

Jury trial begins in Seminole theft case

Three who worked for ex-tribal leader accused of stealing \$2.7 million.

BY JOHN HOLLAND
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Federal prosecutors wanted to indict former Seminole Chairman James Billie, but settled for three associates who refused to testify against their controversial former boss, a defense lawyer said Monday.

Attorney Ken Lipman, representing one of three men accused of stealing \$2.7 million from the Seminole Tribe, told jurors that Billie approved every penny the men spent and gave them the cash to set up an Internet gaming operation in the Caribbean.

Former operations manager Timmy Cox and technical adviser Danny Wisher are charged with

Trial begins for 3 indicted in theft

SEMINOLE

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embezzling the money from the tribe and funneling it through banks in Hollywood and the Caribbean. Wisher's son-in-law, Michael Crumpton, is also charged with helping set up the scheme.

The men worked directly for ousted tribal leader Billie, who is not charged but has been the focus of intense scrutiny by federal investigators because of his extravagant spending, including millions for a private airplane.

"We are sitting here because the government wished to indict Mr. Billie, wished to use these men to do it, and they would not cooperate," Lipman said. "These men did nothing different than what has been done at this tribe for many years."

During opening statements Monday in Fort Lauderdale federal court, prosecutor Ed Stamm told jurors that Cox and Wisher gained access to

the tribe's \$25 million investment account and quickly began writing checks to personal accounts and phony businesses.

The men deposited money into accounts in Hollywood and shuffled it around with wire transfers to banks and front companies in Belize and Nicaragua, he said.

"The Seminole Tribe of Florida was the victim of a conspiracy," said Stamm. "What brought these men together was their theft of nearly \$3 million. . . . The proof will come from the witness stand."

If convicted of all charges, Cox would face up to 90 years in prison, Wisher could get a maximum of 110 years and Crumpton could get up to 115 years. They also could be assessed substantial fines and would have to make restitution.

Defense attorneys argue that the men were just carrying out another in a long series of unorthodox James Billie financial deals that have

brought the Seminoles from poverty to a billion-dollar corporation in just 23 years.

Billie wanted the Internet deal kept quiet so it wouldn't enrage state and government officials who oppose offshore gambling and control tribal gaming licenses that generate more than \$300 million a year, Lipman said. Gov. Jeb Bush and Congress oppose Internet gambling, which Lipman said would bring the tribe even more millions.

He described piles of money so vast that tribal leaders can't document all of it, and said evidence will show millions were spent on luxury cars, tickets to the Super Bowl and breast implants for tribal members and friends.

During the past four years, Wisher and Cox have been two of Billie's closest associates as he faced pressure from tribe members questioning how he spent money. Wisher and Cox were fired last year and Billie was suspended by the tribal counsel.

In recent years, the tribe

has been hurt by internal fighting, lawsuits and the attempted murder of General Counsel Jim Shore.

This morning Shore is scheduled to testify that Cox and Wisher didn't have permission to take the money. Shore, a vocal critic of the men and Billie, played a leading role in their firing.

In January, Shore was shot several times as he sat in his Hollywood living room. Shore, who is blind, could provide no clues and the case remains under investigation.

Defense lawyer Lipman said the tribe's internal squabbles stem from jealousy and a fight over what to do with its fortune.

"The Seminoles' problems are in trying to find ways of spending money faster than they can make it," he said. "They do a nice job."

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