

Law Enforcement

New task force to target corruption in S. Florida

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By: John Pacenti

John Gillies, the head of the FBI office in Miami, retells one particular tale of public corruption repeatedly these days. He said it shows how public corruption is often right out in the open for everyone to see.

Speaking to the Economic Forum of Palm Beach County on Wednesday, Gillies said he worked a case in California in which an attorney openly bribed judges and juries. The lawyer even took a jury out to lunch. Gillies later asked the opposing attorney in the case why he didn't go to law enforcement. The chagrined lawyer said, "I didn't want to look cheap in front of the jurors."

Gillies announced in December that he had formed a new squad to examine corruption, which he calls the No. 1 criminal threat in South Florida. The number of agents dedicated to pursuing public corruption is at a 10-year high in South Florida, and he said tips from the business community have prompted new investigations. Two West Palm Beach city commissioners and three Palm Beach County commissioners have gone to prison since 2007 for using their office to fatten their wallets.

The FBI moved into Broward County in September, arresting school board member Beverly Gallagher, County Commissioner Josephus Eggelletion Jr. and former Miramar City Commissioner Fitzroy Salesman on corruption charges.

And it's not just elected officials who are falling. Last week, 21 prison guards were indicted in a drug ring accused of smuggling cocaine into facilities in Belle Glade and South Bay.

Gillies said he enjoys investigating public corruption because it reveals the unabashed allure of money and power by public officials. He particularly loves the excuses from the accused: "I work hard," "I deserve it," "It won't hurt anybody," and "Everybody does it." The one he hears from corrupt judges — "I would be making more money if I was in private practice."

"I tell them then why didn't you just go into private practice," Gillies said.

He acknowledges most politicians are not corrupt but said a few forget why people elected them. "This is why I love going after corrupt officials and stuff like that," Gillies said. "They are too stupid to realize it. They have money. They have education. They have the power already, but it's not enough."

Gillies said he supports mandatory financial disclosure filings and ethics education for public officials. He said Congress should immediately readdress the Honest Services Act, a popular choice for prosecutors in corruption case, if the U.S. Supreme Court strikes it down as vague. The law was used to prosecute the Palm Beach County commissioners. "Honest services? Really. Do we have to fully articulate what that means so that our politicians know that they have to actually be honest in their dealings?" Gillies asked.

He said some U.S. attorneys around the country are filing superseding indictments in public corruption cases to add charges in case the federal law is overturned.

Rebel Cook, a Palm Beach County real estate broker and member of the forum, said she fully expects more public officials to be arrested — maybe even in Palm Beach County.

"Obviously, there are still investigations going on. Otherwise we wouldn't have been lucky enough to get the FBI special agent in charge to come here to speak," she said.

