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# August 29 is federal court arraignment date for suspended Lee police chief Joseph Buffis accused of extortion and money laundering; selectmen set public hearing on pay pending prosecution

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SPRINGFIELD — Embattled Lee police chief Joseph Buffis

## JOSEPH BUFFIS

Lee Police Chief Joseph Buffis fired in wake of extortion, money laundering charges  
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August 29 is federal court arraignment date for suspended Lee police chief Joseph Buffis accused of extortion and money laundering; selectmen set public hearing on pay pending prosecution  
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will be summoned to appear in U.S. District Court here on Aug. 29 to answer extortion and money laundering charges.

The arraignment is scheduled for 2 p.m. before Judge Kenneth P. Neiman.



Joseph Buffis

AP Photo/Ben Garver, Berkshire Eagle (file)

In a statement prepared by the U.S. attorney's office, the government says: "Buffis will be summoned to appear in court for his initial appearance."

Indictments were returned last week Buffis, 55, following a nearly year-long investigation by the FBI and state police.

Buffis, whose home was searched by state police and FBI late in 2012, but remained police chief, faces one count of extortion by a public official and three counts of money-laundering. The charges allege he shook down the proprietors of an inn in Lee, called only "Citizen 1" and "Citizen 2" in court records while the owners were under investigation for a suspected prostitution ring.

While there were no arrests in connection with the investigation, Buffis in early 2012 told the Berkshire Eagle that the owners had been arrested on prostitution charges, according to federal prosecutors. Trusting the chief's authority, the paper published the article and business at the unnamed inn plummeted, court records state.

Police officers sought criminal charges in connection with the probe, but Buffis intervened before an official hearing to that end.

"Buffis met alone with Citizen 1 and Citizen 2 to discuss resolving the case without any criminal charges being filed," wrote Assistant U.S. Attorney Steven H. Breslow in an 11-page indictment. "During this meeting Citizen 1 and Citizen 2 offered to donate \$1,000 to a local dog rescue fund," to avert the charges.

Instead, Buffis insisted they gift \$4,000 to the Laliberte Toy Fund, established by a late officer to purchase holiday toys for needy children in the area.

According to the charges, Buffis drafted a confidential agreement to avert charges but protect the town from liability, which the witnesses signed. Court officials essentially dropped the charges based on the agreement, the indictment says.

Buffis allegedly deposited the \$4,000 into the toy fund's bank account on Feb. 23, 2012 when the fund had a balance of just \$45. Over the next month, prosecutors contend he transferred the cash to the personal bank account of his and his wife. Buffis used the money as a source of cash and to make purchases at a liquor store, a hardware store and to make credit card payments.

He left just \$55 in the toy fund, the charges state.

It is unclear from the federal charges what, if any, merit the prostitution allegations held.

"He is innocent," Buffis' Great Barrington attorney **Lori Levinson** ([http://www.masslive.com/news/index.ssf/2013/08/lee\\_police\\_chief\\_joseph\\_buffis-rpt-2](http://www.masslive.com/news/index.ssf/2013/08/lee_police_chief_joseph_buffis-rpt-2)) said in an email. "His answer to the charge will be 'not guilty' when we appear in court for arraignment."

Lee town administrator Robert Nason suspended Buffis without pay on Aug. 9, a day after the federal indictment was announced by U.S. attorney Carmen Ortiz.

Former Lee police chief Ronald Glidden was appointed by Nason to serve on an interim basis.

On Tuesday, Lee selectmen are due to convene a public hearing and decide whether Buffis should be paid while his criminal case is pending. #8220;Public Hearing: Police Chief Suspension," the selectmen's agenda states. The hearing is set for 7 p.m. at Town Hall.

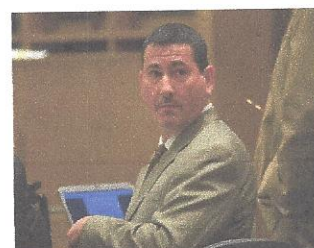
Buffis was appointed chief in 2011 following Glidden's retirement. Buffis previously was a sergeant on the Lee force and has been a member of the department for more than 30 years.

In a related matter, Berkshire district attorney David Capeless confirmed last week he

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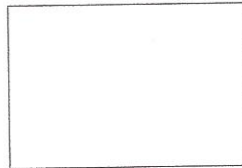
plans to reopen the prostitution case.

Capeless said he became alarmed when the chief ended the prosecution in February 2012. "I was very concerned a charge as serious as prostitution was being scuttled," Capeless said in an interview last week.

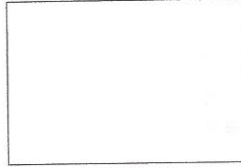
If convicted of the charges, Buffis faces up to 20 years in federal prison.

Staff writer Stephanie Barry also contributed to this story.

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