PRESS RELEASE

Mississippi District Attorney, Mayor of Jackson, and Jackson City Council Member Charged with Bribery and Other Offenses

Thursday, November 7, 2024

For Immediate Release

U.S. Attorney's Office, Southern District of Mississippi

WASHINGTON — An indictment was unsealed today in the Southern District of Mississippi charging Hinds County District Attorney, Jody E. Owens II, 43; Mayor of Jackson, Mississippi, Chokwe Antar Lumumba, 41; and former President and current member of the Jackson City Council, Aaron Banks, 47, all of Jackson, with participating in a bribery scheme to enrich themselves. Owens, Lumumba, and Banks are scheduled to make their initial court appearances today before U.S. Magistrate Judge LaKeysha Greer Isaac in Jackson.

"The indictment alleges that Jackson's mayor, the district attorney in Jackson, and members of Jackson's city council conspired to accept bribes in exchange for official acts benefiting purported real estate developers," said Principal Deputy Assistant Attorney General Nicole M. Argentieri, head of the Justice Department's Criminal Division. "Officials who abuse their positions of authority to enrich themselves undermine public confidence in government. The Justice Department is committed to restoring that confidence by working with its law enforcement partners to investigate and prosecute public corruption."

“Leaders who are awarded the public’s trust should be focusing on the needs of the Jackson community, not looking to line their own pockets and benefit themselves,” said U.S. Attorney Todd Gee for the Southern District of Mississippi. “As alleged in the indictment, from campaign donations generated through laundered money to stacks of cash bribes, the members of this conspiracy allegedly offered and accepted bribes in exchange for official acts. The Justice Department is committed to investigating and prosecuting bribery and other forms of public corruption.”

“Our citizens are entitled to decisions based on the best interests of the public, not corrupt public officials,” said Assistant Director Chad Yarbrough of the FBI Criminal Investigative Division. “No one is above the law, and the FBI is committed to ensuring that those who cross the line and violate the public’s trust are held accountable for their unlawful actions.”

As alleged in the indictment, between approximately October 2023 and May 2024, Owens facilitated bribe payments to public officials in Jackson on behalf of two FBI undercover employees posing as real estate developers (the Developers) in exchange for at least $115,000 and the promise of future financial benefit. Owens instructed the Developers that, for their project to succeed, they needed to secure the support of certain public officials in Jackson through bribery. Those public officials included Mayor Lumumba, Councilman Banks, and former Jackson City Councilwoman Angelique Lee. Owens instructed the Developers how much, where, and when to bribe those officials.

As part of the scheme, Mayor Lumumba accepted a bribe payment of $50,000 from the Developers in exchange for exerting his influence and taking official action relating to the Developers’ proposed project in downtown Jackson. As directed by Owens and Lumumba, the bribe payments were concealed as five $10,000 campaign-donation checks from third-party entities and individuals, including Owens. Lumumba then laundered that money through his campaign account before cashing out a portion of the payment.

The indictment also alleges that, as part of the scheme, Councilman Banks solicited a $50,000 bribe in exchange for his votes in support of the Developers’ proposed project in downtown Jackson. Banks accepted an initial payment of $10,000 in cash, along with a promise to provide funding for the employment of a family member and a protective detail service.

As part of the scheme, former Councilwoman Lee allegedly accepted a $10,000 debt repayment, $3,000 in cash, and a shopping trip worth approximately $6,000 in luxury goods in exchange for her votes in support of the Developers’ proposed development project in downtown Jackson.

Additionally, the indictment alleges that, on May 22, an FBI agent approached Owens, identified himself as an FBI agent, and asked Owens about his involvement in the bribery scheme. During the interview, Owens made material false statements to the FBI agent.

Owens is charged with one count of conspiracy to commit federal program bribery, honest services wire fraud, and money laundering, and, if convicted, faces a maximum penalty of five years in prison for the charge; three counts of federal program bribery, and faces a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison for each charge; one count of using a facility in interstate commerce in furtherance of unlawful activity, and faces a maximum penalty of 20 years in prison for the charge; one count of honest services wire fraud, and faces a maximum penalty of 20 years in prison for the charge; one count of money laundering, and faces a maximum penalty of 20 years in prison for the charge; and one count of lying to federal officers, and faces a maximum penalty of five years in prison for the charge.

Lumumba is charged with one count of conspiracy to commit federal program bribery, honest services wire fraud, and money laundering, and, if convicted, faces a maximum penalty of five years in prison for the charge; one count of federal program bribery, and faces a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison for the charge; one count of using a facility in interstate commerce in furtherance of unlawful activity, and faces a maximum penalty of 20 years in prison for the charge; one count of honest services wire fraud, and faces a maximum penalty of 20 years in prison for the charge; and one count of money laundering, and faces a maximum penalty of 20 years in prison for the charge.

Banks is charged with one count of conspiracy to commit federal program bribery, honest services wire fraud, and money laundering, and, if convicted, faces a maximum penalty of five years in prison for the charge, and one count of federal program bribery, and faces a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison for the charge. A federal district court judge will determine any sentence after considering the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and other statutory factors.

The FBI is investigating the case.

Trial Attorneys Nicholas W. Cannon and Madison H. Mumma of the Criminal Division's Public Integrity Section and Assistant U.S. Attorneys Charles W. Kirkham and Kimberly T. Purdie for the Southern District of Mississippi are prosecuting the case.

An indictment is merely an allegation. All defendants are presumed innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law.

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FINANCIAL FRAUD

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