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## Former Palm Beach town official testifies against contractor in ‘unlawful compensation’ case



Former Palm Beach construction manager Steven White, who is currently serving nearly four years in prison, testifies in the trial against Chaz Equipment president Gary Czajkowski on Monday, Nov. 26, 2011. (Photo: J. Gwen Berry)



Chaz Equipment president Gary Czajkowski during the trial on Monday, Nov. 26, 2011. (Photo: J. Gwen Berry)

By Daphne Duret  
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Steven White’s body wobbled like a wayward sewing bobbin as his shackled feet shuffled out of a courtroom and back into a holding cell.

White, once the Town of Palm Beach construction manager, on Monday looked at least 30 pounds lighter than he did in May, when he accepted a plea deal sending him to prison as one of several defendants in an alleged corruption scheme prosecutors call “Operation Dirty Water.” White returned to court Monday as prosecutors’ last witness against the chief defendant in their case, Chaz Construction president Gary Cjaskowski.

Cjaskowski, who has handled public works contracts throughout Palm Beach County for many years, is alleged by prosecutors to have plied city and county employees with gifts, luxury trips and cash in exchange for help winning contracts. His trial, however, is on a single charge of unlawful compensation or reward for official behavior, in connection with a \$25,000 loan he made to White but later forgave.

Testimony in the case began last week and is expected to end today. If the six-member jury convicts him of the second-degree felony, he faces up to 15 years in prison.

Jurors spent most of Monday hearing from White, who received the loan in April 2009 for a land deal that later fell through. Cjaskowski eventually told White he didn’t have to repay the loan, which Assistant State Attorney Daniel Funk said amounted to unlawful compensation.

But Cjaskowski’s attorneys, Doug Duncan and Mark Shapiro, characterized it as a loan between friends, a description with which White appeared to agree. On the witness stand, White said nothing he received from Cjaskowski influenced the work Chaz Construction received from the town and that he didn’t have direct power to approve contracts.

White also told jurors that he didn’t know that, in accepting the plea deal, he was pleading to a charge involving the loan from Cjaskowski. “Isn’t it true that you didn’t realize that was the case until I took your deposition in July?” Duncan asked White.

White said it was true, adding of the day he took the plea: “I guess I wasn’t paying as close attention as I thought.”

As part of the agreement, White was sentenced to 42 months in prison.

Prosecutors rested their case against Cjaskowski Monday. His defense began with a former employee and personal pilot who said he took White aboard Cjaskowski’s private plane with Cjaskowski and others to scout out a deal for a dry cleaning business proposed by White’s parents in Virginia.

Defense attorneys also tried — and failed — to get Circuit judge Stephen Rapp to acquit Cjaskowski of the charges without letting the jury decide, reiterating their claim that White took the gift as a friend and that Cjaskowski received the town contracts because he was a good contractor in addition to being the low bidder on the projects he won.

Assistant State Attorney Daniel Funk said that based on ethics statutes, because White didn’t repay the loan back within 90 days, it was considered a gift.

It is unclear whether Cjzkowski will testify in his own defense before the case ends.

He originally faced up to 360 years in prison for his alleged role in a six-year-long scheme that generated 77 criminal charges against 13 individuals. Seven city and county officials were netted in the sweep, which alleged everything from racketeering to money laundering to unlawful compensation with Chaz Construction and Dee Griffin Earthworks and the chief companies involved.

Most of the officials arrested in the case have accepted plea deals.