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Lee Police Chief Buffis indicted on extortion, money laundering

Chief's attorney: He 'has done absolutely nothing wrong'

By Andrew Amelinckx and Dick Lindsay, Berkshire Eagle Staff

(mailto:aamelinckx@berkshireeagle.com?subject=Berkshire Eagle Online:)

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SPRINGFIELD - A federal grand jury has indicted Lee's police chief on extortion and money laundering charges for allegedly forcing the owners of a local inn to donate money to a children's toy charity to avoid criminal prostitution charges.

In February 2012, Chief Joseph Buffis, 55, coerced the couple to donate \$4,000 to the Edward J. Laliberte Toy Fund, a holiday toy fund he controlled, according to information from the U.S. Attorney's Office.

In exchange for the donation, Buffis agreed not to go forward with the charges against them, according to the indictment against him.

The couple had initially suggested making a \$1,000 donation to a local dog shelter, but Buffis insisted they donate \$4,000 to the fund, prosecutors said.

The couple, Tara Viola and Thomas Fusco, own The Inn at Laurel Lake on Route 7 & 20.

Buffis made the couple sign an agreement that prevented the disclosure of the deal.

According to prosecutors, the chief then transferred the money to his personal account and spent it at places, including a liquor store. The U.S. Attorney's Office said Buffis also lied to investigators about what became of the money.



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Lee Police Chief Joseph Buffis, seen here outside the police station in a Feb. 16, 2011, has been indicted on money laundering and extortion charges, according to the U.S. Attorney's Office. (Eagle file)

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On Thursday, Buffis flatly denied the federal charges through his attorney, Lori Levinson of Great Barrington.

"Chief Buffis has done absolutely nothing wrong," Levinson said in a phone interview with The Eagle. "We will fight this case until he has been cleared of any wrongdoing."

She added, "He has enjoyed a long, distinguished and unblemished career in law enforcement and he hopes to continue serving the people of Lee."

Buffis, a Lee native who has spent 34 years on its police force, will not be arrested. Instead, he will be summonsed in to court for the charges, according to the U.S. Attorney's Office. No court date has been set.

He faces up to 20 years in federal prison if convicted of the charges.

Buffis no longer manages the fund.

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In January 2012, after a month-long joint investigation by the Lee police department and the Berkshire County Drug Task Force, the Lee police sought criminal complaints against Viola and Fusco, charging them with soliciting sexual favors for a fee, keeping a house of ill fame and conspiring to promote prostitution.


Attorney Elizabeth J. Quigley, who represents them, told The Eagle that her clients were victims in Buffis' scheme to extort money from them. At the time, the



Lee Police Chief
Joseph Buffis
(Ben Garver)

couple believed the resolution was sanctioned by law enforcement and "was a proper way of resolving the matter," Quigley said.

She called her clients "respected and involved members of the community and committed parents" who "wish to see justice done, but also want to continue to live their lives quietly and peaceably."

She said they were "fully cooperating with the U.S. Attorney's Office as any victim of this crime would and look forward to closure and resolution of the matter." 

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When the charges didn't go forward against the couple, Berkshire District Attorney David F. Capeless said he and the task force looked into what had happened.

Because of the close working relationship between local prosecutors and the police on various criminal matters, the case was handed off to the FBI and the U.S. Attorney's Office, Capeless said. Almost a year later, a federal grand jury returned four indictments: one count of extortion and three counts of money laundering.

Capeless stressed that the accusations are only leveled at Buffis and not the Lee Police Department of any other police officer.

"My office will continue to work proudly alongside the Lee Police Department to ensure safety and justice in the town of Lee," Capeless said, reiterating a statement he had made earlier in a press release.

Federal authorities are seeking public's assistance in this case. Anyone who donated cash or toys to the Edward J. Laliberte Toy Fund or those who have applied to the fund are asked to contact the FBI's Springfield office at (413) 732-0159.

The Laliberte Toy Fund has annually provided toys for more than 120 children ages 9 and under in Lee, Tyringham and Lenox Dale. The fund served the Lee area until it was suspended for Christmas 2012 for "reorganization" purposes, which included Buffis no longer managing it, according to an Eagle article from December.

The toy fund was founded in 1958 by Edward J. Laliberte, a longtime Lee police officer. It was named for him after his death in the 1980s.

The Eagle has published the Laliberte lists during the annual holiday fund drive as a community service and isn't financially or managerially involved in the fund.

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