government lawyer quipped, as prosecutors requested the court designate the cases as complex. Mr. Martinez's case involves over 6 million pages and several terabytes of data, while Ms. O'Neal's case contains approximately 2.5 million pages, according to prosecutors. Similarly, the cases of Mr. White and Mr. Hendricks are equally extensive, each comprising millions of pages and terabytes of data.

Editor's Note: An updated version of this article accurately reflects the charges against Ms. O'Neal.