

Grand jury to hear testimony in corruption investigation

Subpoena cites repairs of school classrooms; and federal agents return to county government offices

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The next wave emerged Friday in the U.S. government's investigation of public corruption in Broward County -- a grand jury delving into controversial construction spending by the county School Board.

The federal grand jury will hear testimony next week in the continuing investigation, which has resulted in the arrests of three local politicians and criminal charges against five businessmen.

Michael Garretson, the Broward School District's deputy superintendent for facilities and construction, said he received a subpoena Friday afternoon to appear before the grand jury Thursday. The subpoena ordered him to bring documents related to controversial repair work performed on portable classroom roofs after Hurricane Wilma struck in 2005.

School district auditors delivered a scathing review of the AshBritt Inc. contract earlier this year. The audit stated AshBritt didn't do some of the work it billed for, and Texas-based contractor C&B Services overbilled for work it did on the classrooms. The audit recommended the district demand a \$765,608 refund from AshBritt.

Lobbyist Ron Book, who represents AshBritt, said neither he nor his clients have received subpoenas. Book and company officials have denied any wrongdoing.

Meanwhile federal agents continued to investigate on Friday and returned to Broward County government offices, where they said they planned to interview dozens of employees.

County Commissioner Josephus Eggleton, School Board member Beverly Gallagher and former Miramar City Commissioner Fitzroy Salesman, all Democrats, were arrested and charged in a public corruption investigation Wednesday. Gov. Charlie Crist later suspended Eggleton and Gallagher from public office.

County Administrator Bertha Henry said the FBI interviewed Transportation Director Chris Walton and told him that he is the first of many.

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

Walton said FBI agents conducted a "very general" interview.

"Basically, they asked if any county commissioner ever tried to influence contracts with me, and I said 'no,'" Walton said. They did not ask for any records and did not mention any specific contracts, he said. The agents asked how he knew Eggleton, and he told them he only knew him professionally.

County Commission

Although Eggleton has been suspended, his office is continuing to run. Agents interviewed his two aides, Cynthia Martin and Gwendolyn Hudson, on Wednesday.

Eggleton's attorney, Johnny McCray Jr., said he still is reviewing the case. McCray said his client is concerned "but he is confident and he has faith."

Eggleton also is under investigation by the Broward State Attorney's Office regarding an allegation that a representative of a local developer, Prestige Homes of South Florida Inc., paid several thousand dollars in cash for a Parkland Golf & Country Club membership for Eggleton, said two sources familiar with the investigation.

The issue came under scrutiny because of Eggleton's votes for the developer's proposal to redevelop the old Monterey and Sabal Palm golf courses, which would be the first new single-family home community in Tamarac in 30 years. Prestige Homes planned to build 728 units on two sites near Commercial Boulevard and Florida's Turnpike though the project has been delayed by the recession.

The County Commission signed off on the project in December 2006, with Eggleton voting to approve it with a majority of his colleagues. In June, he sided with the developer when Prestige asked the county to drop requirements to include affordable housing in the project. A majority of the board held firm.

School district

Schools Superintendent James Notter said his appointment to speak with federal agents was postponed to Friday.

Michael D. Weinstein, an attorney for Notter and School Board members Maureen Dinnen, Robin Bartleman and Ben Williams, said he believes his clients are being questioned only as witnesses.

"We just think that they're following up on their investigation of Gallagher and searching for anything else," Weinstein said.

Miramar

Miramar Mayor Lori Moseley said she thinks more arrests will follow as federal agents continue their investigation.

"I think there will be a lot of people pulled in now," Moseley said.

Staff Writers Georgia East and Akilah Johnson contributed to this report.

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