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Former Homestead mayor found guilty

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Steven Bateman holds his head, alongside one of his attorneys Michael Davis, as jurors come back on Monday September 22, 2014 to find the former Homestead mayor guilty of two felony counts of illegal compensation. PATRICK FARRELL/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

For the second time in a month, a South Florida mayor had confidently vowed to beat corruption charges in court. It didn't take long for jurors to decide that this time around they weren't buying a politician's spin.

After less than three hours of deliberation Monday, jurors found that ex-Homestead Mayor Steven Bateman broke the law when he took a secret job as a consultant for a health-care company that needed government approval in building a clinic in the city's downtown.

They convicted Bateman, 59, of two felony counts of illegal compensation and one misdemeanor count of illegal lobbying. The decision stunned Bateman and his lawyers.

“I think they got it wrong,” Bateman said afterward. “I don’t know where it went wrong with the felonies.”

The verdict in state court comes less than a month after a federal jury acquitted suspended Miami Lakes Michael Pizzi of accusations he accepted cash from undercover FBI agents in exchange for his support for a city grant application.

The allegations against Pizzi came in an unrelated, more complicated and murky bribery case based on a “sting” operation complete with undercover recordings and cooperating informants. The Bateman case was built on reams of documents and tedious testimony about the inner-workings of city bureaucracy.

The jury’s message was resounding, said Miami-Dade State Attorney Katherine Fernandez Rundle.

“Our community has been saying loud and clear it will not tolerate public corruption,” she said. “The jury’s verdict reflects how the community feels.”

Miami-Dade Circuit Judge Robert Luck declined to pronounce Bateman guilty right away or take him into custody. Instead, he’ll take two weeks to consider earlier defense requests to dismiss the case.

Bateman remains free on bond. If Luck lets the verdict stand, Bateman will be sentenced in the coming weeks.

He faces up to 15 years prison on each felony count, although as a first-time offender, he would likely receive significantly less time.

For state prosecutors Monday, the verdict was a significant victory as the office has worked to beef up its public corruption efforts over the past year, also creating a task force stocked with detectives from several police agencies.

Earlier this year, prosecutors also earned a jury conviction against notorious Opa-Locka police officer German Bosque for allegedly punching a man during an unlawful detention. This month, a Miami-Dade county bureaucrat pleaded guilty and agreed to four years prison for looting millions for taxpayers.

As for Bateman, he was first elected as mayor of the South Miami-Dade city in 2009, and re-elected two years later. Authorities arrested him in August 2013 during a re-election campaign he ultimately lost.

He was later also charged in a separate case, accused of illegally using campaign funds to throw parties for campaign staffers. That case is still pending.

The ex-mayor has been under scrutiny since several Miami Herald stories beginning in mid-2013, including one that detailed his undisclosed job as a \$125-an-hour consultant for Community Health of South Florida Inc., known as CHI.

During Bateman's six-day trial, Miami-Dade prosecutors accused him of illegally profiting from his business relationship with the non-profit company.

CHI hired him to manage construction projects at the same time it was trying to build a new clinic in downtown Homestead. Back in early 2012, CHI's project was in limbo because of county concerns over the design of a new city sewage pump station needed for the new clinic.

Bateman convinced CHI to give him a job as he was set to meet with Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez about speeding up the process of issuing a permit for the pump station.

"For \$125 an hour, he exerted his influence," Miami-Dade prosecutor Isis Perez told jurors Monday. "That's what this case is about."

Gimenez testified at trial that during the February 2013 meeting, Bateman never told him or his staff he was also representing CHI. Bateman signed in on a visitor's log as Homestead's mayor, not as a lobbyist for CHI as required by local laws.

He later billed CHI for the meeting and other work on the pump station issue. Perez told jurors that lobbyists would normally not meet directly with the mayor, but with his deputies.

"He sold his access to the Miami-Dade mayor's exclusive conference room," Perez said. "Not everybody can get there."

But Bateman's defense had insisted that his role as a consultant was wholly distinct from his job as the elected mayor, and his efforts on the pump station issue were only to benefit the citizens of Homestead.

“He tried diligently to keep these hats separate,” lawyer Ben Kuehne said. “There is no evidence to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Mayor Bateman acted corruptly.”

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