

Snapshot: The Bribery Case Facing An Ex-Fla. State Atty

By **Matt Perez**

Law360 (March 2, 2021, 4:47 PM EST) -- The U.S. Attorney's Office for the Middle District of Florida on Friday announced the indictment of a former state attorney from the Third Judicial Circuit of Florida on federal charges including extortion, bribery and wire fraud.

Jeffrey Siegmeister, 52, served as the elected state attorney for the Third Judicial Circuit between January 2013 and December 2019, when he abruptly stepped down from his post. According to reports at the time, a divorce was to blame for the retirement. Prior to taking the position, Siegmeister practiced law out of Lake City, Florida.

Prosecutors say that during his tenure, Siegmeister earned tens of thousands in dollars through bribes and hundreds of thousands through other fraudulent means.

Here, Law360 Pulse takes a closer look at some of the charges against Siegmeister.

Conspiracy and Extortion

Several of the charges relate to Marion Michael O'Steen, 41, a defense attorney out of Dixie County, Florida, who represented clients in the Third Judicial Circuit at the time Siegmeister served as the state attorney.

The U.S. attorney's office alleged Siegmeister accepted bribes in exchange for favorable disposition of charges against defendants O'Steen represented, as well as delays in actions in order to procure additional fees. O'Steen pled not guilty to extortion conspiracy and other charges in federal court Friday and is out on a \$100,000 bond.

"We disagree with the allegations set forth concerning Mr. O'Steen," his representative, Mitchell Stone, told Law360 Pulse on Tuesday. "We've been consistent all along that he had no special deal with Mr. Siegmeister."

Prosecutors say that in one instance in August 2018, O'Steen pressed one of his clients, who was charged with keeping a gambling house, for \$60,000 to obtain a pretrial intervention. Prior to the meeting, a legal assistant of his sent a message to the client mentioning a meeting with Siegmeister, adding, "If you are wanting a different result about this issue to go the other way you and Michael discussed then he needs to know you are serious about what it takes to do so before he goes to that meeting," according to the indictment.

"Mr. Osteen, according to his contract, was permitted to get additional fees for the additional work that would have to go into the defense of the case, and when he asked for the additional fees, his client, obviously, was working in some way with the government and they decided that that was inappropriate and that he was essentially doing something that was impermissible," Stone said. "We disagree with that, and I think the evidence will bear it out."

Along with the extortion charges, Siegmeister is accused of accepting bribes, notably through the purchasing of bulls. In March 2019, according to the indictment, Siegmeister sent O'Steen a text saying, "Let me know if you're serious about my bulls." The defense attorney and his father previously purchased one of his bulls for \$4,000 then soon flipped it to another farmer for \$3,500,

prosecutors say.

"My client had no quid pro quo when it came to his father and brother who are in the cattle business buying a bull from Jeff Siegmeister's wife," Stone said. "They bought the bull for a reasonable price and the father went and picked it up, he picked up the wrong bull and the brother did not approve so they sold the bull. But there was nothing illegal about that. And it was a normal price on the buy and the sell."

Additionally, Siegmeister solicited O'Steen for donations to an unnamed Republican representative in the panhandle, whom his wife worked for, according to the indictment. Stone noted that it's common for criminal defense attorneys to give political contributions in Florida.

"Providing a campaign donation that essentially went to the hosting of an event with Ashley Moody, who was running for attorney general, I don't believe that that has any bearing as being illegal in any way," Stone said. "But this is where we differ. Obviously, the government takes a different view of how things are done, and as a result we're going to have to litigate these issues."

Discounted Tractor

A separate matter of alleged bribery concerned the purchase of a tractor from a criminal defendant. Prosecutors say Siegmeister made an agreement with Ernest Maloney Page IV, a defense attorney representing a client charged in two driving-under-the-influence cases.

In September 2017, the government says, Siegmeister proposed reducing both charges for a \$20,000 discount on a tractor and accessories, which the client agreed to through Page. Following the deal, Siegmeister's wife made the purchase, including the steep discount, according to the indictment.

In exchange, prosecutors say, the client pled no contest to charges of reckless driving with alcohol and refusal to submit to a blood alcohol test. Both DUI charges were dismissed, and he received a year of supervised probation with no incarceration.

Page pled guilty in August to conspiracy to commit federal program bribery stemming from the agreement.

Stolen Estate

The indictment also goes beyond bribery within the state attorney's office. Along with charges regarding allegedly false tax return filings between 2015 and 2017, prosecutors say Siegmeister defrauded an elderly man out of hundreds of thousands of dollars.

According to the indictment, Siegmeister petitioned to become the guardian of the 80-year-old man and drafted a last will and testament that named one of the former state attorney's relatives as the sole beneficiary of the assets in the estate. Specifically, the man owned 10,248 shares of Coca-Cola common stock that boasted a value of \$664,751.

Prosecutors say that as the court-appointed voluntary guardian, Siegmeister converted his ward's assets into cash and deposited it into accounts under his own name, illegally using interstate wire transmissions to do so. He subsequently provided false information regarding the estate to the probate divisions of the Circuit Court for Columbia County and the Third Judicial Circuit, according to prosecutors.

What's Next

Siegmeister was arrested in Arizona on Friday and made his initial appearance in federal court Monday, in the District of Arizona out of Flagstaff. He's currently being represented by Sarah Kosnoff Erlinder, an assistant federal public defender in Flagstaff.

Siegmeister has an identity and detention hearing scheduled for Thursday before U.S. Magistrate Judge Camille D. Bibles.

Erlinder had no comment to share at this time. The U.S. Attorney's Office for the Middle District of Florida declined to comment.

--Editing by Aaron Pelc.

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