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Rayford Jackson gets max sentence in bribery scandal

Attorney: Judge was 'sending a clear and convincing message'

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Ben Schmitt and Joe Swickard / Detroit Free Press

Detroit businessman Rayford Jackson got the maximum 5-year sentence Friday for his role in the Synagro sludge-hauling bribery scandal that ensnared former Councilwoman Monica Conyers.

Jackson, 44, has boasted about his refusal to cooperate with federal investigators. Now, he's paying the price.

"Mr. Jackson has not displayed contrition and remorse, and he has not apologized," U.S. District Court Judge Avern Cohn said in issuing the sentence.

Jackson's attorney Richard Morgan said his client "is a man. He stood up for his actions."

Jackson, a flashy wheeler-dealer in city political and social circles, pleaded guilty in June to conspiracy to commit bribery.

As a Synagro Technologies associate, he worked to win the council's 2007 approval of a \$1.2-billion solid-waste disposal contract for Synagro and supplied Conyers with at least \$6,000 in cash-stuffed envelopes to secure her tie-breaking vote.

Conyers pleaded guilty in June to bribery charges. She is to be sentenced Jan. 15 -- the day Jackson must report to an undetermined federal prison.

Case may serve as lesson for Conyers

What remains to be seen is whether former City Councilwoman Monica Conyers -- awaiting sentencing in

Conyers, the wife of U.S. Rep. John Conyers, a Detroit Democrat, was not required to cooperate as part of her plea deal in June. But her Dec. 1 sentencing date has been pushed back to Jan. 15.

No explanation was given for the postponement except for an order by U.S. District Judge Avern Cohn saying "the interests of justice would best be served" with the new date.

Cohn was visibly displeased Friday with Jackson's refusal to acknowledge his wrongdoing, even after he admitted to his misdeeds. Jackson pleaded guilty in June to conspiracy to commit bribery, but offered no cooperation in return.

"Contrition and remorse are always a consideration in sentencing," Cohn said. "Mr. Jackson has not displayed contrition and remorse, and he has not apologized for his activities."

Defense attorney David Griem, a former federal prosecutor, noted that Cohn's concerns about Jackson's lack of cooperation and contrition could apply "to a certain Detroit ex-councilwoman. It sounds like those things could be applied across the board."

Griem added: "Absolutely, Judge Cohn was sending a message. He was sending a clear and convincing message."

Conyers' attorney, Steve Fishman, declined to comment Friday on Jackson's sentence.

Jackson, a flashy entrepreneur, arrived in court Friday wearing a dark, double-breasted pinstriped suit. He topped it off with a black bowler and jaunty feather.

Cohn said he could lighten the sentence if Jackson decides to cooperate within a year.

"There's still an opportunity for you to express contrition and remorse in the form of cooperation," he said.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Michael Bullotta disputed defense claims that Jackson was lured into the bribery scheme, saying, "Nothing could be further from the truth."

Defense lawyer Richard Morgan spent his time before and after the sentencing arguing that Synagro Technologies "should be standing here, and they're not."

Morgan railed against the Texas-based firm, claiming Jackson was merely doing his job to secure what he described as a good contract for Detroit.

"I call it lobbying, the government calls it bribery," Morgan told the judge.

Morgan placed the blame on former Synagro Vice President James Rosendall, 45, of Grand Rapids, who pleaded guilty in January to being part of a bribery conspiracy. He is to be sentenced Nov. 30.

Saying he was shocked that his client got the maximum sentence, Morgan grew testy when asked why he didn't go to trial if Synagro was solely to blame.

"Did you ever hear me say that he did not commit a crime?" he said of Jackson.

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The Detroit City Council approved a \$1.2-billion sludge disposal contract in November 2007 with Synagro Technologies, a Texas-based company. The deal, over the concerns and objections of residents in southwest Detroit, was passed 5-4, with Monica Conyers casting the deciding vote. The Synagro contract, since canceled, is just one part of wide-ranging federal investigations of municipal corruption. Here's where some of the figures stand today:

- Rayford Jackson: Synagro's agent in Detroit, he was sentenced Friday to five years in federal prison. He pleaded guilty to bribery conspiracy.
- Monica Conyers: A former member and president of Detroit City Council, she faces up to five years in prison at her Jan. 15 sentencing after pleading guilty to bribery conspiracy.
- James Rosendall: Former Synagro vice president, he pleaded guilty to bribery conspiracy and agreed to cooperate with the FBI. Prosecutors are recommending 11 months in prison.
- Sam Riddle: A political operative and Conyers' former chief of staff, he was indicted in July, charged with extorting bribes.
- Bernard Kilpatrick: Father of ex-Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick and veteran Wayne County politician, he has been identified by sources as "Relative A" in federal documents as getting payments to help win Synagro's approval. No charges have been filed against him.
- Kwame Kilpatrick: Former Detroit mayor, he was identified by sources as "City Official A" in federal documents as the person who told Rosendall to work through Bernard Kilpatrick to get backing for the Synagro deal. He has not been charged in the federal probe.