

Seminole tribe goes on a spending spree

Councilman says he gave away millions

BY JOHN HOLLAND
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He gave away so many BMWs, Cadillacs and Lexuses he's forgotten who got them all. When friends got drunk in their new cars, he hired lawyers to bail them out.

He paid more than \$7 million for landscaping 32 houses and \$350,000 for a boxing gym.

Seminole Tribal Councilman

David Cypress spent the past 3 1/2 years on a \$57 million shopping spree, he testified Wednesday, spreading cash among friends, fellow tribe members and anybody with a good sob story.

His only regret is that there wasn't more money to go around.

"I have no problem with spending money; that's what I've been telling you," Cypress testified Wednesday at the trial of three men accused of stealing \$2.7 million from the tribe. "I bought Lexuses for anyone who asked for one. Give me a [sad] Hank Williams song, and I'll give you one, too."

From the witness stand Cy-

press provided a glimpse at the uncontrolled spending by a tribe making more than \$300 million each year in casino gaming profits.

A heavy, likeable man with long hair flowing halfway down his back, Cypress said all councilmen were given millions and told to spend the money as they pleased, as long as it helped the tribe.

Former Seminole Operations Director Tim Cox, tribe computer consultant Dan Wisher and Wisher's son-in-law, Michael Crumpton, are charged with

**"I have no problem with spending money; that's what I've been telling you."
David Cypress
Seminole Tribal Councilman's testimony**

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stealing \$2.7 million from the tribe and diverting it to their own private accounts in Belize and Nicaragua.

The men say suspended tribal Chairman James Billie gave them the money to set up an Internet gaming operation.

Wednesday's testimony focused less on the criminal accusations than on the spending habits of Cypress and other council members.

Defense lawyers Ken Lipman and Bruce Zimet are hoping to make two points. First, that Billie gave the men the money for legitimate business reasons and was perfectly justified. Second, the men had no reason to steal since everyone was giving away so much money in the first place.

Cox's wife, Amy, is a full tribal member entitled to ask

for as much cash as she'd like, although her requests are not always granted, according to testimony.

On the stand, Cypress fascinated spectators and jurors with tales about how he spent millions.

He was allotted only \$5-million yearly to give away, but ran out so fast he kept asking the council for more. They always obliged.

In all, he spent an average of about \$45,000 per day, every day, for the past 1,250 days. Most went to friends, finance companies and businesses who sold to the tribe members, but he spent millions on himself, also.

"I do not exclude myself from the benefits," he said, drawing laughter from the audience. He's not sure if he paid taxes on his millions.

Each of the five councilors received allotments of at least \$5 million per year.

Many, like Cypress, got more cash when that ran out.

Billie, as chairman, received about \$15 million yearly to give away or spend on himself.

A list of Cypress's three-year spending reads like a benevolent lottery player's fantasy. Boat shops, car dealers and hotels racked up millions in sales from tribe members, who then turned to Cypress to help pay their bills, he testified.

Cypress paid \$1.6 million to a company called Michael's Decoration and \$69,000 to Sound Advice, an upscale audio store.

He spent \$40,000 on Bose stereo equipment. Records show he spent nearly \$600,000 on auto maintenance and repair at Hendry County Motors; \$100,000 at Sears and almost \$1 million in American Express charges.

Records show purchases totaling millions spent at Lexus, Cadillac, Honda, BMW, Jeep,

Ford, Volkswagen, Lincoln Mercury and Harley Davidson dealers.

"I like to help people and I enjoy giving money away," Cypress said. "Everyone knows if they show up at my door, I'm probably going to help them. That's just the way I am, and I don't want to change."

But Cypress also gave \$5.8 million to Nationwide Landscaping, which is owned by his friend and business partner, Krishna Lawrence. He also spent \$1.2 million on lawn sod from another company and gave Lawrence another \$1.2 million directly.

Cypress also paid himself more than \$1 million.

Lawrence and Cypress are partners in a Hollywood boxing gym that they bought for \$350,000 with tribe money, Cypress testified. He keeps all the profits.

While Cypress talked about the fun of having enormous

wealth, he also said there are pitfalls. Records show Cypress has paid hundreds of thousands of dollars in bills from hospitals, lawyers and drug rehabilitation centers.

As the casino profits have exploded in recent years, so have the problems, he testified.

"I have tribal members that I buy cars for, they go off the reservation, get in trouble, and I need to get a lawyer to get them off the hook," Cypress said.

"We're going through a process at this time where there's too much money at one time, and we're not all ready for it," he said. "Yeah, it's been great but the down side of money is the drug addiction, the alcohol, the teen pregnancies. That all goes with this."

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