

Mashpee Wampanoag tribal council chair behind Taunton casino indicted on bribery charges

By Colin A. Young
State House News Service

The chairman of the Mashpee Wampanoag tribal council was arrested Friday morning on federal bribery, extortion and conspiracy charges that prosecutors said stem from a self-enrichment scheme related to the tribe's years-long quest to build a resort casino in Taunton.

Cedric Cromwell, who has led the tribal government as chairman since 2009, was indicted alongside David DeQuattro of Warwick, R.I., on two counts of accepting or paying bribes as an agent (or to an agent) of an Indian tribal government and one count of conspiring to commit bribery. Cromwell was also indicted on four counts of extortion under color of official right and one count of conspiring to commit extortion, U.S. Attorney Andrew Lelling's office announced.

The tribe said late Friday morning that its Tribal Council plans to hold an emergency meeting Friday afternoon and "will be taking immediate action."

As the head of the tribe's Gaming Authority that was pursuing a plan to build a \$1 billion resort casino in Taunton, Cromwell signed the tribe into a contract with a Providence architecture firm owned by DeQuattro in 2014 and for the next three years took more than \$57,000 in money, exercise equipment and hotel stays from the company for his own personal enrichment, Lelling's office alleged.

"The charges allege that Mr. Cromwell violated the trust he owed the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe by committing extortion, accepting bribes and otherwise abusing his position," Lelling said. "Many American Indians face a host of difficult financial and social issues. They require – and deserve – real leadership. But it appears that Cromwell's priority was not to serve his people, but to line his own pockets. We will continue to aggressively investigate public corruption, including by those who purport to serve our American Indian tribes."

A spokesperson for the Mashpee Wampanoag tribe said the tribe "is deeply concerned about Chairman Cedric Cromwell being indicted on several charges" and said the tribe is expected to have additional updates Friday afternoon after an emergency meeting.

Federal prosecutors said DeQuattro's firm provided Cromwell with a "stream of payments and in-kind benefits" totaling \$57,549 and, in exchange, the tribe's Gaming Authority entered a contract that paid the firm approximately \$4,966,287. Lelling's office said Cromwell received \$44,000 in personal checks, which the prosecutors allege the chairman spent "on personal expenses, including payments to his mistress."

In May 2014, the tribe contracted with DeQuattro's firm to serve as the "owner's representative" during the design and construction portions of the tribe's casino project. Cromwell and DeQuattro signed the contract, which did not include a termination date. Cromwell then began to solicit payments from the firm through DeQuattro, claiming they were donations for his reelection campaign or charitable donations to a development fund Cromwell had incorporated to serve as a shell entity, the feds allege.

DeQuattro "agreed to make the payments knowing they were neither donations to Cromwell's reelection campaign nor charitable contributions," the indictment said. To hide the

involvement of the firm, Cromwell and DeQuattro agreed that the payments would be made with checks written from DeQuattro's personal accounts, and DeQuattro and his firm's president – who was not indicted Friday and is not named in the charging document – agreed that the firm would reimburse DeQuattro with phony bonuses.

Lelling's prosecutors said Cromwell requested \$10,000 from DeQuattro on at least five occasions between July 2014 and November 2015. Generally, DeQuattro would write the check to a consulting company owned by Cromwell's friend, who would deposit the checks and the buy cashier's checks made payable to Cromwell or the development fund, according to the indictment.

In August 2016, Lelling's office said, Cromwell texted DeQuattro to ask for exercise equipment. The president of DeQuattro's firm then arranged for the delivery of a Bowflex Revolution Home Gym system to Cromwell's Attleboro home. DeQuattro met the seller at Cromwell's house and paid \$1,700 for the machine, prosecutors said.

In May 2017, Cromwell allegedly texted DeQuattro: "Hello Dave. I hope all is well. My Birthday is coming up this Friday May 19th and I wanted to spend Friday through Monday at a very nice hotel in Boston on for my Birthday weekend. Is it possible that you can get me a nice hotel room at the Four Seasons or a suite at the Seaport Hotel? I am going to have a special guest with me. Please let me know and Thank You."

DeQuattro allegedly used his firm's credit card to foot the \$2,467.17 bill for Cromwell's three-night stay in an executive king suite with a harbor view at the Seaport Hotel, including room service and a tab at the hotel lounge.

But DeQuattro and his firm's president might have been growing tired of the scheme with Cromwell by that point. Before making the hotel reservation, DeQuattro allegedly texted the company

president a copy of Cromwell's request and said, "Guess who" and "You can't think of this stuff.....what is next?"

The Cape Cod Times reported in January 2019 that the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribal Council had voted to strip Cromwell of all fiduciary duties as chairman and as president of the tribe's Gaming Authority, and also approved a vote of no confidence in the chairman.

The Times said that Cromwell "has repeatedly come under fire for his handling of the tribe's finances" and that debt to Genting Malaysia, the gambling giant behind the tribe's casino quest, totaled \$440 million.

The Mashpee Wampanoag tribe began planning for its \$1 billion First Light Resort and Casino in Taunton since the early 2010s, broke ground on the project in 2016 after the Obama administration took the land into trust for the tribe and had hoped to welcome gamblers in 2017. But the Trump administration has worked since 2017 to undo the land-in-trust designation and the dispute threw the brakes on the casino project.

Trump's Department of the Interior ordered the tribe's land be taken out of trust status in March 2020, putting the sovereignty of the tribe's 321 acres of reservation land in Mashpee and Taunton in question. The tribe has been fighting that order through federal courts.

The fate of the tribe's land in trust could also have a significant impact on the state's commercial casino industry. The Mass. Gaming Commission could still issue a license for a commercial casino in Region C – the commission's name for Bristol, Plymouth, Barnstable, Dukes and Nantucket counties – but some worry that commercial casino operators might not be willing to invest the minimum \$500 million in a project that might have to compete with a nearby tribal casino.