

SOUTH FLORIDA

**Tribe leader:
I approved
all spending**

Gaming costs authorized, he testifies

BY JOHN HOLLAND
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Seminole Chairman James Billie testified Monday that he authorized every penny spent by three men accused of swindling the tribe and ordered them to quietly set up an Internet gaming operation in Central America.

Billie's testimony, coming without immunity from future prosecution, contradicts nearly every piece of evidence put forth by federal prosecutors during the two-week trial. It apparently damages the embezzlement case against former tribe Operations Director Tim Cox and two other men, already weakened by testimony that the tribe has no rules for how it spends money.

"It was better to go under disguise and keep it quiet," said Billie, who was suspended from his job last year but has not been charged by the government. "I was prepared to spend up to \$10 million on Internet gaming because look at the numbers. When I saw we could make so much money on this, why wouldn't I spend that?"

Cox, former tribe computer expert Dan Wisher and Wisher's son-in-law, Michael Crumpton, are charged with conspiring to steal \$2.77 million from the tribe. According to prosecutors, Cox diverted tribal money to a phony corporation in Belize and Nicaragua run by Cox, Wisher and Crumpton.

But Billie, the powerful chairman who took the Seminoles from poverty to a billion-dollar corporation in 20 years, told jurors the corporation, Virtual Data, was very real and set up with his money and approval. Cox's 1999 wire transfer of \$1.6 million to Virtual Data, which prosecutors called theft, was seed money for the gaming business, which a consultant said could generate \$740 million in its first three years, Billie said.

Billie signed a letter authorizing the transfer and two others, he testified Monday in Fort Lauderdale federal court.

"Did Mr. Cox, Mr. Wisher and Mr. Crumpton steal any money from the tribe?" defense attorney Ken Lipman



TAKING THE STAND:

Seminole Chairman James Billie arrives in federal court to testify for three defendants.
Staff photo/Judy Sloan Reich

asked.

"No, they didn't. That's the sorry thing about all of this, because they didn't do it," Billie testified.

Defense attorneys argue their clients were simply following the orders of their successful boss, who has rankled many in the Seminole community with his powerful personality and perceived arrogance. They said Assistant U.S. Attorney Ed Stamm has been misleading jurors with claims that the men never set up an Internet gaming operation or spent any of the money on legitimate operations.

So far, defense lawyers have produced checks showing more than \$1 million was spent on furniture for a hotel in Nicaragua partially owned by the tribe, computer equipment for the gaming operation, technical support and even payouts to players who won money gambling on the Internet site.

All of it was done in secret, Billie said, because he had so much opposition to his plan.

Billie also approved loans totaling \$80,000 to Cox, who is married to a Seminole tribe member.

Prosecutors said he stole the money. Cox needed the money because he and his wife, Amy, were adding onto their home so they could become foster parents to several abused children and needed to get state approval, according to testimony.

"Did you expect him to pay the \$80,000 back?" Lipman asked.

"He always did in the past," Billie responded.

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