

Corruption probe continues in Broward; FBI agents at county building

By Paula McMahon, Kathy Bushouse and Scott Wyman
South Florida Sun-Sentinel
3:56 p.m. EDT, September 25, 2009

FORT LAUDERDALE - A federal corruption probe in Broward County appeared to be expanding today, as FBI agents returned to Broward County government offices and announced plans to interview dozens of employees.

Broward County Transportation Director Chris Walton said agents showed up at his office around 12:45 p.m. and requested to meet with him. He described the interview as very general.

"Basically, they asked if any county commissioner ever tried to influence contracts with me, and I said no," Walton said.

He said they asked for no records and did not mention any specific contracts. The agents asked how he knew Eggleton, and he told them he only knew him professionally from county government.

Walton said the agents told him that he is the start of the questioning of many more.

They haven't given me a list of who they want to interview," County Administrator Bertha Henry said. "They can interview whoever they want to interview."

School Board member Beverly Gallagher, County Commissioner Josephus Eggleton and former Miramar City Commissioner Fitzroy Salesman were arrested and charged in a public corruption probe Wednesday.

FBI agents showed up at the Governmental Center shortly after arresting Eggleton at his home. Agents interviewed Eggleton's staff at the time, but took no records and did not search his office.

On Thursday, federal investigators focused largely on two fronts: the school district, and allegations of contractor misconduct in the city of Miramar, where two businessmen were accused of helping to pay bribes to Miramar officials.

Government agents who questioned school district officials wanted to know about the process of awarding construction contracts, whether contracts could be steered to selected companies and about lobbyists' influence on the School Board, according to district officials who spoke on condition of not being identified.

The agents also asked about the school district's controversial audit of payments made for repair work after Hurricane Wilma struck in October 2005, the sources said.

They wanted to know about the work done by AshBritt Inc., and whether the company's lobbyist, Ron Book, had been in touch with School Board members, the sources said.

Book told the Sun Sentinel he hasn't been contacted by the feds himself, and didn't know why they would be asking about him.

"I've got a couple of small clients that have been at the School Board. I don't do much business at the School Board," Book said. He said he had had "maybe, in the last five years, three conversations with Beverly Gallagher."

Lobbyist Neil Sterling also was mentioned in the interviews, the sources said. Sterling is registered as a school district lobbyist for eight companies, including architectural firm Zyscovich, Weiss and Woolrich Contractors and the Community Blood Center.

A woman who answered the phone at Sterling's [Fort Lauderdale](#) residence Thursday evening said he was not available.

FBI agents had scheduled a meeting for Friday with Broward Schools Superintendent [James Notter](#), Notter said, but rescheduled the interview for next week. Notter said he has had no indication that the FBI is looking at any board members besides Gallagher.

"They're finishing up their questioning of the witness list that they have," he said.

Notter's lawyer, Michael Weinstein, is also representing three School Board members --- Maureen Dinnen, Robin Bartleman and [Ben Williams](#). Weinstein described his clients as "witnesses and not targets of the investigation."

Dinnen, Bartleman and Williams have been or are about to be quizzed by federal investigators, who wanted to learn "how the School Board awards contracts," Weinstein said.

"They were asking if these people were accepting money like Gallagher did, and they all said 'no,'" the attorney said.

Meanwhile Thursday, federal authorities unsealed criminal charges against two local businessmen, one of whom worked for a prominent Fort Lauderdale construction company.

The pair are accused of seeking fake invoices from undercover FBI agents to conceal the source of \$50,000 in cash allegedly being used to pay off unidentified Miramar city officials. Checks written from the account of one of the companies were given to fictional companies set up by the agents, who then gave cash back to Celestine Skippy "Skip" Aniekwu to be given to three Miramar public officials, according to the criminal complaints. No work was performed for the money.

No additional charges have been filed against any Miramar officials and a source familiar with the investigation said agents are still investigating whether the money was ever turned over to public servants. The agents posed as asset managers representing a construction business looking for contracts.

Aniekwu and Luke Facarazzo Jr., were charged with conspiracy to commit wire fraud between October 2004 and December 2008. Facarazzo was arrested Thursday, Aniekwu has not yet been brought in, public records show.

Aniekwu was a project manager for Gulf Building Corp., a Fort Lauderdale construction company that works on private and public projects, including two Miramar contracts worth more than \$30 million. John Scherer, son of prominent local attorney Bill Scherer, is Gulf's president.

Aniekwu, 50, was laid off July 1 because of a company downsizing, said Kevin Boyd, a company spokesman. Aniekwu was hired in 2005 as project manager for the Miramar projects, Boyd said.

"The company is not accused of anything," Boyd said.

The Miramar City Commission awarded a contract to Gulf Building and another partner in March 2006 to build the \$15 million Ansin Sports Complex, a 24-acre recreation center and track and field, according to court records. The company also built a \$15.4 million services center for the city.

According to the criminal complaint:

Facarazzo was the president and chief executive officer of Luke's Landscaping, a Hollywood subsidiary of the Continental Group Inc. and [FirstService Corp.](#), which is publicly traded on NASDAQ. Efforts to contact Aniekwu, Facarazzo and the other companies were unsuccessful late Thursday.

According to court records, Aniekwu told an undercover agent in April 2008: "I might be able to move a couple of things through you, for the city of Miramar" but he would have to "take care of the people that brought the projects."

In July, Aniekwu said he needed cash payments of \$50,000 each for three unidentified Miramar officials. The agent said Aniekwu's company could write a check for the agent's company. But Aniekwu said the check would not come from his company -- it would have to come from a subcontractor, Luke's Landscaping or Continental.

The agent later turned over invoices for \$50,000 for "professional consulting services" to Aniekwu who said he would give the money to the officials when the city paid Luke's.

Eventually, in November 2008, the agent met with a person sent by Aniekwu who delivered two checks totaling \$30,000 from Lukes-Sawgrass Landscaping to an agent. Later that month, Aniekwu delivered a \$20,000 check to an undercover agent.

On Nov. 24, 2008, an agent gave Aniekwu a computer bag containing \$50,000 in cash. Aniekwu counted it and told the agent to take his 7 percent fee. Aniekwu then said he was going to meet with "them" for lunch, a remark the agent believed meant the cash would be given to Miramar officials.

Federal agents also continued to interview municipal employees, commissioners and former elected officials Thursday.

Salesman's attorneys, Eric Schwartzreich and Jason Kreiss, said they are reviewing the case against him and will talk with prosecutors before deciding how to proceed.

Staff Researcher Barbara Hijek and Staff Writers Georgia East and Scott Wyman contributed to this report.

Paula McMahon can be reached at pmcmahon@SunSentinel.com or 954-356-4533.